

## Program that lets disabled live at home opens enrollment

AMY BECKER STAFF WRITER

**M**ore than 4,000 Minnesota families with mentally retarded family members recently got extra help taking care of their loved ones.

A state program that allows people with mental retardation to live at home instead of in an institution has temporarily opened its enrollment. Families who have been waiting for years will now have more flexibility in caring for relatives at home.

With the waiver, services can be used in the home instead of a group home or other institution, explained Shirley Patterson, Minnesota human services director of continuing care for people with

disabilities.

The key is that it's not prepackaged, Patterson said. Families work with their county of residence to pick services that fit their needs.

"This is really intended to be focused on the individual's situation," she said. It can include respite care, in-home services, equipment not otherwise covered and adaptive computers for communication.

Participants can select from a list of services or set up an account through their county social services office. Counties administer the funds, tell participants their budget and ask how they want to spend the money.

"It's very flexible . . . just about

anything that would help the person or the family," Patterson said.

Opening enrollment in this program (official title: home and community based services waiver for people with mental retardation and related conditions) looses a logjam of people. The number enrolled has jumped from roughly 9,000 last January to about 13,600 this month.

People can continue to sign up through the end of June by contacting their local county social services office. Typically families can spend a long time on the waiting list, because it's not an entitlement program.

Because the cost has fallen below projections, the state is allowed to open enrollment. Peo-

ple who have been waiting for years suddenly qualify.

This waiver includes the state and federal share of the cost of services. That combined cost is about half a billion dollars a year; the average cost per person is about \$60,000, Patterson said.

Still, that's cheaper than putting someone in an institution. And the benefits can be incalculable.

"The personal benefits of living at home — there's not much comparison," Patterson said. "The feedback we've gotten is people really like the services."

Amy Becker, who covers Washington County, can be reached at [abecker@pioneerpress.com](mailto:abecker@pioneerpress.com) or (651) 228-5465.