Karen Schelinder’s work history has followed a path of helping others since she served as a Lutheran church parish worker in the late 1960s.

When someone seeks help, her philosophy is simple. “There’s a reason they need it,” said Schelinder, 65, who provides information-and-referral services for people with disabilities as a part-time worker at Options Interstate Resource Center for Independent Living in East Grand Forks, Minn.

Schelinder’s approach? She imagines herself or a loved one in the place of that person in need, “then you just start searching and researching and finding out what help you can get.”

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Karen Schelinder: ‘Caring’ NDAD helping ‘because they want to’

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“And you help people to advocate for that.”

She credits that attitude to her upbringing in a small Lutheran family of Dutch and German ancestry in the southwestern Minnesota town of Clara City. As a child, “I would always think, ‘If this is my grandma…’ or ‘If this is someone in my family, what would I do?’” said Schelinder, a University Lutheran Church member who continues to turn regularly to her faith.

Schelinder also speaks as someone who’s needed help at times. Her health has been challenged by kidney failure – she had a kidney transplant in 1988 – plus arthritis, osteoarthritis and gradual-onset scleroderma, a systemic, chronic autoimmune disease.

“I describe it as a disease that works inside and outside your body,” she said, sitting comfortably in her power wheelchair. Her fingers, noticeably bent sharply at the knuckles, haven’t been opened for several years. “You can have fingers like mine, where the muscles and ligaments will not straighten out. Your skin will be very, very tight. Mine, it was at the very beginning. You usually have a smaller mouth. My skin, it’s not nearly as tight as it was at the beginning.” Her muscles became weak, making it increasingly harder to walk independently.

She’s faced more than three decades of adjustments, frustrations and loss. Part of that time, her husband of 40 years, the Rev. Roger Schelinder, a Lutheran minister, battled cancer. He died in 2002, but not before the pair raised three children.

It even took a few years before the scleroderma was correctly diagnosed. “But it’s never stopped me from working, from doing what I want to do,” she said, chuckling softly, proud of that personal accomplishment.

A former Valley Memorial Homes volunteer coordinator and housing manager, Schelinder went to work for Red River Valley Community Action after recovering from her kidney transplant. As emergency services director, she helped low-income families with housing, rent, electricity and heating, plus ran an emergency shelter home for women. Very rewarding work, she said.

But scleroderma issues required hospitalization, ultimately preventing Schelinder from maintaining her Community Action job beyond 20 years. “So I recouped and recovered, and I thought, OK, I’m going to retire. I can do that,” she recalled, smiling. “Then I found out I couldn’t do that. I couldn’t be home all the time. I needed to be out and about doing something again. It wasn’t a financial thing so much – not that finances can’t hurt. It was much more of a ‘I’m not that type of person’ thing.”

Schelinder got the job at Options, one of several Grand Cities non-profits for which she’s served as a board member or president. “I try to stay as active and as independent as I can,” she said.

Before she moved to East Grand Forks, NDAD helped twice, working with the North Dakota Division of Vocational Rehabilitation to pay for devices to assist vehicle accessibility in 2001 and again in 2009, when she bought a new van using an NDAD financial loan for assistive devices.

“I’ve always appreciated NDAD,” Schelinder said. “You know, they’re always listening and willing to do what they can do. They’ve gone the extra mile. And it’s not like, ‘We’re helping you and we’re done with you,’ that type of thing. They’re there afterwards. . . . It’s just not that they’re helping you because it’s their job. They’re helping you because they want to.”

Sounds like Schelinder herself.
Dickinson man with 2nd power chair: NDAD ‘has not disappointed’ him

Donald Shock lives with both chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD) and heart disease. The Dickinson man, 73, survived a major heart attack in 2004. He no longer gets enough oxygen naturally to routinely handle everyday tasks. He is on medication and travels with an oxygen tank.

“As I mentioned to the doctor, I’m just like a horse,” Shock said. “I don’t like to get knocked off my feet.”

He’s traveling fine with a new power wheelchair that he obtained in February through NDAD. Lighter, quicker and a bit more maneuverable, the power chair renewed the spring in Shock’s motorized “step.”

It’s the second time in nine years Shock qualified for NDAD assistance. After his heart attack, the charitable nonprofit got him his first power wheelchair and a van ramp — “a godsend,” he recalls. But after more than eight years and many miles of regular use, the power chair “just wore out,” he said.

“Without that power chair, there are a lot of people — including myself — who would not be able to get around and be independent. . . . It’s not easy to go from a person who was active to all of a sudden, in the snap of a finger, telling yourself, ‘Look, you can’t do it. Sit down,’ ” he said.

With his first power chair faltering, Shock contacted NDAD again in early January. NDAD’s approval for another new chair in February was a “big surprise,” he said, because he wasn’t expecting help a second time.

NDAD is “a wonderful organization,” he said. “A lot of people say that they would help, but NDAD is about the only one that I could say so far that was truthful on that. . . . NDAD has not disappointed. I really commend them. I pray that they will keep up the good work….A lot of people out there need it.”

Read an extended version of this article on NDAD.org or on NDAD’s Areavoices blog, ndad.areavoices.com.
It’s **AMAZING** what people can do when there’s help.

NDAD is a nonprofit, charitable organization founded by concerned citizens to assist mentally and physically disadvantaged people in North Dakota, many of whom are not eligible for services from other agencies.

Disabling conditions often are very costly. NDAD was founded on the belief that people with disabilities, when given the opportunity, can live more satisfying, productive lives — and NDAD has helped thousands do just that since its start in 1975. This often requires the purchase of specialized equipment, medical treatment, or other services. NDAD provides financial assistance through funds generated by both the organization and community projects. NDAD also provides information and referral services to help people receive assistance through other agencies, when possible.