



Nonprofit formed to operate daycare center

BY RICK BUSSLER
PUBLISHER

Leo Augusta Children's Academy, a nonprofit organization recently established in Blooming Prairie, will operate the proposed daycare center.

Jen Brovold of Mankato has joined the academy as its executive director. Brovold, who has an extensive background in human resources and business administration, has been working on developing the center since January. She is currently working out of Kruckeberg Industries in downtown Blooming Prairie.

There are currently three directors on the academy board: Ann Wills, chairperson; Amy Hinzmann, treasurer and Sara Winzenburg, secretary. Hinzmann is the CFO and Wills is vice president of human

resources for Kruckeberg Industries. Winzenburg is an educator and home daycare provider in Blooming Prairie.

The board, Hinzmann said, is small right now by design but will grow in the coming months.

"Jen will be the face of the center to the parents, children and employees," said Hinzmann.

While the daycare center will need to be a self-sustaining entity, Hinzmann said the reason a nonprofit organization was established in the first place was "to accept the wonderful donation of the property" by the Kruckeberg family.

Hinzmann said the center will begin attracting quality employees as early as October, with an opening expected to be in February or March. The center will employ up to 25, including instructors, aides, office personnel and kitchen

"YOU GIVE — THEY THRIVE" Capital Campaign

What: Governs new daycare center in Blooming Prairie
When: Center to open by early 2022
Who: Board members—Ann Wills, Amy Hinzmann and Sara Winzenburg
Goal: Raise \$2 million
More Info: www.leoaugusta.com or call 507-572-2062

"It's not ours... it's the community's project."

Ann Wills
Leo Augusta Chair

workers. There will be a combination of full-time and part-time positions.

The center will be able to serve 100 children ages infant (6 weeks old) through 12 years of age. In addition to regular daycare, there will also be before and after school, plus summer

services available for school-aged children.

Wills is overseeing a \$2 million capital fundraising campaign, "You Give - They Thrive." The funds raised during the campaign will provide resources for appointing classrooms and outdoor spaces with the

necessary technology, security, supplies and equipment. The campaign will also provide an endowment from which the academy can draw as needed.

Funds raised during the campaign, Wills said, will not be utilized for operating expenses such as staff salaries. The operating funds will come from tuition costs charged to families who use the center.

"As a nonprofit organization, our foundation looks forward to forming alliances with other community partners and business leaders," said Wills. "Funds will be utilized in the classroom, creating a direct impact on the care, comfort and development of future generations."

Both Wills and Hinzmann are focused on educating the community about the academy. "It's hard



Jen Brovold

to fundraise if they don't understand it," Hinzmann said.

A thermometer will be added to the campus in the near future for the community to monitor the fundraising effort.

"It's not ours... it's the community's project," Wills said.

Hinzmann said there is a lot of work currently going on behind the scenes to work through the state licensing requirements for the daycare center to be ready by early next year.

New center to fill daycare void in area

BY RICK BUSSLER
PUBLISHER

Amy Hinzmann knows firsthand the importance of having daycare options available close to home.

She lives and works in Blooming Prairie but drives her children 10 miles away to Hayfield for daycare every day.

The recent formation of a new nonprofit academy to operate a daycare facility in Blooming Prairie excites Hinzmann, who says she will be the first to keep her children in town once the center opens up.

Hinzmann has been a part of developing the center's vision along with her boss, Craig Kruckeberg, owner of Kruckeberg Industries. The Kruckeberg family has donated the land and buildings for the center.

Daycare is a major issue facing many parents throughout the community and elsewhere.

"There has been a significant shortage of daycare providers throughout the state and in the three-county area of MN Prairie," said Jane Hardwick, director of MN Prairie, which services Steele, Dodge and Waseca counties. She said this trend has been continuing in recent years.

For example, in Blooming Prairie, there are currently 200 children under the age of 6, with only 130 licensed daycare spots available. There are 13 licensed daycare operators in Blooming Prairie.

According to Southern Minnesota Initiative Fund (SMIF), six of the 13 providers in Blooming Prairie have provided daycare for more than 20 years. The statewide average is 12.7 years. There are four providers with five years or less service, which is considered the

most vulnerable length of service for providers to continue in the profession.

"If someone is looking to exit, this will be a fantastic transition to get out of in-home daycare," Hinzmann said. "The community needs this. Our in-home providers are maxed out."

Ann Wills, chair of Leo Augusta Children's Academy, points out how those numbers put 100 children in Blooming Prairie alone at risk of potentially not having childcare available.

SMIF has provided guidance to Leo Augusta with this project. "We have received fantastic support from SMIF," Wills said.

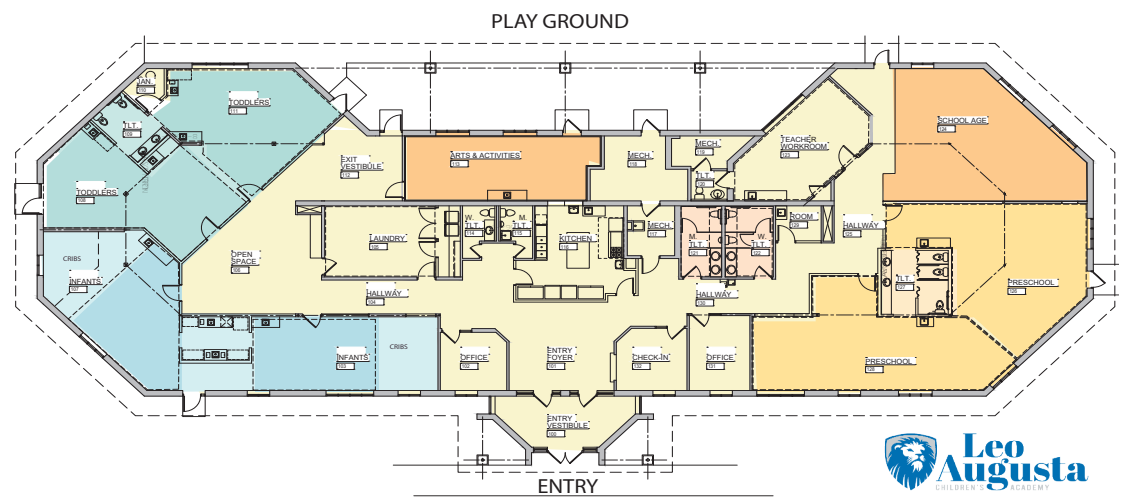
According to the 2020 Census, there are 4,829 children ages birth to 9 years old in Steele County. However, there are only 1,962 licensed daycare spots available in the county, according to MN Prairie County Alliance.

Of the major center facilities in the county, they have very few openings and are not actively marketing openings. The major centers are Kids Korner, Wee Pals and Cedar Kids.

Out of 76 home daycares in the county, only a handful is offering to do second or third shifts.

MN Prairie's Hardwick said any additional childcare in area communities is helpful. "Having access to affordable, quality childcare is critical to our economy and raising families in addition to preparations for school readiness," she said.

Hardwick said MN Prairie has found many in-home providers leave the profession because it's difficult for them to keep up with the increasing regulations. "It has made it really



This is the architect plan for the former Minimizer corporate office building, which will be converted to a daycare center.

challenging to continue in daycare," she said, adding as more new providers become licensed, many others leave.

As a business owner in Blooming Prairie for more than 30 years, Kruckeberg has seen his employees struggle with finding quality childcare. "We recognized a need," Kruckeberg said.

Added Hinzmann, "There is not enough good in-home daycare to go around for all the children."

As the plans for the daycare center progress, Wills hopes to receive input from the greater community.

"We are hoping for community partnerships so we can maximize the need," she said, adding they don't want to have any space go unused.

Wills said the new center slated to open early next year will provide daycare options for parents not only in Blooming Prairie, but other surrounding communities. The center expects to serve families living within a 20-mile radius of Blooming Prairie.

However, Hinzmann stressed, priority will be given to Blooming Prairie children first. "We will take care of the Blooming Prairie community before opening up to the surrounding areas," she said.

"This will be a great opportunity to help area communities with childcare," said Wills. "It's giving parents more options... it's all about options."

The new daycare center, Wills said, will

provide a hands-on learning approach partnered with a structured curriculum. The center will be licensed through the State of Minnesota.

Wills said the center will provide quality care in state-of-the-art facilities. One feature the center will make available is a security system in which parents will be able to log in remotely to watch their children at daycare.

The perimeter of the 3-acre property, which includes two facilities, will be fenced so children won't be able to wander away.

"We have a lot of room to work with, which is a great opportunity for indoor and outdoor space," Wills said.

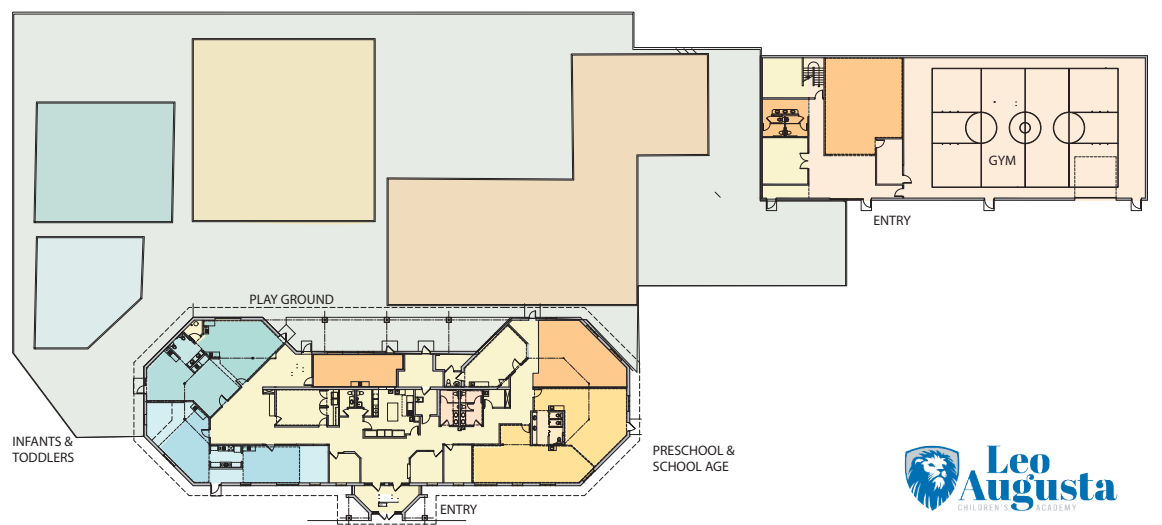
Hinzmann said the new center will be mod-

eled after Kids Korner in Owatonna, which has been operating for more than 30 years. "They have been a fantastic resource," she said, adding the local group has done its homework on this project.

"I think it's exciting to be a part of a project like this to help employers, working families and children in the community," said Hinzmann, adding it's a win/win situation for all involved.

Added Wills: "Our hope is this will be a great opportunity for Blooming Prairie in a variety of ways—employee and childcare opportunities."

Hinzmann said the center's overall goal is to make young people as well-rounded as possible in a safe environment.



This is an overview of what the Leo Augusta Children's Academy will look like. The lower left side is the building, which housed the Minimizer corporate office and will be transformed into a daycare center with a large playground slated for behind the building. The upper right side is the current storage building, which will be converted into a large gymnasium.