

HISTORY NOTE: ProAct's recent history is one of innovation, change

Access Press Staff

December 10, 2019 at 12:31 am



Editor's note: The second of two parts, adapted from the [Red Wing Republican Eagle](#)

What would become ProAct started the 1980s with a time of expansion in Red Wing. This included a new, state-certified community education program for adults with disabilities. By 1981, the center served more than 100 participants. For the first time, a majority of the contract revenue for work performed by participants came from outside of Red Wing. On the housing side, a new trend was emerging to place people in group homes.

The focus expanded to include services to people who had sustained traumatic brain injuries. That led to efforts include a partnership with IBM for computer-aided diagnosis services, therapy and vocational transition services. The brain

injury program was one of the first of its kind in Minnesota. By 1986 IRC was named the Rehabilitation Facility of the Year by the National Association of Rehabilitation Facilities.

By 1984, the program's annual budget reached \$1 million for the very first time.

Mobile work crews began in 1988 with janitorial services for factories and offices in and around Red Wing.

By 1990, IRC began serving Wisconsin residents with services in Pierce County. That decade also saw a shift toward more community integration and outreach efforts. By the mid-1990s, the name ProAct was first used at a location in Zumbrota.

The mid-1990s to early 2000s would bring added services in the production department, more work crews in the community, more use of assistive technology and more self-advocacy education.

The move was also on to more person-centered planning and community integration. The year 2000 was particularly exciting, when the move from state institutions to community housing was completed for people with developmental disabilities.

"We wanted to ensure that participants had more knowledge of their choices in work, leisure and community activities," said Sally Ogren, wife of IRC's founding director Bill Ogren.

A big change came in 2002, when IRC merged with Eagan-based Owobopte. The larger ProAct era had begun.

ProAct in Red Wing and Zumbrota would serve 283 individuals in the next fiscal year, with 141 in extended employment and 124 in day training. Steve Ditschler was the president and CEO at the time of the merger. He continues in that capacity today.

The nonprofit also started ProAct eRecycling Services in 2015, which gathered electronics from a wide area and trained participants in disassembly, customer service and organization. The program received national attention. The service continued until the reimbursement rates for raw materials made it impractical to maintain.

In a testament to its efforts to integrate people with disabilities in the work world, ProAct in Red Wing has supported crews and employees at more than 50 outside organizations in the area, explains ProAct Designated Coordinator Joyann Johnson. It has also contracted with hundreds of businesses for packaging, assembly and other work performed in-house.

“Change in many forms is our constant challenge as we continue to provide person-centered, positive and exciting service offerings to individuals with disabilities,” Ogren said.

The History Note is a monthly column sponsored by the [Minnesota Governor's Council on Developmental Disabilities and Partners in Policymaking](#)®.