

50 Years of Hiawatha Homes



Hiawatha Homes Celebrates 50 Years of Supporting Individuals with Disabilities

July 2026

A large crowd gathered at the Hiawatha Homes administrative offices on July 16, 2026 to mark 50 years since the Hiawatha Children's Home opened the doors to children with disabilities. The group was welcomed by Hiawatha Homes board member Matt Nigbur. Mayor Kim Norton was on hand to proclaim the day.

The Zumbro Valley Chorus, a chapter of the Sweet Adelines International, performed songs that the group sang at the ribbon cutting in 1976. They brought along the original certificate of appreciation they received in 1976 from Hiawatha Homes for performing! The Rochester Chamber of Commerce Ambassadors, along with members of the founding families and the leadership of Hiawatha Homes, participated in the ceremonial ribbon cutting.



Individuals, staff, former colleagues, Rochester Chamber Members, board members and more gathered at Hiawatha Homes for a ribbon cutting ceremony to celebrate our 50th anniversary on July 16.

A new wall timeline illustrating the evolution of Hiawatha Homes from the original Children's Home, the addition of the Adult Home, to the current model of community homes was unveiled. The piece includes services and activities provided to the individuals we support over the years.

After the formal ceremony, attendees were able to tour the Ferguson House, one of our first community residential homes. It is named in honor of Dr. Richard and Ann Ferguson, early and enthusiastic supporters of the Hiawatha Homes vision.

Former Executive Director Douglas Butler and current CEO Cindy Ostrowski shared their experiences and organizational challenges during their respective tenures.

Doug started his career in disability services in high school, working at Camp Courage, a summer camp in Maple Lake, Minnesota for individuals with disabilities. Later he worked at Camp Friendship in Annandale, Minnesota. It was there that he met the Fergusons. (It was also at Camp Friendship that Doug met Sue, the camp nurse – and his future wife!)

Dr. Ferguson was a Mayo Clinic rheumatologist; he and his wife were enthusiastic advocates for individuals with disabilities. With the support of the Fergusons and many local citizens, Doug started Camp Winnebago in Caledonia, Minnesota, modeled after Camp Friendship.

As the trend away from institutions and towards community-based residential care gathered steam, the Developmental Disabilities Planning Council (DDPC) was established, and tasked with creating and building new residential programs. The state was divided into regions; Doug was hired by then Governor Harold LeVander as the Region 10 council administrator.

Rep. Brad Finstad sent a Certificate of Congressional Recognition in honor of 50 years of serving the community, along with a US flag that had flown over the national capital building in honor of the event.

Seven of the original residents of the Hiawatha Children's Home have lived at Hiawatha Homes for the entire 50 years; they were on hand for the celebration.



A member of the Sweet Adelines holds a certificate of appreciation from the 1976 ribbon cutting for Hiawatha Homes.

Concepts were reviewed by city, county, and township officials, with initial emphasis on services that would support individuals living with their families.

Subsequently, Governor Al Quie appointed Doug to the state DDPC, established to distribute federal grants to eligible residential programs under the newly developed community system.

Meanwhile, the Fergusons were working with the Hiawatha Homes’ founding families to create a model of residential care – purchasing property, designing the building, obtaining permits, and most importantly securing funding for their vision.

Shortly after the Children’s Home opened Dr. Ferguson, who was serving on the Hiawatha Homes board, approached Doug to serve as executive director, a role in which he served for the next 28 years.

The early years were hectic! Hiring staff. Developing care plans. Identifying educational and recreational opportunities. Doug emphasized the importance of community education and involvement. He also emphasized the importance of advocacy, meeting frequently with state and local leaders, and serving in leadership roles in advocacy organizations.

Doug also recognized that services and facilities would need to change and evolve to meet the individual needs of those whom we support. During his tenure, family support and respite services were offered. Homes were built specifically to accommodate wheelchairs and specialized transport vehicles.



Cindy Ostrowski, CEO of Hiawatha Homes, and Doug Butler, former CEO of Hiawatha Homes, pose together during the 2025 Festival of Trees Gala.



Rochester Mayor Kim Norton proclaimed July 16, 2026 as a day to celebrate the history of 50 years of Hiawatha Homes.

Challenges were – and remain – funding and staffing. Current CEO Cindy Ostrowski provided a brief overview of the current political and funding landscape, and she reminded the audience of the ongoing importance of community advocacy and support.

We at Hiawatha Homes are grateful to the many people who have contributed to the success of our past 50 years. Despite current funding shortfalls, **we are committed** to continuing to provide the care and services the individuals we support need.

I want to support 50 more years!



Make your gift online at:
hiawathahomes.org/50

Consider becoming a monthly donor where \$50 a month supports Hiawatha Homes for years to come.
Mail to: 1820 Valkyrie Drive NW, Rochester, MN 55901

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