

Dear Williston Chamber of Commerce,

Married for 63 years, Fred and Clara did not have children of their own. For 10 years before Clara's death in 1963, they nurtured the idea of setting aside funds to start a home for boys and girls. A leather satchel, which was filled with small pieces of paper on which ideas had been written, was the start of their dream. Through estate planning, the Eckerts established "The Fred and Clara Eckert Foundation for Children." The foundation is a 501(c)(3) tax-exempt North Dakota nonprofit corporation that does business as "Eckert Youth Homes." The first Eckert home opened in 1975 and served boys. A home for girls followed six years later. Although childless, Fred and Clara Eckert showed their love for children by giving them the youth homes, a place where kids can grow and heal in a safe and caring environment.

From 1975 – 2019, Eckert Youth Homes provided residential childcare. When the Families First Prevention Services Act passed in 2018, Eckert learned the program they had provided for decades could no longer be. Administration had until September 2019 to determine what type of program the homes would transform into. Around that same time, Juvenile court and the North Dakota Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation's Division of Juvenile Services identified the need for residential addiction services in North Dakota. These agencies worked collaboratively with the Behavioral Health Division to bring this service to North Dakota. Eckert stepped up to the plate and preparing for this level of treatment began in April 2019.

In March we began providing residential substance use treatment to North Dakota youth ages 14-17. Upon opening in March, we were quickly forced to measure the challenges of COVID-19 against the threat of untreated addiction to our youths' well-being. The program we had spent nearly a year developing was subject to adjustments. In-home activities replaced our planned off-site activities, visitations were restricted to computer screens, and house guidelines were re-written for social distancing. We were reminded that change is uncomfortable. The feelings we experienced as an agency paralleled the feelings of our youth and their families as they seek treatment - change can feel scary; change can be challenging; change may threaten our sense of safety. Nevertheless, the youth continued to be referred and treatment continued to be provided. If there is ever a year for Eckert to be acknowledged in the community for Leadership, it is 2020.

The challenges of COVID-19 fueled the increase in substance use disorders that previously existed in our region. An August report from the CDC found that 13% of individuals had either started or increased their substance use throughout 2020. COVID-19 creates intense situations for many who were already contending with a substance use disorder. Loss of income, cancellation of meetings, disruption of routines, and the loss of meaningful face to face contact are all risk factors that play a major role in substance use and relapse for youth and adults alike. Our mission at Eckert is "to provide quality services which encourage the spiritual, educational, behavioral, emotional, and physical development of children and their families." In 2020, the mission of Eckert has never been more important. This year, Eckert hired several professionals to accommodate the new program. New positions added include licensed addiction counselors, a registered nurse, clinical social workers, a medical biller, a case manager, and numerous direct care staff whose credentials include CNAs and social workers. We also established ourselves as a training site for addiction counselor trainees and social work internships.

We have an 8-bed capacity for our residential addiction treatment. Length of stay is based on individualized treatment needs and typically ranges anywhere from 3 – 8 weeks. The youth spend approximately 20 hours per week in a combination of group, individual, and family therapy. The youth maintain their academics while at Eckert during scheduled school time with our on-site tutor. The remaining hours in the day are filled with activities focused on life skills, feelings management, worthiness of life, and interconnection. Youth are encouraged to try a variety of activities to discover where their talents and predilections lie, with the goal of continuing them after discharge. As we look into the future, several opportunities exist for growth. Potential options include increasing our bed capacity and providing outpatient services to the Williston and surrounding communities.

In conclusion, I would like to nominate the Fred and Clara Eckert Foundation for Children and the staff at Eckert for the Leadership Award. As Clinical Director at this agency, I am intimately familiar with the resiliency and leadership displayed by Eckert's Foundation and employees. Every staff member at Eckert is considered a frontline employee during this pandemic. They are swiftly completing their duties to support others while also needing to engage in self-care in incredibly intentional ways. Within Eckert's mission statement is the goal of encouraging the growth and development of others. Despite the challenges of 2020, the new treatment program touched the lives of over 40 youth and their families this year. Eckert is also facilitating training opportunities for professionals in our community in the fields of addiction, mental health, and social work – each of which are critically underrepresented in Williston. Eckert is not only making a positive impact in our community but is also a leader in the State in addiction treatment for youth – most notably as the premier facility for trauma-informed care. Families travel to Williston from all over North Dakota to receive our treatment. The community of Williston should be proud to have this caliber of service in their community.

Thank you for your consideration.,

Dr. Leah Hoffman

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