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REVIEW

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## School vouchers signed into law

### State will help pay private K-12 tuition

BY ELIJAH HELTON  
EHELTON@NWESTIOWA.COM

DES MOINES—Iowans can use public funding to pay for private K-12 education, marking one of the most monumental shifts in the history of the state's school system.

Gov. Kim Reynolds signed the Students First Act on Tuesday after a streamlined legislative process. The law only had Republican support as Democrats and a few GOP defectors voiced numerous objections to the new policy.

Described as "school choice" by its proponents, the Students First Act allows parents

to receive state funds — up to \$7,598 per student per year up — to cover the cost of enrolling in private schools.

Almost all nonpublic schools in Iowa are Christian.

Similar legislation had been attempted in the Legislature in previous years. Those efforts were stymied by a Republican faction chiefly concerned private school vouchers would hurt rural school districts.

Rep. Skyler Wheeler of Hull

See ACT on page A5



Skyler Wheeler



Iowa lawmakers meet on Tuesday with landowners against the proposed CO2 pipelines in Des Moines. Photo by Jess Mazour

## Taylor enters five anti-pipeline bills

### Aimed at stopping eminent domain

BY ELIJAH HELTON  
EHELTON@NWESTIOWA.COM

DES MOINES—State Sen. Jeff Taylor has five different bills plumb into ways to curtail eminent domain for CO2 pipelines in Iowa.

The Republican from Sioux Center said his proposals are

necessary to protect the constitutional rights of landowners who don't want the proposed carbon-capture projects coming through their properties.

"It's one thing to talk about a government needing this for a public use. This isn't that. Government shouldn't be helping the private developer out because they're frustrated

See PIPELINE on page A3

## Sudenga, Dur-A-Lift get county support

### George company building expansion

BY ELIJAH HELTON  
EHELTON@NWESTIOWA.COM

ROCK RAPIDS—Diversified Technologies Inc. officially secured public support for its multimillion-dollar expansion project Tuesday.

The Lyon County Board of Supervisors signed off on a contract pledging its financial support for the manufacturer's new facility on its campus near George. DTI owns the Sudenga

and Dur-A-Lift brands.

County economic development director Steve Simons joined DTI plant manager Mike Dominick at the board meeting.

"It's great to see them making the investment here in Lyon County and us helping them make that come true," Simons said.

He explained that DTI also is getting assistance from the Iowa Economic Development Authority. To be eligible for state funding, however, the company

See DTI on page A5

PART 1 OF A SERIES

We need to do a better job in our society of saying, "We have a whole group of kids that need families" — we have a whole group of kids that have nowhere to go. We literally have kids showing up with the clothes on their backs — with nothing.

Kim Scorza CRITTENTON CENTER EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR



# HOMELESSNESS & HOUSING



Staff members interact with a couple of young people living at Crittenton Center located in Sioux City, the nearest shelter for children from N'West Iowa who have no home. Photos by Aleisa Schat

This is the first in a series of articles about homelessness and housing issues in N'West Iowa. Adequate housing — housing that is accessible, safe and affordable — is more than simply a matter of physical shelter. It is a matter of safety and stability. It also is an important measure of the health of a community.

A broad coalition of nonprofit organizations, social services agencies and city governments in N'West Iowa are working to address issues related to housing and homelessness in the region's communities. This series will highlight that work — as well as the work that remains to be done.

BY ALEISA SCHAT  
ASCHAT@NWESTIOWA.COM

REGIONAL—The most visible story of N'West Iowa is one of healthy communities, thriving families and economic vitality.

However, there is a less visible story unfolding in the region's communities, too. According to Orange City resident Kim Scorza, executive director of the Crittenton Center in Sioux City, that shadow story includes people — some of them children — who have no home.

Crittenton Center provides temporary and long-term housing to children ages 0-18 who are in state care and have nowhere else to go.

"We need to do a better job in our society of saying, 'We have a whole group of kids that need families' — we have a whole group of kids that have nowhere to go," Scorza said. "We literally have kids showing up with the clothes on their backs — with nothing."

Many of those children come from N'West Iowa, with recent arrivals to the center coming from Orange City, Sheldon and Spencer.

Younger children, including infants, may stay only a few hours, or a few days, perhaps brought in by law enforcement officials on a temporary basis while they search for a more permanent arrangement.

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The art classroom at Crittenton Center, which has a school on-site for school-age children and young adults who are living at the shelter.

PROVIDING A HOME FOR KIDS WITHOUT ONE

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## NEWS

# Crittenton Center puts its focus on holistic approach

## HOMELESS

Continued from page A1

The older kids, however, often stay longer — some of them stay for years.

The Crittenton Center shelter is located in an inconspicuous building on Green Avenue in Sioux City — a former nursing home, the building has a footprint of 17,500 square feet and sits on about five acres of land.

Along with providing shelter services, the organization operates child development centers and preschools for low- to medium-income families in Sioux City. It also offers classes and referrals to parents and families out of its downtown office.

"We can accept kids from anywhere in the state of Iowa, but most of our kids are from the Western Service Area — most of them are from northwest Iowa," Scorza said.

Scorza, previously CEO of Seasons Center for Behavioral Health based in Spencer, has been Crittenton Center's executive director since early last year, after the organization reopened the doors of its emergency shelter. Staffing shortages related to the COVID-19 pandemic forced its closure in 2021.

Succumbing to similar pressures, other emergency shelters in Iowa's Western Service Area, which includes 30 mostly rural counties, have reduced their beds available or closed altogether.

Those closures have increased the pressure on Crittenton Center, which relies on a mix of state and grant funding as well as donations. To help meet demand for beds, Scorza requested permission from the state of Iowa to increase the facility's bed capacity to 20, with two emergency beds set aside for short-term cases involving law enforcement.

"We kept getting more referrals, and more referrals, and I called the state and said, 'I need help. I don't want to go over my licensing capacity, but I can't have these kids out on the street,'" she said.

Along with 22 beds on the shelter side of the facility, there are six rooms with a capacity of 12 that are designated as supervised apartment living. In this part of the center, children 16.5 and older are granted a measure of independence and are supported in acquiring important life skills, like meal-planning, cooking and budgeting.

## Therapeutic model

Crittenton Center reopened its doors on Jan. 1, 2022, and while the building is the same, the center's operational model is entirely different. Under Scorza's leadership, the emergency center has been redesigned as therapeutic transitional housing. In place of a focus on physical care, a therapeutic model offers a more holistic approach to well-being.

"The model is night-and-day different from what it was. Traditionally homeless shelters across the state have been more about, 'We house the kids, we feed the kids, we clothe the kids,'" Scorza said. "But there hasn't been a lot of emphasis on the children's mental health."

Many of the minors who end up at the doorstep of Crittenton Center have experienced significant trauma. Some come by way of the juvenile courts system; others come through the child welfare system, having failed multiple foster placements.

"The kids with the highest level of need — the highest level of acuity — those are the kids we get," Scorza

said. "There just is no other place for them to go."

Many young arrivals at Crittenton Center have suffered years of instability, abuse or neglect. A high proportion of them are children of color, increasing the chances they have been affected by cultural trauma.

Shelter staff members are trained to provide trauma-informed care, an approach grounded in the recognition that trauma changes the brain. Those changes can lead to survival-focused behaviors, Scorza said, including aggression, and those behaviors should be met with empathy and understanding, not punishment. When maladaptive behaviors arise, a therapeutic model provides pathways to restoration and relationship repair.

## Upstream efforts

Christina Eggink-Postma, vice president of program coordination and compliance at Seasons Center for Behavioral Health, is one among many who works upstream from Crittenton Center to provide early interventions that can help keep children in their homes when they are at risk of removal — or barring that, in stable foster placements.

She describes trauma-informed care this way:

"We go from asking, 'What's wrong with you?' to 'What happened to you?'" she said. "What looks to somebody else like a kid is aggressive and lashing out — for that child, that might have been the only way they could stay safe. They are in their fight-flight mode, and that's actually kept them alive. So, kudos to them."

Trauma-informed care can move those children toward healing — and more adaptive behaviors, she said.

Based in N'West Iowa, Seasons is a community health agency that serves 20 Iowa counties, and a new extension of the organization's Sioux Center office, the Family Support Center, provides a centralized location for services that could ultimately reduce the demand for beds at Crittenton Center in Sioux City.

"We recently got two different funding streams, one from SAMSHA and one from HRSA, to offer even more specialized services for foster and adoptive youth and their families," Eggink-Postma said.

The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration and the Health Resources and Services Administration are branches of the U.S. Department of Human Services.

Seasons began offering the services in the wake of recent federal legislation that overhauled child welfare funding, requiring states to redesign programs to put more emphasis on preventing out-of-home placements.

"The premise behind it is that children are better off with their families than out of home placement, and we agree with that — that's great," she said. "What that means then, from an in-practice standpoint, is that children who maybe previously would have been removed from their families, and placed into a licensed foster home, are now more likely to be placed in a family member's home, or even in a fictive kinship placement."

Fictive kin have a connection to a child — it could be a teacher or a neighbor — but they are not relatives.

One problem, according to Eggink-Postma, is family members and fictive kin may not be equipped to deal with the challenges that come with providing a home to a child — or to siblings — who have a history of abuse or neglect.



Permanency support specialist Sherri Huizenga, kinship navigator Tiffany Thomas and Family Support Center program director Taneil Johnson meet in the Seasons Family Support Center in Sioux Center. Photo by Aleisa Schat

## FOR MORE INFO:

■ To learn more about the Crittenton Center, visit <https://crittentoncenter.org>.

■ To learn more about Seasons Center for Behavioral Health, visit <https://seasonscenter.org>.

Scorza agrees the new federal legislation, which was signed into law in 2018, brought with it unintended consequences.

"I fully support the mission of — and intention of — Family First legislation," she said. "The problem with it is we don't have enough foster families, and we don't have enough biological families, with stability and intensive supports around them to take these really, really complex, high-needs kids," Scorza said.

"In some cases, they didn't have to go through the training that a licensed foster family does," Eggink-Postma said.

Among other services, the Family Support Center offers permanency support specialists, available to connect families to crucial resources — or simply to listen.

"Our permanency support specialists — we have two of them — are experienced foster and adoptive parents, and so they have kind of walked this road," Eggink-Postma said.

Without these specialized forms of support, Eggink-Postma said, foster placements may fail, and children may have nowhere else to go but Crittenton Center, the region's nearest youth shelter.

"They're going from placement to placement — and in the end, there is no placement for them," she said. "But we are trying to get further upstream — to say, 'What can we do to make those placements be more successful?'"

## New model

It's no easy undertaking, however, and when those efforts are not sufficient, Scorza and her team of around 50 shelter employees are waiting downstream, where they do their best to create a safe and nurturing environment for the children who have no place else to go.

Twenty-five-year-old Yanira Lozano is employed as a staff member at Crittenton Center, but she also lived in its emergency shelter for several periods during her early teens.

"When I saw that they were hiring, I was like, 'Oh my gosh, I'm so excited. I feel like I've been in some of their shoes,'" she said. "It was like, I can definitely relate, and I can help them."

Lozano said the shelter is run differently today than it was when she lived there, when the approach was more bare bones and harsher.

"When I was here, it was not like this," she said. "What we are offering is really phenomenal, and I know, just from my personal experience, that it's making a huge difference. Kids don't want to leave, or they'll call back and say, 'You guys were the best placement.'"

Along with a staff trained in trauma-informed care, Crittenton Center provides a variety of services and amenities on-site intended to support the health and well-being of those who live there.

There is a soundproof room that ensures private access to telehealth and remote mental health services. There is a licensed social worker on-site to provide counseling services, and across the hallway, there is a sensory room filled with lava lamps and bean bag chairs. The quiet, dimly-lit room offers a quiet space that can help with emotional regulation.

Unless they have already attended school in a Sioux City district, students attend school at the shelter, and Crittenton Center provides teachers and teaching assistants equipped to respond to children with complex needs and histories.

The rooms on the shelter side of the facility, down the hall from supervised apartment living, are spare, but large, and they have windows. Some of the children who live there long enough personalize the rooms — there might be a poster on an otherwise blank wall, a teddy bear on the bed, a shower caddy with a few products sitting on the built-in desk.

The goal, Scorza said, is a minimal stay. However, the kids who are around 10 and older are less likely to find another placement, whether it is a foster placement, placement with a kinship family or placement in another group facility. When there is space available, some of those older children opt to stay in supervised apartment living until they are old enough to live independently.

"Sometimes, when kids leave, there are huge, huge tears," Scorza said. "That's super hard because it's a shelter. It's a homeless shelter, and they should have never been here to begin with, and they shouldn't stay for long periods of time. But when they're with us, it's all hands on deck, just loving these kids unconditionally."

## Restoration

As a former nursing home, the shelter's arrangement is somewhat institutional, but the walls along the long hallways of the center feature bursts of bright graffiti and colorful murals, all of them created by the young people who make temporary homes there.

One of those murals was painted by a young girl after a food-related outburst led the girl to punch a number of holes in the wall. Scorza said her response to the outburst typifies the center's therapeutic approach.

Rather than punish her, Scorza asked her a number of gentle questions, and eventually, it came to light that she had experienced food scarcity when she was young and living outside of the United States.

"We worked through that, and then we came up with a plan. When she feels that panic, like she's going to starve, and that brings her back to when she was 3 years old, how do we respond to that? How do we care for her?" Scorza said. "Because in her mind, she's still on the street, and she's starving, and that physical feeling of hunger just triggers her."

Shortly after that conversation, Scorza had the girl cover the holes she had created in the wall with something beautiful.

"She painted this beautiful picture of an African American girl holding a book with the phrase, 'What's your story,'" Scorza said. "She was with us for several months, and she never ever after that punched a hole in the wall. She never became violent or assaultive after that. It's these therapeutic interventions — and meeting kids where they're at. We didn't punish her. We just brought her some paint and a wall."

## Raising funds

Scorza and her colleagues estimate that more than 300 children will come through Crittenton Center in the coming year, and that traffic will bring high costs.

Erika Fuentes, Crittenton Center child development director, said the center's therapeutic model is more costly than other models.

"With what the state pays us, it takes an additional \$1,000 per child for a year," Fuentes said. "So, that's 300,000 guys that we have to hit the street and fundraise for."

That additional cost is nonnegotiable, she said.

"It's the difference between engaging and building that relationship and just warehousing," she said. "Not warehousing takes a lot more effort. And it's a better way."

To accommodate longer stays for those who need it, and to provide more support during the transition to independent living, Crittenton Center also is actively fundraising for a new project — the construction of a number of tiny homes adjacent to its existing housing facility. Scorza said they hope to break ground this year.

"We really need to be able to support them therapeutically here — so we can make that transition happen, and so they don't bounce back here. That's the goal," Scorza said.

Children leaving the child welfare system are at a high risk of future homelessness, incarceration and poverty.

"We feel like we're the place where we love the kids; we engage them in relationships; we stabilize them with the goal of never seeing them again."

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