

The History of Exceptional Opportunities, Inc. 1967-2012

In 1967 a series of discussions concerning the needs of mentally challenged persons was attended by a group of Kossuth County residents. These initial discussions were arranged by Reverend Robert Lorenz, Pastor of First Lutheran Church, Algona, Iowa.

Following eighteen months of extensive research, it was decided to establish a pre-school for mentally challenged children. First Lutheran Church of Algona, offered its facilities as a meeting place for classes to be held three days a week. The Kossuth Association of Retarded Citizens established a fund to support the operation of this program. In the fall of 1968, a program called Peter Pan Pre-School began serving five small children from Kossuth County.

In May, 1970, the Kossuth Association of Retarded Citizens and other individuals formed a private, non-profit, tax exempt corporation, Exceptional Opportunities Inc. The corporation was designed to serve the mentally challenged and physically handicapped, regardless of race, creed, color, national origin, age, religion or sex.

The individuals who signed the original Articles of Incorporation were: Mr. W. B. MacDonald, Mr. Cecil Wattermann, Mrs. Ardeen Sampson, Mr. Wilbur Spear, Mr. W. A. Renger, Mr. Richard Deitering, Mr. W. Conn and Reverend Robert Lorenz. On June 3, 1970, the following individuals, in addition to the signers of the Articles of Incorporation, were nominated and elected as the first volunteer board of directors of Exceptional Opportunities: Mr. W. H. Shoenhair, Mrs. Helen Huber, Reverend Paul Hansen, Mrs. Helen Conn, Dr. D. J. Shey, Mr. Joseph Bradley, Mr. Leon McCoy, Sister Patricia Drydyk, and Mr. Richard Ringsdorf. Mrs. Alice Benck was hired as the coordinator of the corporation's programs.

As the services of the Peter Pan Program increased for the very young children Exceptional Opportunities received several requests from parents of older mentally challenged individuals for similar services. This additional request to provide expanded services prompted the Board of Directors to investigate the availability of physical space that would accommodate the new and developing programs for children of all ages. It was learned that Burt had vacant buildings that could be remodeled to serve the needs of the new and growing programs. Burt's central location in Kossuth County seemed to be the most favorable for Exceptional Opportunities' new facilities.

With the help of the Kossuth Association of Retarded Citizens, families, friends and the Kossuth County Supervisors, two vacant buildings on the main street of Burt were renovated to meet the needs of the existing day programs. One building became the new home for the Peter Pan Pre-school, while the other provided an area for a newly developing Helping Hand Activity Center that opened in January, 1975, providing day programming for five adults. The latter program was the initial beginning of today's Work Activity Center.

During the next two years, these children and adults were transported to Burt by families and employees. As the program grew, a group was formed called Concerned Parents. Through this group and with the help of other families, churches, clubs, service organizations and individuals, a fund drive was begun to support efforts in procuring vehicles to assist in providing transportation to and from Exceptional Opportunities' programs. After much determination and effort enough money was raised to purchase two vans in 1973. A station wagon was later donated by three families. In 1985, Exceptional Opportunities became a Region II Transit provider for the northern part of Kossuth County. Today, the transit program operates in all of Region II and is provided with five leased vehicles. Exceptional Opportunities' transportation fleet has grown to seventeen vehicles that travel approximately 200,000 miles annually in order to provide for the needs of the one hundred-two individuals being served in all programs of Exceptional Opportunities.

In 1972, Mrs. Benck and the Board of Directors began planning for a community residential care facility for children with mental disabilities. In August, 1974, the facility named Shepherds Cottage became a home for four children. Shepherds Cottage was licensed as a Comprehensive Foster Care Facility by the Department of Human Services. The facility would eventually be filled to its capacity of twenty-one. In the fall of 1976, classrooms and a large area for recreation was added to the Cottage to strengthen the educational and developmental programs. In 1988, another addition of two large classrooms was completed to assist in better meeting the needs of Exceptional Opportunities certified school program.

In 1991, it was determined that the Comprehensive Foster Care per diem was no longer adequate to support the needs of the residents and a Certificate of Need was filed with the Department of Inspection and Appeals to license Shepherds Cottage as a fifteen bed Intermediate Care Facility for Mentally Retarded (ICF/MR). The Certificate of Need was approved and in 1992 Shepherds Cottage was converted to an ICF/MR facility.

In 1972, with the help of many volunteers, another building in downtown Burt was renovated and became the new Helping Hand Craft Center, a shop for the making and selling of crafts. Administrative offices and a meeting room were developed on the second floor of the building. The programs of service for individuals with mental disabilities continued to grow and expand. During the summer of 1979, Exceptional Opportunities acquired another building on Burt's main street. This provided space for a pre-vocational program for the adults and adolescents enrolled in the programs of Exceptional Opportunities. It was at this time that the staff and the board of directors began planning for the construction of a residential facility for developmentally disabled adults and adolescents. A Certificate of Need was filed with the Department of Inspections And Appeals which was approved for the building of a twenty-nine bed facility to be operated according to the rules governing a Residential Care Facility for the Mentally Retarded (RCF/MR). In 1981 the Adult Residential Facility was opened and eventually became the home for twenty-nine individuals. This facility also provided new space for the administrative offices. In 1988 an addition to the Residential Facility was completed to increase the licensed bed capacity to thirty-four.

In 1982 the staff and board began studying the requirements mandated by the Department of Human Services pertaining to Work Activity programs in the State of Iowa. It was learned that the existing facilities would not meet the requirements of the accrediting agencies and planning began for a new building to house the Work Activity programs. With the funds from a Community Block Grant and the Kinney Lindstrom Foundation, a new building was completed and opened for operation in October, 1984. This center provides work and educational programming for most of the sixty adults receiving residential services from Exceptional Opportunities as well as several adults who still reside in their own homes. Supported employment was implemented in 1989. The Work Activity Center received a three year accreditation from the Commission on Accreditation for Rehabilitation Facilities in the fall of 1984.

In May, 1986, Exceptional Treasures, an extension of the Work Activity Center, opened for businesses at 105 East State Street in Algona. Used clothing and household items donated by the public and craft items made at the Work Activity Center are sold here. A can redemption center was operated from the rear of the store. Can redemption ceased in 2003. In the fall of 1989, Exceptional Treasures moved to 203 East State Street in Algona. This move was necessary to accommodate the growing and expanding business.

In November, 1988, a supervised apartment complex, West Side Apartments, opened in Algona to provide semi-independent living for fifteen adults. This facility was made possible by securing a Housing and Urban Development loan with a section-8, rental assistance program. In July of 1992, the first adult moved from West Side Apartments to an independent living site, with continued contact hours being offered by West Side staff.

In May 1992, a group home, Overmyer Home, was opened under the rules and regulations provided by the Department of Human Services for Residential Care Facilities for Mentally Retarded adults. This specialized program allowed the residents to be more independent and involved in the community events. This home for four adults later became a non-licensed home operating under the guidelines of the Home and Community Based Services. In 1999, Exceptional Opportunities ceased offering Home and Community Based Services.

In 2002, Exceptional Opportunities became certified to provide Home and Community Based Services Supported Community Living. These services were initially provided in individual's apartments for people receiving contact hours of supervision. After several months individuals living at West Side Apartments began requesting this service and Home and Community Based Services rapidly expanded.

A Federal Supreme Court ruling mandating de-institutionalization impacted State processes for serving individuals with disabilities. This legislation, coupled with the changing needs of individuals served, spurred Exceptional Opportunities to action. After approaching the State Health Facilities Council for approval in September of 2003, Exceptional Opportunities began the downsizing and conversion of the Adult Residential from a thirty-four bed Residential Care Facility for Mentally Retarded to two twelve-bed Intermediate Care Facilities for the Mentally Retarded. The downsizing from serving

thirty-four individuals to twenty-four individuals was accomplished by assisting ten individuals in moving to ranch style homes in Algona, where four people share a home and access Home and Community Based Services. The first home of this nature was purchased in January 2004 at 621 East Fair Street. In April of 2004, four men and four women moved to a newly constructed duplex at 103/107 North Williams Street also accessing Home and Community Based Services. As a part of the conversion of the Adult Residential, the Business Offices of Exceptional Opportunities were moved to a temporary location for approximately ten months until the building of a new Administration Building was completed in August of 2004. The transition of many services to the Algona area contributed to the need for a branch office of Exceptional Opportunities to be located in Algona. Exceptional Opportunities Supported Community Living Branch office was constructed on property directly to the south of West Side Apartments at 218 West State Street. In February 2005, a residence at 205 North Woodworth became home to four men receiving Home and Community Based Services.

The Home and Community Based Services model of services expanded to Exceptional Opportunities Work Activity Program in the form of offering Pre Vocational and Day Habilitation services.

Exceptional Opportunities continues to serve approximately one hundred individuals with disabilities in an effort to provide quality care and specialized programming in order that each person may achieve the highest level of independence possible. Employing a workforce of approximately one hundred-seventy-five employees makes Exceptional Opportunities the fourth largest employer in Kossuth County. The quality of services is demonstrated in the many positive results of State and National surveys. In 2005, Exceptional Opportunities received their eighth consecutive three year accreditation from the Commission on Accreditation of Rehabilitation Facilities for the Work Activity Center, a three year with excellence survey result for Home and Community Based Supported Community Living program, two unannounced deficiency-free ICF/MR Department of Inspections and Appeals surveys, and an unqualified audit report.

In the summer of 2006, an addition was built on to the existing Work Activity Center. This addition allowed for storage of raw materials and finished products connecting the existing building with the 3-bay loading dock used to ship products. The space freed up by this addition has allowed for the development of individual work stations for the individuals completing the work. Upon completion of this expansion the Work Activity Center's name changed to Exceptional Industries.

The year 2007 found Exceptional Opportunities hiring a Director of Quality Assurance. This position came to be out of Federal and State mandates for review of documentation to substantiate the billing of Medicaid dollars for services provided. An extensive education program for Exceptional Opportunities' team of employees to learn the required criteria for documenting services provided, training for first level supervisors to review each piece of documentation billed by Exceptional Opportunities for required data, and finally reviews of documentation by the Director of Quality Assurance and Employee Development and Administrative Assistant / Quality Assurance Assistant were

time consuming but essential. These quality assurance reviews are essential as through various audits, Exceptional Opportunities may have to refund revenue received for service provision that is not correctly documented.

In 2011, Exceptional Industries achieved their tenth consecutive three year accreditation from the Commission on Accreditation of Rehabilitation Facilities. This is the second survey with excellence having no recommendations which signifies the surveyors did not identify any areas of nonconformance to the regulatory standards. This is an extraordinary accomplishment, as only 3 percent of national CARF surveys result in no recommendations. Our next CARF survey should be expected in the fall of 2014.

At the completion of the school year in June of 2009, Exceptional Opportunities ceased providing Special Education services as a private school. The school enrollment was down to ten students, three whom receive residential services at Exceptional Opportunities and seven who were bused in by school districts around the county from the student's parental home. The decision of where these students would receive their education was up to the home school district and the parents.

In 2010, Exceptional Opportunities, Inc. celebrated their 40th Anniversary. "Making a Difference - 40 Years of Fulfilling Dreams" was the focus of our celebration.

In October of 2011, Exceptional Industries received their ten consecutive three year accreditation from the Commission on Accreditation of Rehabilitation Facilities (CARF). The October survey award was also the second consecutive "three year accreditation without recommendations" which fewer than 3% of the facilities in the nation receive.

In February 2011 and December 2011, Exceptional Opportunities' three ICF/ID homes (South Home, East Home and West Home) received deficiency-free surveys from the Iowa Department of Inspections and Appeals – Health Facilities Division.

"Exceptional Opportunities' mission is to provide services to people with disabilities with Commitment, Acceptance, Respect and Excellence while assisting them in reaching dreams and living life to the fullest." The support given to Exceptional Opportunities by the community of Burt, families, individuals, churches, community organizations county-wide and the Kossuth County Supervisors is appreciated and necessary to the continued success of Exceptional Opportunities, Inc.