



The Common Council
The Planning and Development Department
City of La Crosse

April 21, 2017

To the Members of the Common Council,

Chileda, a therapeutic living and learning residential and school program for children and youth with significant needs is requesting to replace the current fence with a higher, more secure one to significantly improve the safety of residents.

Who We Serve

Students who live and learn at Chileda enter the program for therapeutic interventions related to several diagnoses including autism, intellectual disabilities, mental health issues and related behavioral challenges. These are students who are not able to care for themselves on a daily or even hourly basis, have low cognitive skills that result in poor decision making, and are not able to fully understand the consequences of their actions. All students have communication challenges and if away from their family or staff, would likely not be able to communicate their needs or wants effectively. In addition, over half of the residents communicate non-verbally, which is another barrier to communication.

Why Fencing is Necessary

Our primary job is to keep students safe while they are learning the skills toward independence. One behavior of great concern is called elopement-leaving an area or the facility without permission. This impulsive behavior can put our residents in grave danger if they get near or encounter traffic, the river, trains, strangers, or inclement weather conditions. Even with our high staff ratio, students who can scale a fence have been able to outrun their caregiver. As you can imagine, this puts the entire campus in a high state of urgency.

Licensing Regulations

Chileda is licensed as a Residential Care Center through the State of Wisconsin's Department of Children and Families and as a Community Based Residential Facility through the Department of Health Services. The regulations are clear that Chileda cannot lock the facility from the inside out, as a behavioral health unit at a hospital, for example, is regulated to do. Our clients are highly encouraged not to exit our facility without staff and we are allowed to slow exiting with 15-second timers on doors. Since residents are allowed to exit, staff must stay with them to protect them from the inherent dangers of parking lots, the river, and major intersections.

Fencing allows the children to move through and play in one of the several playground areas on our property. It also creates a neighborhood for our four duplexes.

Eloperments

The problem faced by staff is that students have climbed the current fence, eloping out of view. Some have exited their bedrooms through windows that are required to open. Although an alarm is triggered to notify the staff, the students are very quick. If a youth runs out of our view, the Missing Student Procedure, including on-foot and vehicle searches is immediately established. Police are notified if the student is not found immediately. As one can imagine, a missing student brings fear and worry to all involved, especially their parents and assigned staff. The unpredictable nature of our residents puts them in grave danger if they leave the facility unaccompanied.

As an example, in March of this year one of our 16 year old students climbed up and over the fence at 9:30 p.m. before staff could reach him. Many city resources, including police and fire department personnel, were supportive in searching for him through the night. Thankfully, he was located in the next morning, however the 'if only our fence was higher' was discussed during the debriefing. It is believed that a higher and unscalable fence would have made it a non-event.

This request for a higher fence is based on a history of elopements, however, not just this one incident. These include students who have:

- Squeezed through the aluminum fence and ran down the street.
- Scaled the wooden fence on the north side of the property and hid in a tree.
- Climbed the chain link fence and eluded staff for several miles. Immediately after this incident we installed a camera alarm system and slats in the chain link.

Most recently, a student climbed over the fence five times in one week. Thankfully, staff were with him and he walked safely back to campus. For these and other incidents, we believe our current fence is not satisfactory. The risks involved with doing nothing are too great.

Structural Remediations

We have attempted to address the weaknesses related to the fences in the following ways:

- Students who are habitual runners may be staffed 1:1 if their home county approves funding. This can be helpful, and in a number of cases has resulted in students choosing or being guided to another activity. However, when a youth is determined to "jump" the fence, they can scale it quickly before staff can block or talk them safely down. Going over the fence puts youth in imminent danger, yet in some situations even multiple staff responding to a HELP call at the fence may not be able to safely remove them from their perch. Once the student's adrenalin is surging, they can overpower staff in that position.
- Slats were inserted in the chain link fence, with the understanding that students would not be able to climb the fence because they would not be able to get a footing within the chain link. This has turned out to be inaccurate at Chileda, as some students are able to get a foothold, reach the top of the fence, and pull themselves up and over.

- A fence alarm system was installed to alarm staff if a person was attempting to go over the fence from either direction (within or outside our property). We consulted with Per Mar Security on the project. This was experimental in nature, as the system was new and not intended to warn of a person scaling the fence, but all involved believed it would be highly effective. It has been minimally effective.
- Netting was installed in 2006 to extend the fence height when the building was new. This acts as a deterrent from throwing toys and other objects into the street, onto vehicles, or other property, however is not intended to stop students from climbing, as the netting is not strong enough to hold a person's weight. The netting poses a risk should a resident attempt to scale it.
- Polycarbonate (Plexiglas) was added to the emergency gate after a student wedged through the aluminum fence's 4" bars and subsequently ran off campus. Prior to this incident, we were unaware that the fence material was pliable enough to squeeze through. We have 157' of this fencing material, including the fire gate, without Plexiglass due to the concern that a broken piece of Plexiglass could be a weapon, as well as creating flying objects if one were to get taken by the wind. The aluminum fence poses a safety risk.

Even with these remedies, the fence continues to be targeted by students. The risks involved with the current fence are significant.

Current Fencing Types

The residential area, bordering the property behind the four duplexes and including the fire gate equates to approximately 840 linear feet of fence. The materials used for fencing vary and were determined by the builder and previous leadership.

The northwest corner and northern portion of the property has a 6' wooden fence with another 4' of netting above it. The netting is secured on metal posts that are attached to the fence posts.



The western portion of the property is bordered by a standard 6' chain link fence with slats to fill the openings.



The southern and south eastern portion is bordered using a more decorative 5'6" aluminum fence as well as wooden fencing with netting above.



The fire gate, to provide access for fire trucks, is aluminum, as is the adjacent gate for staff to enter/exit in an emergency only.



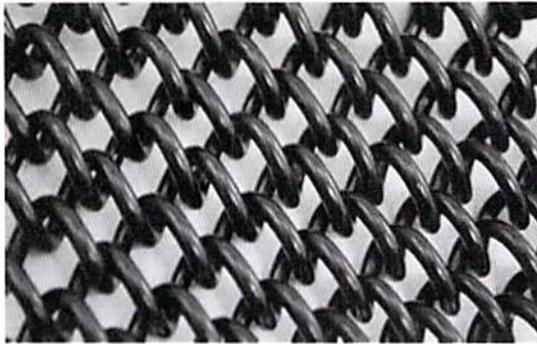
Emergency Exit



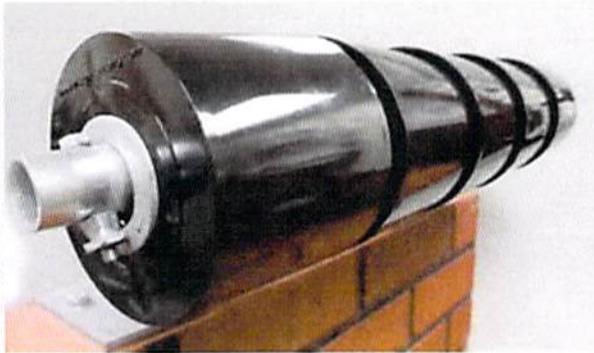
Proposed Safety Improvements

To ensure the safety of our students related to the fence, we are proposing to replace all fencing in the residential area with a 10' high, mini mesh chain link fence and a roller barrier. An example of an extended fence with roller barriers can be seen at a local behavioral health facility.

A) Fence the entire area, approximately 840', with a contiguous 3/8" mini mesh chain link fence topped with a roller barrier (a non-aggressive, anti-climb barrier).



Maximum-mesh chain link fencing



Roller barriers

B) Fence the utility areas in front of each of the four duplexes with an 8' high mini-mesh (maximum security 3/8" mesh fencing) with roller barrier.



This is a photo of the front of one of our four duplexes. The white picket fence area hides utilities from a distance; however is not a secure area. Children can easily enter the area, having access to hazards of electric and gas lines.

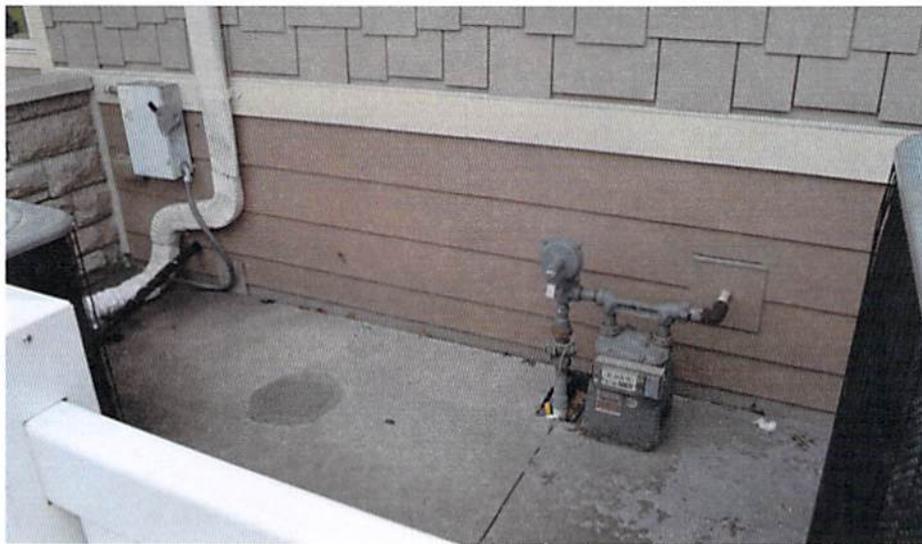


Exposed Utilities





Exposed Gas Meter



In Closing

We at Chileda are looking forward to the opportunity to make this major improvement to protect the children. Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Ruth M. Wiseman
President & Chief Executive Officer
Chileda Institute
608-782-6480 x237