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<b>YOUR WEATHER:</b> - National Weather Service Forecast for Casper	<b>It's no secret!</b>  <i>Sunday, September 5, 2010 10:58 AM MDT</i>  25 years of quietly helping people  by India Hayford  This month, one of the best-kept secrets in Wyoming celebrates its 25th anniversary.  "We don't want to be a secret," said Ken Hoff, Executive Director of Wyoming Independent Living Rehabilitation, Inc. "We hold informational meetings at senior centers, discharge centers, hospitals and nursing homes, sponsor radio spots and ads in the newspaper - whatever we can do to get the word out. It's just that people don't pay any attention to us until they suddenly need our services."  Regulated by the Title VII Rehabilitation Act, WILR is one of more than 400 individual independent living agencies scattered through every state in the union. In the last quarter century, the private non-profit organization has provided services for 18,578 Wyoming consumers with severely limiting physical disabilities ranging from arthritis to stroke to blindness, enabling people who might otherwise be confined to hospitals and nursing homes to live independently in their communities. Developmental disabilities that are congenital or occur before the age of one are generally covered by NOWCAP, a separate system from WILR.  "The independent living program is the basis for everything we do here at WILR," Hoff says. "We're particularly concerned with people who need personal care assistance in order to stay in their own homes instead of long-term care facilities. This is consumer-directed care; WILR works with consumers to help them hire and train personal care attendants and oversees programs that provide consumers with rent, groceries, furniture, anything they need to get back into the community."  Bob Carbon founded WILR in 1985 and went on to become its first director. A passionate proponent of the independent living movement, Carbon spent his life in a wheelchair after breaking his neck at the age of 13. Beginning with a modest staff of three, a single office in Casper and a limited budget, Carbon's organization grew to its current staff of 30 employees serving 13 counties in eastern Wyoming. To date, WILR has served almost one out of four Wyoming citizens with a disability. Originally, a single Casper counselor covered the entire state, but a second center for independent living (Wyoming Services for Independent Living) was established in Lander in 1994 and now serves western Wyoming.  Though WILR is non-governmental, much of its funding comes from grants written to federal agencies. Donations are accepted from private foundations, corporations and individuals; fees for service, in-kind donations and fundraising activities bring in additional funds for a total income of \$2,455,378 in the fiscal year 2008-2009. WILR has no stockholders. All money made is plowed back into the business. State Medicare approves the programs and reimburses many fees for services. Programs offered through WILR lower state Medicare costs significantly. Hoff emphasized that WILR isn't a funding source and can't purchase items for individuals. What WILR can and does do is write personal grants to foundations on behalf of individual consumers who need services or goods.  "If a consumer needs modifications to her home in order to live there, WILR applies for grant money to make the modifications," Hoff explained. "Most of our jobs are small and we have local contractors we work with on a regular basis to install safety equipment or build access ramps. For example, the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) requires ramps to have a one-inch rise per one foot of ramp. If the cost of building a ramp is \$100 per linear foot, a six-inch rise requires a six-foot ramp at \$600. A big ramp may cost as much as \$4,000, which is still considered a small construction job, but funding makes a big difference for consumers on limited or set incomes."  Hoff emphasized that WILR is a program for independent living. Consumers may arrange for labor or materials to be donated by a friend or acquaintance, who may then be reimbursed by WILR once certain eligibility criteria are met. WILR also maintains a huge closet of adaptive equipment ranging from wheelchairs and canes to toilet risers that are loaned to consumers on a short-term basis.  If a consumer requires the equipment longer than 30 days, he goes through an eligibility process to obtain funding for permanent purchase. The eligibility process for all services involves a specialist meeting with the consumer to do an intake and assessment to see if WILR can assist with material items or life skills training. Ninety-nine percent of services are provided in the consumer's home and are available regardless of disability or income level.  While the majority of clients are age 60 and older, WILR historically serves clients of many ages through a number of specific programs.  The Visually Impaired Program (VIP) was established in 1992 to provide services to individuals over the age of 55 who are blind or visually impaired. VIP's average consumer is over the age of 80 and suffers from macular degeneration.  Federal funding for this program is limited and consumers are encouraged to help with the cost of services, which include, but aren't limited to, low vision training, environmental assessment and referrals to other resources and agencies.  Currently, peer support groups serve the visually impaired in nine Wyoming communities throughout the state, and WILR is in the process of developing an improved volunteer program to be implemented in the fiscal year starting in October.  The Self Help-Consumer Directed Care program gives consumers the option of choosing and hiring their own personal care attendants with basic education and training provided by WILR. Personal care assistants may include friends or family members, though spouses and minor children aren't eligible. Assistance with activities of daily living such as bathing and meal preparation may make the difference between a consumer remaining in their own home and living in a nursing care facility.  The Transportation Check Program secured funding from the Wyoming Department of Transportation in 2006 after a trial run of four years. Hoff was instrumental in piloting this program, the first statewide Transportation Check Program in the nation.  He said, "In Casper, people have access to community buses and CATC, but in many small towns the only transportation available may be a senior citizen van that operates between 9 in the morning and 3 in the afternoon. The Transportation Check Program comes from a model that was first used in four counties and now serves the eastern half of Wyoming.  "To be eligible, a person must have a disability that doesn't allow that person to drive. He or she is allocated 500 miles per quarter, which can be used in that three-month period for any reason. Participants arrange for their own rides with family, friends, co-workers or public providers then submit assigned checks for fee payments or reimbursement of mileage at 36 cents per mile."  Hoff also implemented the Wyoming Technology Access Program (WYTAP) in collaboration with Wyoming Institute for Disabilities (WIND) and First Interstate Bank of Laramie. WYTAP provides low- or no-interest loans for amounts of \$500 to \$25,000, with payback periods of up to 70 months.  These loans are to be used for assisted technology (AT) devices that will improve a consumer's mobility, accessibility or quality of life, such as computers and adaptive hardware, wheelchairs, hearing aids, home modifications and devices used to enhance recreational activities such as hunting or skiing.  Federal dollars are matched by local dollars and the resulting fund can be used to buy down loan interest by 2 percent. For example, if a loan charges 5 percent interest, WYTAP uses the fund to buy down the interest so that the consumer pays only 3 percent.
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This is the first program of its kind in the state and is currently seeking additional funds. In its six years of existence, WYTAP has approved 50 loans totaling \$524,963. Although there's no income requirement, consumers must demonstrate credit-worthiness.

Project Out-Nursing Home Transition is another of Hoff's innovative programs, established in 2002 as a collaborative effort between the Wyoming State Department of Health-Aging Division and WILR.

Independent living transition specialists help Medicaid-eligible individuals develop a plan that allows them to live independently in their own home as an alternative to nursing home care. Limited funding is available for housing and transportation assistance. Assistance may include funds for rent, furnishings and modifications necessary to make a home accessible to the disabled individual.

According to WILR's 2008-2009 Annual Report, Project Out has served 770 individuals in the last seven years, reducing Medicaid costs by approximately \$8.5 million.

Agriculture workers sustain the highest nonfatal occupational injuries and illnesses of any major industry in Wyoming, and are among the least likely people to seek assistance on their own behalf. Wyoming AgrAbility is part of the National AgrAbility Project, which provides education and assistance to those engaged in agriculture who either have a disability themselves or have a family member with a disability.

In conjunction with University of Wyoming's College of Agriculture, this program seeks to reach underserved rural people who deal with physical issues that include but aren't limited to arthritis, repetitive motion injury, multiple sclerosis, visual impairment, cancer and amputations.

Unlike most of WILR's other programs, Wyoming AgrAbility covers disabilities that are present at birth as well as those that result from accident and illnesses that occur later in life.

Wyoming AgrAbility assists farmers and ranchers with farm equipment adaptations and home modifications, provides peer support, conducts informational and educational workshops, and refers families to local service providers so that individuals with disabilities can continue to farm and ranch.

WILR also encompasses Youth Corp, implemented in 2005 to provide physically-challenged youngsters between the ages of 14 and 21 with job skills, and connect them with potential employers. The Age and Disability Resource Center was established by WILR and WIND in 2005 to educate people on long-term care options and to provide assessment, referral and enrollment in long-term care programs.

WILR has been recognized by the Department of Education, Rehabilitation Services Administration as an Outstandingly Innovative program, received a certificate of recognition from the Department of Health and Human Services in 2007, and in 2009 was named Outstanding Service Provider of the Year by Wyoming Association for Persons in Community Employment.

Individuals seeking assistance or desiring to donate service, cash or goods may contact WILR's main office at 266-6956.

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