

Earl Walden Award for Outstanding Achievement in Rural Advocacy – 2004

- Post Minneapolis Conference newsletter article

Interview with Steve Thovson

Steve Thovson was the recipient of the 2004 Earl Walden Award for Outstanding Achievement in Rural Advocacy. He says he is honored to receive the award, based on his staff's recommendation, and was both excited and humbled by the recognition.

Steve came to Southwestern CIL in Marshall, Minnesota (SWCIL) as a part timer in May of 1990. As a financial person with a background in Agribusiness, he was hired to help the Board figure out how to fix the problems uncovered during a recent unsatisfactory audit. After being away from Minnesota for about 20 years, Steve and his wife Barb had returned with their four children including three who are adopted, and one of whom has a disability. In this temporary job at the CIL, Steve began to see that his personal beliefs about life and disability fell right in line with the IL philosophy. Three months later, the Board asked him to stay on as the full time ED, where he became the 6th or 7th director they'd had in ten years. "The rest is history," Steve says, "I've been there ever since."

"During my early days at SWCIL, I was very fortunate to know several individuals who helped me, mentored me and absolutely drilled me in the IL philosophy. One was Scott Rostron, the IL Program Manager for our DSU and the other was Jay "JJ" Johnson. Jay was the Executive Director of OPTIONS CIL in East Grand Forks. They helped me gain an understanding of the guiding principles of IL philosophy and to know the importance of putting the consumer first. Learning from them, I have been able to put together a Board and staff who are also committed to that philosophy, which makes hard decision making easier since the team is on the same page."

In the last budget cycle, Minnesota's State IL funding was cut from \$1,875,000 to \$0 in one swipe of the pen. "It was supposedly a midnight fix for a \$4.5 billion deficit," Steve says. "And we just couldn't figure out how our little bit would help much. I feel that being involved in helping restore 70% of that funding in the Governor's budget, and getting language to bring it to 90% in the next budget was a huge accomplishment for us. In the end, consumers and their participation put that restoration over the top. Their voice was incredibly powerful. As one Governor's staff person told us, 'you did it right because your constituency spoke up and CILs did some heavy lifting this session to get our attention.' For me personally, working behind the scenes and getting to know the people in our state who care and are willing to work together toward a common goal has been very rewarding."

"I think the greatest challenge for rural CILs is to NOT necessarily follow the money. By that I mean it's a great temptation, in our sagging economy, to go after bucks that may be tied to deliverables that don't always fall into IL's core services or philosophy, particularly when it comes to cross-disability issues or making sure the consumer comes first. We must remember that core IL funding is the only source of dollars that allows CILs to serve people based on the IL Philosophy. We need to stretch the dollars to fit IL, not the other way around."