

CHANGE SERVICE REQUESTED

# FOCUS

on the region

West Central Initiative is an equal opportunity provider, lender and employer.

FOCUS on the region is published quarterly by West Central Initiative

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**our mission**  
Serving to improve west central Minnesota through funding, programs and technical assistance.

**our vision**  
Uniting ideas and resources to help people and communities create a better tomorrow.

## Preparing for the unthinkable

West Central Initiative has launched a website to help businesses develop continuity plans that prepare them for potential disaster. Stayopenforbiz.org was created to motivate businesses to begin, refine and improve a disaster recovery plan for their companies.

“Because disaster seldom announces itself, a continuity plan can make the difference between a business surviving or going under,” said Greg Wagner, WCI business and economic development director. “West Central Initiative helps companies start up and expand through our loan and business assistance programs. For us, thriving businesses mean thriving communities. Providing them with the planning tools to survive a catastrophic event is another resource we can offer to keep the businesses in our region open.”

Stayopenforbiz.org provides suggestions, how-to guides and planning templates from FEMA, the Small Business Administration and other emergency planning resources, suitable for small to large operations.

The website includes several videos of businesses that survived disaster. The business owners and managers are candid about their experiences, sharing both the hardship of their loss, and what resources helped them to start over. The

The difference between weathering a storm or going under is in your hands.

stayopenforbiz.org

videos also include interviews with regional emergency preparedness and business experts.

Stayopenforbiz.org was made possible through funding from the Philanthropic Preparedness, Resiliency, and Emergency Partnership (PPREP), a project of the Funders' Network for Smart Growth and Livable Communities. WCI is part of a PPREP Midwest cohort of foundations.

## Anna Wasescha named WCI President/CEO

Dr. Anna M. Wasescha has been named president of West Central Initiative by the WCI Board of Directors. She will begin her duties on May 8.

Reporting to the WCI Board, Wasescha will lead, direct and manage the organization, and guide its strategic direction. She will also act as WCI's chief spokesperson and represent the west central region to the greater state of Minnesota.

Wasescha has served as the president of Middlesex Community College, Middletown, Conn., since 2011. Previously, she was provost at Minnesota State Community and Technical College (M State) in Fergus Falls from 2007-2011.

“The board could not be more pleased to welcome Anna as president of West Central Initiative,” said WCI Board Chair Warren Anderson. “She knows the region, has worked with many of our partners, and is passionate about the same things that define WCI's work in helping our communities, families and businesses thrive.”

“I am so happy to be joining West Central Initiative as its new president. It is a real privilege for me to have the opportunity to work with WCI's dedicated staff on projects that are critical to the quality of life

in this region. This is work I care about deeply, and it takes place in a part of the state that matters a great deal to me,” Wasescha said.

As president of Middlesex Community College, Wasescha led efforts to deepen relationships with the community and develop programs focused on workforce needs. Under her leadership, the college foundation's asset base doubled and both annual giving and the number of endowed funds increased.

As part of her responsibilities at M State, she managed budgets, and hired and supervised faculty and staff. She also raised funds in partnership with the Fergus Falls Area College Foundation.

“Through my work at M State, I developed an active network of friendships and alliances with local organizations,” Wasescha said. “I understand the challenges rural communities face but I have also experienced the rich rewards that they offer. Living away from west central Minnesota, I have come to appreciate all the more the values and lifestyles that define this region and welcome this opportunity to work with others to strengthen its economic and social fabric.”

WCI contracted with CohenTaylor Executive Search Services, Minneapolis, to conduct a nationwide candidate search for WCI's senior executive position after the departure of Brad Barth in December, 2016.

### 5 Things about Anna

Her family has long-time west central Minnesota roots.

“My grandparents had a farm outside of Perham. Growing up, I spent part of every summer in west central Minnesota.”

Anna and her husband, Richard Kagan, already have a home in Otter Tail County. They built it on the foundation of a lake cabin Anna's parents had owned since the 1970s.

Anna was provost at Minnesota State—Fergus Falls from 2007-2011.

She was the subject of a chapter in a book, *Grace from the Garden*, which chronicles her community organizing to develop a community garden in the heart of St. Paul, called Farm in the City.

She holds a doctorate in educational policy and administration from the University of Minnesota.



## More than the “terrible twos”



Early childhood mental health refers to a young child's developing capacity to express emotions, develop close relationships and explore the world around them.

Network wants to be a resource and advocate for the mental health of our very young.

When members of the Early Childhood Mental Health Network gather each month at WCI, their work is clearly defined...and right in front of them. That's because the group's coordinator Carolyn Strnad included the definition of early childhood mental health and its categories on the back of each member's nameplate.

“Defining what is early childhood mental health and its components helps us to center our work around the youngest of children in our community, says Carolyn Strnad, the network's coordinator. She also coordinates the Clay County Early Childhood Initiative and the Clay County Collaborative.

The ECMH Network began meeting last fall and is comprised of professionals from early childhood, education, social services and health care from the nine-county region of west central Minnesota. WCI funds the gatherings and Strnad's coordination.

If it seems strange that these members need a reminder on their nameplates, imagine

what the average person wonders when they hear the words “early childhood mental health.” The subject is complex, Strnad says, but, briefly, it refers to a child's developing capacity to express one's emotions, develop close relationships and actively explore the world around them.

What many don't understand, Strnad continues, is that from a very young age, adverse childhood experiences, known as ACEs, can dramatically change a child's social-emotional makeup and capacity to handle what life hands them. This mental stress manifests itself in many different ways.

“A lot of people, when they think of mental illness, think of a raging kid, but depression and anxiety can affect very young children too,” Strnad explains. In many cases, families have to figure out on their own how to deal with their child's illness—even if the child has been diagnosed.

That's why one of the ECMH Network's first projects is to

develop a regional resource database of early childhood mental health services from prenatal to age eight.

Another goal is to address the stigma associated with talking about mental health. “How do we talk about kids and their mental health needs? Too often, people say things like, ‘Oh, she's just two’ or ‘That's what all boys do,’ to explain a child's behavior. As an early childhood group, we have a voice about our young children's social-emotional development, and we can teach others how to have that conversation with families, child care, educators, medical professionals, media and others,” Strnad says.

For information about the ECMH Network, email Carolyn Strnad at [coordinator@claycountycollaborative.org](mailto:coordinator@claycountycollaborative.org).

## WCI offers forgivable loans for child care providers

Thanks to a \$50,000 grant from the Minnesota Department of Employment and Economic Development (DEED), West Central Initiative (WCI) is offering forgivable loans for home- and center-based child care providers for a second year.

In 2016, WCI piloted its forgivable loan program for start-up and existing child care businesses in the nine-county region of west central Minnesota that WCI serves.

“We were able to provide 20 forgivable loans to licensed providers throughout the region, and quickly ran out of designated funds for the loans,” said Greg Wagner, WCI's business and economic development director. “We found out that a small amount of money can make the difference in opening a business or keeping it running.”

This year, WCI is providing a \$51,000 match to the DEED grant. This allows WCI to provide up to 29 forgivable loans at \$3,500 each. Payments on the three-year loans are forgiven each month as long as the child care stays in operation. If it closes prior to the end of the loan period, the loan recipient is required to pay back only the remaining principal of the loan.

For information about WCI's forgivable child care loan program, visit [loans.wcif.org](http://loans.wcif.org).

## The best kind of thank you

A folder filled with the most delightful cards and drawings showed up at our office recently, all bursting with thanks, praise and best wishes. But they weren't for us. They were for Inga.

We tell Inga Johnson's story a lot—with her brother she ran the Lake Alice Grocery Store in Fergus Falls. She traveled throughout the U.S. as a young woman. She loved to fish. She loved photography and was a charter member of the local photography club. And, before her death at the age of 96, she worked with her financial planner and West Central Initiative to establish the Inga

Johnson Trust Fund. In 20 years, the trust has given more than half a million dollars to local and regional nonprofits, especially those organizations that serve children and promote the arts—both important to Inga during her lifetime.

A Center for the Arts in Fergus Falls used its gift this year from the Inga Johnson Trust to help fund transportation and tickets for second- and fourth-graders of the Fergus Falls school district to attend a performance of *Alice in Wonderland*.

The cards we received from those elementary school children were effusive in

their thanks and filled with joy for the experience. We think Inga would have loved it. We sure did, and came to admire Inga's lasting legacy to Fergus Falls even more.

*Would you like to become an Inga? Our donor services team of Tom McSparron and Sandy King would love to visit with you about how to leave a legacy that would help support your community and your values. Call them at 800-735-2239, or email [tom@wcif.org](mailto:tom@wcif.org) or [sandy@wcif.org](mailto:sandy@wcif.org). With all financial matters, we also encourage you to consult your financial advisor.*



## More workforce solutions eligible for new grant program

When a car breaks down, it's an inconvenience to all of us, but for those living in severe poverty, their very livelihood and the welfare of their family is often at stake. The Douglas County Car Care Program in Alexandria was created to help alleviate this exact situation.

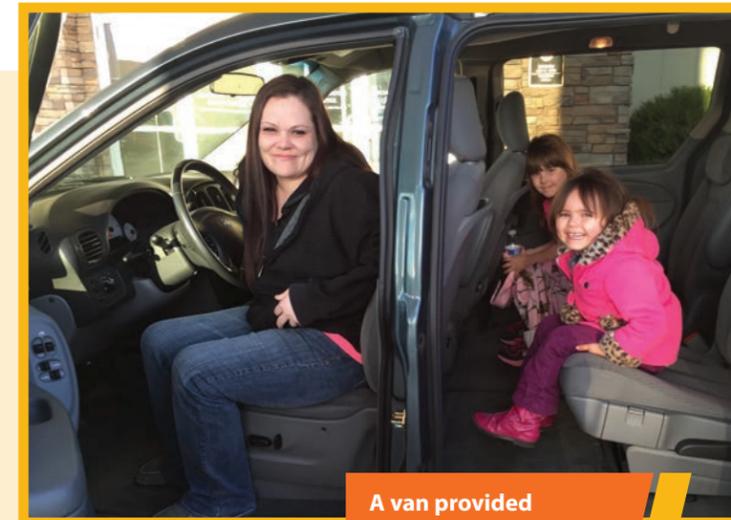
The program works with area auto shops and dealers to repair vehicles, and even provides refurbished vehicles that are donated to the organization.

The Douglas County Car Care Program recently received a \$15,000 grant

from WCI's new Workforce Solutions Grant program. It retools the foundation's previous Competitive Workforce Grant program so that more proposals would be eligible for funding.

“Douglas County Car Care is the first organization to benefit from the Workforce Solutions Grant Program,” said Wendy Merrick, WCI's program director. “An engaged workforce is crucial to economic vitality and our work at West Central Initiative. Having lots of job openings and a low unemployment rate is a good problem to have, but,

like any challenge, we want to be proactive in working on a solution. That's what WCI's Workforce Solutions grant program is all about – supporting innovative projects that bring partners together to ensure workforce needs are met and that talent is readily available.”



A van provided through Douglas County Car Care gave Samantha Flaten safe transportation to get to and from work and child care.

Learn more about the Workforce Solutions Grant Program at [workforcesolutions.wcif.org](http://workforcesolutions.wcif.org).