Where all people are ‘visible and connected’

Nonprofit leader of the Momentum Center looking to clear up ‘mischaracterization’ of group

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GRAND HAVEN — The leader of a local nonprofit is pushing back against the ‘mischaracterization’ of her organization during public comment portions of Ottawa County board meetings.

Some commenters have decried events at the Momentum Center in Grand Haven and called it a “political organization,” while staff and members have spoken up to defend the value and importance of its services.

Barbara Lee VanHorsen, experimenter at the Momentum Center, has spoken at recent meetings to clear up misconceptions.

“I need to do the best I can to make sure the actual information, the real information, is getting out,” VanHorsen told The Sentinel. “I’ve been trying to be charitable and just call it mischaracterization, but it’s feeling a lot more like malice lately, (and) it’s getting into the community.”

See NONPROFIT, Page 4A

Momentum Center Experi-Mentor Barbara Lee VanHorsen stands in front the the organization's Grand Haven location on May 30.

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Nonprofit

Continued from Page 1A

What is the Momentum Center?

The Momentum Center seeks to create a community where all people are “visible and connected.”

“We provide social and recreational activities and facilitate community conversations,” VanHorsen said. “We focus on mental illness, addiction and disability, but you don’t need to have a clinical diagnosis or referral.”

The center is “social and recreational,” meaning it doesn’t offer clinical services. It does, however, refer members to therapy when appropriate. Therapists will also refer patients to the Momentum Center for a positive behavioral health environment.
The Momentum Center also has teen programming, which focuses on overall wellbeing and healthy relationships, VanHorssen said. Membership to the Momentum Center costs $1 per year. There are currently around 275 members, which the center hopes to grow once the Grand Haven location moves into the former Rendezvous Restaurant.

The center holds events and support groups Mondays- Fridays, including in-house activities like yoga, crafting and bingo, plus frequent group trips to farmers’ markets and volunteer opportunities.

Support groups address families dealing with addiction, general family support, LGBTQ+ challenges and more.

Members are welcome to participate in as many, or as few, events as they like.

“One of the reasons this model works is the autonomy given to members to opt in or opt out,” VanHorssen said. “They can participate in anything, they don’t have to participate in anything.”

The Momentum Center also operates a café in Grand Haven and an ice cream shop in Holland. Those establishments, open to the public, are meant to further foster community.

“The whole purpose of those is social integration,” VanHorssen said. “To have a place that brings in the general public, so we’re addressing stereotypes and getting rid of the stigma.”

The center often hosts community conversations about “mental illness, mental health, disabilities, addiction and the social determinants of mental health,” VanHorssen said. Social determinants include safe housing, access to healthy food, racism, discrimination, education, environmental health and more.

“We recognize those social determinants are important, and if we’re not looking at those, we’re not dealing with whole people,” VanHorssen said.

**Public comment pushback**

The focus on social determinants, VanHorssen thinks, is drawing the ire of Ottawa Impact and its supporters. VanHorssen said blog posts claiming the center was “creating racism” and “grooming children” circulated prior to the 2022 election.

VanHorssen wasn’t surprised to get attention at commission meetings, but she didn't expect it during public comment.

“I figured that, at some point, we’d get some pushback (from commissioners),” she said.

During the commissioners’ May 23 meeting, a speaker criticized the center’s ‘Prom with a Purpose,’ painting a hypothetical of a middle-
aged man getting drunk and flirting with a teenager.

Prom with a Purpose is an all-ages prom and fundraiser intended to break down barriers. VanHorssen said the event has been compared to a wedding reception, with people dancing and having a good time. She said the characterization presented at public comment was “offensive.”

“I’m concerned,” she said. “What happens when that starts rolling down to our members and they start hearing that ridiculousness?”

With such a large portion — 43 percent — of the organization’s funding coming through the county’s mental health millage, VanHorssen is worried public comments might do more than spread rumors.

“We’re really concerned that (funding) is going to stop and that some of these comments are just trying to lay the foundation for cutting us off,” she said.

During her public comments, VanHorssen has invited board members to visit the Momentum Center, an offer she extended to new commissioners before they took office, as well. Initially, Rebekah Curran was the lone commissioner who accepted the invitation.

Allison Miedema and Gretchen Cosby visited after VanHorssen was reappointed to Ottawa County’s Department of Health and Human Services Board. Jacob Bonnema has since visited the center, too.

**Positive effects**

Rebecca Wait has visited the Momentum Center for three years and says it’s “an incredible group of people.”

“They’ve saved my life more than once,” Wait said. “They’re always here, always available. It doesn’t matter what’s going on. They love what they’re doing and you can tell by watching them.”

Polly Minnerick works with MOKA, an organization that seeks to create opportunities for individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities in West Michigan. She regularly brings a group of six women to participate in programming at Momentum Center.

“Our ladies look forward to going out and being around other people for sure. It’s great, I’m glad they have the Momentum Center,” Minnerick said. “The other people say hi to them, it makes them happy to feel welcome.”

Richard Watson is a volunteer at the Momentum Center. He says visiting helped him work through his depression.

“I’ve been here since they opened,” Watson said. “I was depressed after I lost my first leg — five years later, I lost my second one.
“Just talking to people, coming here, having a place to go (really helped). All the people are really nice, the staff are really nice. Any time you want to talk, they’ll talk to you.”

The Momentum Center also conducts surveys and studies with a data scientist to measure its impact.

“We’re seeing a statistically significant improvement in depression, anxiety, loneliness and social connectedness. It works,” VanHorssen said.

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Audience members applaud public comment during an Ottawa County Board Meeting in West Olive.

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