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**westwood early childhood center NAMED OUTSTANDING DISABILITY EMPLOYER  
BY MINNESOTA ORGANIZATION FOR HABILITATION AND REHABILITATION**

**Valuable partnership with Partnership Resources, Inc. recognized by state disability organization  
as model for other employers; award presentation set for 12 p.m. on October 12 at WECC, including comments from Congressman Dean Phillips and St. Louis Park city leaders**

Nominated by Partnership Resources, Westwood Early Childhood Center, WECC, in St. Louis Park, was named an Outstanding Disability Employer by the Minnesota Organization for Habilitation and Rehabilitation, MOHR, during National Disability Employment Awareness Month in October.

“Employers like Westwood Early Childhood Center tap into this great talent pool and give people with disabilities an opportunity,” said Julie Johnson, president of MOHR. “Organizations will be stronger if they hire these talented and dedicated people. They will quickly see the benefits of an inclusive workforce." MOHR represents more than 100 disability service providers across the state.

As part of Westwood Lutheran Church, the child-care center has hired individuals through Partnership Resources, PRI, to support its kitchen operations. PRI supports these individuals on the job to help make them successful, explains PRI Program Director Marijane Oquin. “WECC has gone above and beyond to support our client, Allie Henley, in her role as a kitchen aide,” she said. The center updated a list of duties, created a new checklist and provided an embroidered apron for her, Oquin explained.

MOHR President Julie Johnson will present the award at the WECC amphitheater space outdoors on October 12 at 12 p.m. WECC is located at 9001 Cedar Lake Road South in St. Louis Park. Also speaking are U.S. Congressman Dean Phillips and St. Louis Park City Councilman Tom Brausen and Mayor pro-tem Rachel Harris. Capacity is limited to 25 and masks are required.

WECC provides year-round child-care and education to infants, toddlers and preschoolers, focusing on their social, cognitive and spiritual development. Henley supports seven classrooms, washing dishes in a commercial kitchen, Oquin explains. The duties involve sanitation. She also helps with large events such as funerals.

Kellee Nelson, director of WECC, said the center believes in diversity and inclusion, and that communities should include individuals with different gifts, talents, and abilities. ”Our ability to embrace individuals with special abilities and provide them with opportunities to work within a caring environment reflects our values, and promotes practices we hope to see in mainstream society,” said Nelson. “It has been a joy to work alongside Allie and support her professional goals!”

PRI brings job coaching twice weekly to support the individual employee, while encouraging independence and inclusion as well as positive “natural supports,” provided by the employer. What was formerly a dishwashing position was expanded to the kitchen aide role to foster personal growth for Henley, said Oquin. The PRI client also assists a food specialist with “food explorations” to teach students about food topics in unique and fun ways. The kitchen aide has also been encouraged to share her faith through preaching.

When the COVID-19 precautions began in March, WECC closed for six weeks, but continued to pay Henley during that time. Then a limited number of children returned and staff had reduced hours. Work hours increased slightly in September and WECC expressed its commitment to getting her back to regular hours as soon as they could. “They see value in the employee’s position and are ensuring retention of the position, long-term,” Oquin said.

WECC also recognized PRI’s challenges as COVID-19 reduced the nonprofit’s income dramatically. PRI launched a “Partners 4 Hope” campaign to raise funds, and WECC assisted. The child-care center created videos for two campaign events to shine a light on the importance of hiring people with disabilities and the need for providers like PRI, Oquin explains.

“WECC exemplifies an employer that sees the value in inclusion and works to share its importance with others,” she said.

Johnson said employers help people with disabilities to pursue their goals, earn decent wages and contribute to the economy as part of their communities. “Supporting people to live a community connected life is a large part of what MOHR providers do for the people they support.”

[MOHR’s](https://mohrmn.org/) mission is a**dvocate and support its nonprofit members in providing meaningful services to persons with disabilities and communities served**. Members are committed to respect for each individual, a person-centered approach and expanding work opportunities.

Celebrated every October, this year’s theme for [National Disability Employment Awareness Month](https://www.dol.gov/agencies/odep/initiatives/ndeam) is “Increasing Access and Opportunity.” It celebrates the contributions of workers with disabilities and educates about the value of a workforce inclusive of their skills and talents. The national observance began under a different name in 1945.