2195 NW 136th Street

Clive, IA 50325

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RE: Forty-under-40 Nomination – Melissa O’Neil

To whom it may concern:

It is a pleasure to recommend Melissa O’Neil for your Forty-under-40 class of 2018. She epitomizes the best attributes of tomorrow’s leaders: visionary, mission-driven, strategic thinker, action-oriented, creative, compassionate, data-based decision maker, and long range planner.

In addition Melissa’s strong ability to build relationships is fundamental to her significant successes. Relationships with clients change their lives as they build for their future. Relationships with donors stabilize finances. Relationships with staff fosters professional growth through daily “huddles,” and daily reflection on their achievement of the strategic plan. Melissa’s relationships with staff are evident in creating with them a working culture that enables everyone to grow and to work together with dignity and respect. Compassion is the foundation to responding to client and staff concerns. Strong relationships have been formed with City and County governments, CISS’ neighborhood, Drake Farmers Market, Eyerly Ball, Primary Health Care, Veterans Administration, and all metro organizations devoted to working with the homeless.

Melissa measures program impact in terms of client successes. She enthusiastically relates how the CISS staff unites as teams to accommodate client needs. With the recent freezing weather they negotiated special accommodations for residents living in the tents bordering CISS to enter the shelter. Homeless tent residents were reluctant to leave their “homes” to seek shelter from the sub-zero temperatures. Staff members who spoke their language and with whom they could readily identify presented them with CISS’ plan – come in out of the death threatening weather, come into the shelter and benefit from all of its resources, and stay in a large separate room in which you can sleep, eat, and spend the day. They accepted, probably saving their lives.

In addition to the individual client’s success stories, data loudly proclaims program effectiveness for 2017: 1,772 unique (different) clients served, 8,615 volunteer hours donated, 1,058 pounds harvested from CISS’ Mulberry Farms, and 173 veterans served. The number of chronically homeless has dropped significantly as housing has been found for them.

A key success which is a source of pride for Melissa is the significant percentage of clients who have been moved from the shelter into permanent housing. This was achieved through collaboration with the City, housing units, and dedicated CISS staff members.

Melissa speaks widely throughout the metro to civic organizations, service clubs and churches. I heard her speak at Plymouth Congregational. At least ten people commented to me how impressed they were. Melissa is a true diplomat for CISS and for the City of Des Moines. As someone who has long been involved with CISS and who has toured homeless shelters in major cities I can say with certainty that Melissa has created one of the outstanding homeless shelters in our nation.

The focused success we have seen since Melissa has come to Des Moines and to CISS is a result of her working from her core beliefs and focused goals. She believes all clients have potential to rebuild their lives as they move towards independent living. Her view of the shelter extends beyond temporary housing to making available services needed by all human beings. New programs have been added to the shelter that respond to her criteria that they must provide employable or life skills for clients, they assist in leading clients towards independent living, or they build strong relationships with the community.

Melissa is bright, articulate, with boundless energy. Her warm approach is highly professional. As a visionary she avoids barriers saying, “Why not? Let’s get the data.”

She is an excellent role model for young people seeking leadership positions with high visibility and responsibility.

I recommend Melissa without reservation.

Sincerely,

James E. Ferguson, Ph.D.

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