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Nokomis Child Care Center Facing ‘Devastating’ Budget Woes

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By: Helmut Schmidt, INFORUM

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Losses tied to the spring flood and cutbacks in grants and charitable giving due to the recession have turned the nonprofit agency's finances into a wreck, said Gary Wolsky, president and CEO of The Village Family Service Center, which operates Nokomis.

Wolsky said Friday that donations are starting to flow in after a mini-media blitz.

People have been writing checks from \$25 to \$5,000, he said.

"I think our whole notion of this, is we're going to be very optimistic," Wolsky said. "There's no question that the community has heard this and is responding. It's just delightful to hear."

Still, the shortfall is sobering, he said. To date, contributions toward the 2009 budget of \$1.3 million are down \$100,000.

"It's been devastating," he said. "... We're dead if we don't get this fixed."

Wolsky said 70 percent of the 161 children at Nokomis' two sites have special needs that have made them difficult to place in other child care centers.

The recession increased demand at Nokomis, which at any time may have 50 to 70 percent of the children in its care coming from families that receive a government subsidy, he said.

"We really get squeezed in two directions simultaneously," Wolsky said.

He has sent scores of letters to foundations and individuals who have donated to the agency in the past and plans to send out 20 to 30 more a week through the end of the year.

He's optimistic the funding gap can be plugged.

Becky Carter, a West Fargo mother of three, hopes that happens. She's impressed with the care her 7-month-old son gets at Nokomis I.

Carter is looking for a job and her husband is on a seasonal layoff, she said, so they receive a scholarship for their son.

If the agency is forced to close, "I think it would be very devastating to a lot of people. They help a lot of people," she said.



Laura Simons, head teacher for 3-year-olds, acts out the song "Sticky Bubble Gum" with her class at Nokomis Child Care Center in south Fargo. Carrie Snyder / The Forum

Victoria Gelling, a professor at North Dakota State University, hopes her own letter writing can crack open some checkbooks.

The Fargo woman has written North Dakota state Sen. Tony Grindberg, R-Fargo, and U.S. Sen. Byron Dorgan, D-N.D., asking them to press their colleagues to help Nokomis out of its budget morass.

Gelling's energetic 4-year-old attends Nokomis and has had success there after not getting the attention he needed elsewhere.

"After a lot of stops and starts, we landed at Nokomis, and it's been a completely amazing experience for us," she said. "That's something Nokomis is known for. They'll take the children that need a little more work. Honestly, some kids need a little more attention than others,"

Wolsky said Nokomis has never existed without "a huge dose of community support" and has always struggled a bit financially. "But normally, it works pretty well."

That optimism fuels plans to buy 10 acres of land on 32nd Avenue South as a home for a Nokomis facility that could take in 258 children Wolsky said.

"We think growing Nokomis is one more way to get it financially stable," he said.

Closing one of the facilities is not an option Wolsky wants to contemplate.

"Frankly, I think it would be devastating," he said. "We're going to run on optimism and just assume the community is going to step up to the plate."

Fast facts:

- History: Nokomis Child Care Center was founded in 1971. It became a program of The Village Family Service Center in 2006.
- Locations: Nokomis I at 618 23rd St. S.; Nokomis II at 1620 16th Ave. S.
- Number of children served this year: 161
- Staff: Nokomis I has 23 on staff. Nokomis II has 27 on staff.
- Finances: Budget for 2009 is \$1,358,000. Budget for 2010 is \$1,386,000.