UpNorth Access North News

Summer '26

Access North Centers for Independent Living of Northeastern Minnesota

Access North Loses a Longtime Friend and Valued Board Member

On June 20, Access North lost a true friend, advocate, and dedicated leader. Jeff Christian.

Jeff served on Access North's Board of Directors for more than 15 years, holding the offices of President, Vice President, and Treasurer during his tenure. Following a courageous 20-year battle with multiple sclerosis, he continued to bring his trademark dedication, integrity, service, generosity, and commitment to helping others.

Jeff was instrumental in creating our Accessible Deer Hunt. He spent countless hours organizing and promoting the event, reaching out throughout the region to better understand what it means to provide a safe, meaningful, and high-quality experience. Together, Jeff and I worked closely with Minnesota State Parks & Trails, the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources, and Options Bowman Center for Independent Living to model our hunt after their successful program, which has operated for more than 20 years.

Jeff was a man of faith, family, and community. Whether executing volunteer, fundraising, or leading a helping hand, he never hesitated to answer the call. He was equally comfortable on the ice as a hockey referee or behind the grill at Walk, where his passion for serving others was evident to everyone who knew him.

Jeff's leadership, leadership, and unwavering dedication touched countless lives. We are deeply grateful for the years we shared with him and for the lasting impact he made on Access North and the communities we serve.

Goodbye, my friend. You will be greatly missed.

Applications Now Open for Our 6th Annual Accessible Deer Hunt

Applications are now being accepted for Access North's 6th Annual Accessible Deer Hunt, taking place October 23-24 at McCarthy Beach State Park.

Our Accessible Deer Hunt provides a fully supported hunting experience for individuals with disabilities. Hunters are provided with accessible hunting blinds, transportation to and from the blinds, shooting tripods, and a dedicated team of volunteers to assist with loading, field dressing, and processing harvested deer. Lodging, meals, and beverages are provided throughout the two-day event.

Participation is free for hunters, thanks to the generosity of our sponsors, donors, and volunteers. Hunters are responsible for their own hunting licenses and tags, which are purchased through the Deer Hunt Lottery.

If you would like to sponsor, donate, or volunteer for the Accessible Deer Hunt, please complete the application below or contact Don or Patty at info@access-north.org or call them for more info.

Accessible Hunt Applications

Become a Sponsor of Our 6th Annual Accessible Deer Hunt

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Participation is free for hunters, thanks to the generosity of our sponsors, donors, and volunteers. Our goal is to host all ride hunters and no fee hunters. Our hunters typically bust within the campground area, while rifle hunters are stationed throughout McCarthy Beach State Park.

If you would like to sponsor, donate, or volunteer for the Accessible Deer Hunt, please complete the application below or contact Don or Patty at info@access-north.org or call them for more info.

Accessible Hunt Sponsorship Form

Access North Installs its 2,000th Home Access Ramp

Access North is proud to announce the installation of our 2,000th home access ramp to Jeff Christian, a longtime Access North volunteer, advocate, and former Board member.

The Ramp Program was launched by Jeff Christian and Access North in partnership with the St. Louis County Community Development Block Grant that helped purchase the equipment needed to begin construction. Today, the universal engineered ramp design developed by Access North is supported by the Minnesota International Code Council (MICC) and is used by Centers for Independent Living across Minnesota.

One of the greatest strengths of our Ramp Program is its longstanding partnership with the Minnesota Department of Corrections. Through collaboration with correctional facilities in Togo and Willow River, incarcerated individuals gain valuable job skills while helping improve accessibility for people with disabilities throughout our region.

Participants in the Challenge Incarceration Program (CIP) at the Togo facility travel to Access North's Duluth office to learn the construction skills needed to build home access ramps. Upon successful completion in the program, participants can individual's sentence, making this collaboration an outstanding example of restorative justice in action.

At the Willow River Correctional Facility, modular ramp sections are built on-site before being transported and assembled at homes throughout Northeastern Minnesota. These modular sections are constructed and then customized to meet each homeowner's needs before railings, supports, and transitions are installed.

In addition to permanent wooden ramps, Access North also offers temporary metal Rolt Ramps that can be quickly installed for individuals recovering from surgery, illness, or injury.

Beyond the Ramp Program, Access North also provides Home and Community-Based Services waivers, and Access North accepts most waiver insurance plans. Veterans may qualify for Veterans Administration funding, and for income-eligible families, we also offer a trial-to-own program. Our staff continually pursue grant opportunities to ensure accessibility remains affordable for our community.

Each year, Access North also hosts a Community Ramp Build, where building officials across Minnesota come together to construct a ramp for a local family. This unique collaboration not only provides an immediate accessibility solution for a family in need, but also strengthens relationships, builds trust, and improves engineering, and safety standards that have made our ramp program a model throughout the state.

As we celebrate the installation of our 2,000th ramp, we also celebrate the thousands of individuals and families whose independence, safety, and quality of life have been enhanced because of this program.

Your Support Makes Independence Possible

Every donation helps create opportunities for people with disabilities to live safely and independently in their own homes.

Your generously supports programs that make a lasting difference—from home accessibility ramps and independent living services to advocacy, information and referral, and community programs that keep people connected to their homes and lives.

Whether you choose to make a one-time gift or explore planned giving opportunities, your support helps ensure Access North can continue to meet the growing needs of our community. Even small gifts begin to work with you and your family to create a lasting legacy that reflects your goals and values.

Thank you for helping us remove barriers and for helping us build a more accessible, inclusive future.

Donate Today

—Don Brunette, Executive Director

Brained Office Now Open for Walk-In Visits

We have exciting news! The Brained office is no longer appointment only!

Beginning this summer, our office is open for walk-in visits every Monday through Thursday from 10:00 a.m. to 3:00 p.m. Whether you have questions about our services, need help getting connected to community resources, or simply want to stop in, we're here to help.

Brained is a free, peer-to-peer, brain injury support community, located inside the office. Hunting leases are available to members in need while supplies last. The pantry includes a variety of everyday essentials such as toilet paper, laundry detergent, and dish soap, as well as a small clothing closet(s), personal care items (including soap, body wash, shampoo, and toothpaste), hand sanitizer, hand sanitizer, first aid supplies, and paper goods (such as toilet paper and paper towels) while supplies last.

If you need to meet outside of walk-in hours or would like to be dedicated time with a staff member, appointments are still available.

We look forward to seeing you!

—Kirt Hansen, Independent Living Coordinator Co-Lead

Access North's Pop-Up Care Package Event

A few tables, a canopy, and a dedicated team of staff and volunteers helped create a meaningful day of connection and support for Access North's Brained members.

Thanks to the generosity of our partners and the hard work of our staff, Access North distributed approximately **150 community care packages** containing household essentials such as toilet paper, paper towels, and other everyday supplies. In addition, Access North provided gift cards to local stores and reached **148 family members**, helping ease the cost of everyday necessities for individuals and families throughout the community.

The event also provided an opportunity for community members to connect with Access North staff, learn about available programs and services, and receive information about additional local resources. These conversations helped strengthen relationships and ensure that people left with more than just a care package.

We are grateful to everyone who helped organize, promote, and staff this event. Your time and commitment made a meaningful difference for hundreds of our neighbors.

Events like this remind us how important it is to be out in the community and will have a ripple of beneficial ripples. Community members are welcome to stop by our office and learn more about the programs and services available from while supplies last. If you are visiting our Duluth office, please call ahead to check which supplies are still available.

—Jacob Knuffke, Independent Living Coordinator Co-Lead

A Special Hello to our new Accounts Payable Clerk, Kelly Dagen!

Hi, I'm Kelly Dagen, and I am excited to join the Access North team. I've been in accounting for many years, mostly in construction, and I will be processing accounts payable and assisting with finance tasks. I would be happy to assist with any questions you have or answer payable or please don't hesitate to stop by my desk. I look forward to working with everyone and getting to know you.

Outside of work, know that my two daughters are grown, I enjoy spending my free time with my two granddaughters. We other hobbies include bowling, ice fishing and fishing. I also love spending long walks with my standard poodle, Bella, and my three kittens. Bella is the dog I've wanted but has to wait for my dad now since he is the office dog!

Welcome Susan DePyper - Brained Receptionist

I have lived in the Brained Lake Area since 1990, when I moved to Upper Michigan to attend Northern Michigan University. I grew up in Minnesota, from all over the world, including parts from as far away as Lombok, Indonesia. Later, I decided to pursue schooling in the medical field, which led to positions with large hospitals and independent living facilities, where I spent many years in medical records and as a medical receptionist. Recently, I found a job at Access North where I can continue to be productive while helping others and supporting our mission of promoting independence and inclusion.

In my free time, I've been married for 34 years, and we share our home with our two cats, Lucy and Ethel.

When I'm not at work, you'll usually find me enjoying time at my photo cabin. Lucy's Lake I love swimming, boating, fishing, and reading the day with a campfire and a good book.

Join Access North in Celebrating the ADA!

Each year, communities across the country celebrate the anniversary of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA)—a landmark civil rights law that promotes equal access, opportunity, and inclusion for people with disabilities. This summer, Access North is excited to participate in two regional celebrations, and we'd love to see you there!

Twin Ports Disability Pride Festival
Saturday, July 25 • 4:00–8:00 p.m. • Pfeifer Circle at Duluth City Hall, Duluth, MN
Enjoy activity stations, guest speakers, live music, and connect with organizations that support the disability community. Free event. T-shirts are available with RSVP while supplies last.

Indivisible Disability Rights Celebration
Thursday, August 6 • 11:00 a.m.–2:00 p.m. • Superior High School, Superior, WI
Join us for a celebration of the ADA with a vendor fair, speakers, and a small market. Set-maker, crafteleners, and opportunities to navigate the disability rights movement and learn about the resources available to make a difference. American Sign Language interpreters will be available.

If you're attending either event, be sure to stop by the Access North booth! We'd love to say hello, answer questions about our services, and connect with members of the community. Stop by to learn more about our services, meet our team, and celebrate community, accessibility, and disability pride!

—Jacob Knuffke, Independent Living Coordinator Co-Lead

Neighbors Helping Neighbors: United Way Day of Action in Chisholm

This summer, four Access North staff members rolled up their sleeves and joined the United Way Day of Action in Chisholm, Minnesota. For a day, they lent their hand and their projects around their homes.

Together with other community volunteers, the team tackled home improvements that ranged from painting to general upkeep. Tasks that more of us might take for granted but can become physically challenging or impossible as we age.

Events like this remind us how small acts of kindness create safer outdoor spaces and eased the burden on two homeowners who related to certain living challenges firsthand. The smiles, conversations, and gratitude shared throughout the day were a reminder that sometimes the greatest gift we can offer is simply our time.

Thank you to the United Way Achieve Independence in Aitkinnington Partnership, to everyone at the Global Day, Day of Action reflects our commitment to supporting older adults and people with disabilities. Not only through our programs and services, but also by being active participants in the communities we serve.

We are grateful to United Way for organizing this meaningful event and to everyone who volunteered. Days like this remind us why strong, stronger communities where neighbors support neighbors and everyone has the opportunity to thrive.

—Jacob Knuffke, Independent Living Coordinator Co-Lead

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Continuing the Transition to Community First Services and Supports (CFSS)

As we continue transitioning all of our PCA clients to Community First Services and Supports (CFSS), our priority remains the same: putting our clients and their first and foremost.

Whether you are returning home from the hospital and need Direct Support Professional (DSP) services, just beginning your journey with CFSS, or you have been receiving CFSS services for a long time, we're here to help you access the support you need. We understand that navigating long-term care services can feel overwhelming, and we want to make the process as simple as possible.

Access North is a trusted resource for individuals and families with questions about aging in place, living with a disability, or accessing community-based support. Our goal is to make the process as seamless as possible so you can focus on what matters most—living your life with the support you need and deserve.

One of our clients shared that it took them three years to find Access North. We are so honored to be her words and grateful for the opportunity to make a positive difference in the lives of those we serve.

"I came to Access North after a friend recommended your organization. I was in a very difficult beginning, I was authorized with spare arrow. The team made my transition fast, easy, and, most importantly, smooth.

Having Tammy as my nurse coordinator has been invaluable to my family and caregiver. She is always there when we need her, and I have questions or concerns, she is always quick to respond with answers and guidance. During an emergency, she was there to help us navigate the situation with ease. Her care, her dedication, her compassion, and her dedication goes an immeasurable way to our family. Tammy is a blessing.

I truly don't know where I would be without Access North. Their support has made a meaningful difference in our lives, and I can't thank them enough for the care, kindness, and commitment they continue to provide." —Gene Hardmann, Access North support

—Tammy Bottern, RN/ CE-Lead

Advocacy Preserved over 8,000 in Home Modification Support

Disability Resource Center (DRC) Supervisor Jill Lund received an email stating that because his accessible bathroom home modification would not be physically completed before his lease expired (as of 5/31/26), the remaining balance of the grant would be lost, and he would be responsible for the full budget. This caught my attention because the home modification had already been approved for over 180 of his monthly rent, and he was actively working with a DRC case manager on an SC waiver, meaning the entire cost could be covered. Lund and waiver funds, not just the small 3k maximum on most other waiver types.

Based on what I knew about home modifications, I assumed that this was correct. The grant had already been approved and funded through his current plan year, and the work was already moving forward. If the project was not completed by the end of the plan year, the remaining balance would simply roll over and be available for his next approved work in a good standing.

Rather than assuming the information was correct, I went to the DHS policy and statutes regarding 1 reviewed the information for home modifications and could find no policy stating that approved project must be split between plan years simply because the physical construction date falls after the end of the plan year. The rule simply requires that the approved budget year that otherwise would have been unnecessarily tied up in a project already approved and underway.

What I cast proof of a that this did not just help one consumer. The PHS specifically stated that the rule was being applied to all home modifications, meaning this would affect many people across the state. Clarification will help ensure future consumers in similar situations are also being served according to DHS policy.

—Amber Pittman, Independent Living Coordinator

Accessible Technology, Greater Independence

At Access North, we know that technology can be a valuable tool for independence, but it can also be a barrier for people who are unfamiliar with what devices aren't working the way you need them to.

Recently, I visited a consumer who is blind and was having difficulty changing the screen reader voice on her Amazon Fire tablet. Together, we spent time exploring the device's settings and adjusting the voice to a setting she was comfortable with. We were able to continue the voice reader to match her preferences. By the end of the visit, she felt more comfortable using her tablet and helped navigate it independently.

Whether it involves accessibility settings, troubleshooting a device, or learning how to use a new feature, Access North is happy to provide one-on-one support to help consumers get the most from their technology.

*Access North's Independent Living Coordinator Kirt Hansen visited with Jill Lund at the **Northern Dreams Disability Resource Group meeting Tuesday from 10:00 a.m. to 12:00 p.m. at our Hibbing office.** Our staff and Don Specialist are available to assist with troubleshooting, navigating settings, learning new features, and completing technology tasks in a welcoming, supportive environment. Whether you're a beginner or simply looking to learn something new, continue to improve your independence with technology.*

—Aspen Bourg, Independent Living Coordinator

Access North Connects with Future Employees at Duluth CareerForce Job Fair

Access North recently participated in the Duluth CareerForce Job Fair, represented our organization at a job fair hosted at CareerForce in Duluth. The event provided a great opportunity to connect with job seekers, share information about the rewarding careers available at Access North, and highlight the impact our organization has in the community.

Throughout the event, Kevin and Grace spoke with individuals interested in making a difference in their communities and highlighted the variety of roles available at Access North. These roles include direct support professionals and Independent Living Coordinators, which offer opportunities for meaningful advocacy and community connection.

Thank you, Jenny and Grace for being outstanding ambassadors for Access North!

Borrow Before You Buy

Did you know Access North offers a short-&-long-term Assistive Technology (AT) Loan Program through our Duluth office?

Whether you're recovering from an injury, exploring new ways to live more independently, or simply want to try equipment before purchasing it, we may have just what you need.

Our current inventory includes a variety of assistive devices:

- Wheelchairs, walkers, rollators, canes, crutches, and bathroom safety equipment
- Hearing aids, amplifiers, and communication assistance devices
- Hand tools, kitchen tools, including ergonomic utensils, jar openers, and lighting, and environmental controls
- Hearing, vision, and communication devices
- Daily living aids such as grabbers, transfer boards, bed safety equipment, medication dispensers, and more

Equipment is available on a first-come, first-served basis and may change as items are loaned and returned.

Borrow what you need, try it out, and return it when you're ready—it's a great way to explore what works for your needs, comfort and lifestyle after. Our staff would be happy to help you explore available options and find technology that can make everyday life a little easier.

—Grace Nanocich, Independent Living Coordinator

R30 Mobility: The Firefly 2.5 Electric Trike Attachment

Access North's partner, R30 Mobility has manufactured a wheelchair attachment that gives users of manual wheelchairs the option to convert to a motorized trike in seconds after the initial set up. The Firefly 2.5 weighs 30 pounds, folds in half for storage, and has a 12-to-15-mile range on a full charge.

R30 Mobility began as a recreational vehicle company six years ago. Founder Ryan Mitchell noticed that people with disabilities were being left out of trips that ranks, breaking the social norms and pressurized notions of wheelchair travel. Firefly 2.5 users can easily traverse grass, hills, rocks, and uneven and even frozen lakes. Check out Duluth native Jenson, Jenseinner on YouTube to see it in action.

Access North's Independent Living Program provides medical devices, not medical equipment. This has enabled Access North to serve the Firefly 2.5 for many individuals, as most private insurances will not outright approve the Firefly 2.5 as a medical device. Access North has helped many users, 75% of them thus far, receive their claims are submitted following the right procedures, up to 80% of prior authorizations have been approved. This includes taking the steps of:

- Working with the Minnesota Department of Human Services' Technology evaluation. The letter must reference the currently listing of medical equipment.
- Work with an approved vendor. Using a Complex Rehab Technology provider that is enrolled with MHCP ensures that the Firefly 2.5 is properly documented and submitted in the DME or your Manager Care Organization's prior approval.
- Wait times for a response are typically 2-6 weeks once everything has been submitted.

This type of innovative Technology isn't new, but we don't have about it or we at least can offer. Society can tend to think of the most basic needs when it comes to accessibility: a manual wheelchair for users who prefer independence, a power wheelchair for those who need it, and a ramp to get into the home. Beyond these basics, there is a world of other devices, APTs, and accessibility, the convenience of the Firefly 2.5 makes perfect sense. Recreation is important to everybody, not just able-bodied people, and has been found to have profound health benefits that go beyond the enjoyment of a ride. Check it out!

—Grace Nanocich, Independent Living Coordinator

FEATURED RECIPE: Summer Cucumber Salad

This recipe is from Kirt's Grandmother in the Cloquet, but also enjoyed all year round!

- 3 cucumbers, washed and sliced very thin
- 2 bun green onions but for flavy
- 1 large tomato, chopped
- 1 cup Miracle Whip
- Refined Sulfate dressing to savor
- A couple shakes of Montreal seasoning
- Salt & pepper

Squeeze the sliced cucumbers (yes, squeeze them), Mix in Montreal seasoning and sugar, let sit for an hour in the fridge. Add tomato and onion. Cover with Sulfate dressing (add more or less to taste) Mix and serve!