Written by Ivan Phifer, Staff Writer
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A new service facility, Washburn Facility – a three story building – is set to be placed on 1128 Glenwood Ave.

The facility, founded by Walter Caldwell Crosby, has a mission to help children and their families with social, emotional and behavioral problems, lead successful lives. With 130 years of experience in assisting high-risk children, Washburn Center for Children is a leading children's mental health center, caring for a wide variety of children's needs such as trauma, anxiety, depression and learning difficulties.

Mohammed Lawal, an architect of the Washburn Facility has worked on education instituted projects for 15 plus years.

"We were hired two years ago to start designing new children's mental health institute, specifically for the Washburn Center for Children," said Lawal.

The current facility is located on 24th Street and Nicollet Avenue. It is a center that helps toddlers to teens with behavioral issues, mental health, and undiagnosed family issues. More than 2,000 children go through the program each year. Most are in day treatment and attend the facility four days a week in addition to regular schooling to assist with therapy.

"We looked at over 2,000 sites, ranging from Southwest to Downtown," said Lawal, who said the final location was based on a few factors. "We saw it as a real connection to nature; a site along a cultural corridor and is also located in a dense urban neighborhood. One of the things we are working on is the restorative power of nature related to children's mental health and behavior."

The site is along – and connected to – Basset Creek, Bryn Mawr Park and its bike path. It is an unconventional building with slim footprints. "This way we receive natural daylight into all the spaces in the building. It is also more energy efficient so you do not have excessive heat," said Lawal.

According to Lawal, the new building is 50,000 square feet, more than double the current site of 24,000 square feet.

"That will only allow them to better serve and take care of the children that so desperately need the service," said Lawal. "Often times you do not even know a child can have a mental health disorder, until you can't help them."

Lawal said simple tasks such as taking a walk around creeks and parks before and after therapy can be a way of reducing anxiety and escalated conditions. "We have been looking at how to incorporate these aspects to relieve anxiety into design, in terms of shape of building, access to natural daylight, and landscaping," said the architect.

As a city kid, Lawal used to wonder how to bring nature to the city.

"Choosing a site in North Minneapolis and working with the Harrison Neighborhood Association, it would be a very rewarding asset for families and children that do need the services," said Lawal.

As a student at Harrison Elementary School, Lawal said he was very interested in the arts. At age 9 he and his family moved to Nigeria.

"While in Nigeria, my parents encouraged me to select a vocation; so I though architecture seemed close to the arts," said Lawal. "I approach architecture from an artistic phenomenological point, how people feel in the space, how you feel about yourself when you enter a building."

According to statistics, one out of five Minnesota children will experience mental health challenges, yet only 20 percent of these children will get the professional help they need. Responding to the community's growing needs, Washburn expanded its services and now serves 81 percent more children than it did five years ago.

"For Washburn, it's been a very exciting and rewarding time working with them," Lawal said. "They are very aware of the work and the amount of time they spend with children."