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Homeward Bound hopes to avoid state funding chop

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By Laura Gatzke - Sun Intern

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Officials with Homeward Bound, a nonprofit organization that serves severely disabled individuals throughout the Twin Cities Metro, are watching the sky.

No, they're not concerned about a spring tornado. In fact, what has them on edge is Minnesota Legislature's continued work to close a multi-billion-dollar budget deficit.

Two individuals in the nonprofit's care recently took a trip to the capitol to meet with legislators and argue their case.

They personally delivered letters they had written urging the legislator's not to cut disability services.

The legislature is considering a proposal to cut two percent from the disabled services portion of the health and human services budget. That translates to \$236,000 that Homeward Bound could lose from its bottom line.

Homeward Bound needs financial support for general operating needs as well as capital needs.

"We have homes and they always need repair and remodeling," explained Homeward Bound's director of development Lori Merriam.

The nonprofit looks for organizations to donate the materials they need for homes and also for volunteers that can do the labor.

Homeward Bound is funded primarily through federal and state Medicaid dollars, which pays for employee salaries and for the basic functions of the houses. The rest of the necessary money is raised through fundraising.

Homeward Bound has 300 employees, which includes nurses and direct care staff. The nurses handle medical concerns while the direct care staff helps residents with daily activities including dressing, bathing and eating.

"We serve children and adults with severe and profound disabilities," said Merriam. "That is what differentiates Homeward Bound from other organizations in that we serve those that need medical intervention."

Homeward Bound serves 104 people in 18 homes located in Brooklyn Park, Crystal, Golden Valley, Hopkins, Maple Grove, Minnetonka, New Hope, Plymouth, Robbinsdale and St. Louis Park.

Originally begun to care for children with disabilities, the nonprofit now has residents ranging in age from 12 to 75 and over.

There are four people living in most of the homes, but a couple of them house six people. There is also a home that has 32 residents with a common area for people to interact with each other.

Similar to a college dorm room, roommates in the houses are determined by the personality of the individual. They try to place compatible personalities together as roommates.

Placement in the specific houses caters to the proximity to the individual's family because they want residents to be as close as possible to their families.

Families of children with disabilities created Homeward Bound in 1973 because they wanted to avoid putting their children in hospitals or institutions. Instead, they started a community-based program where individuals could reside together in homes. The original community residence housed 64 children in New Hope.

There are large corporations, small businesses, Rotary Clubs, churches and individuals that raise money for Homeward Bound. In addition to donating money, there are groups that offer their services. Church groups come to rake leaves at the homes for residents, and companies donate their time landscaping the houses.

Greiner Construction in Minneapolis is one of the volunteer businesses. Each year the company's employees spend a day working on construction projects at Homeward Bound homes. One year they donated a bathtub to a bathroom that needed it. They also worked on completing tiling and plumbing that needed maintenance.

Volunteers are vital to Homeward Bound, but Merriam says the organization still need as much state funding as possible to make what they do everyday happen.

"We really need people to call their legislators and the governor's office and ask them not to balance the budget on the backs of people with disabilities," she said. "We shouldn't bear disproportionately more of a burden."

Merriam is hoping the Legislature and the governor will find a suitable compromise.

"Our great hope that both parties will work together to achieve a balanced budget without cutting services to those most vulnerable Minnesotans with disabilities," said Merriam. "If it does go through, we'll look at cutting those things that least affect the people that we serve."