

Award: Harry J. Baker Community Service Award
Recipient: Community Elements / Sheila Ferguson
Presenter: Claudia Lennhoff

Good evening. My name is Claudia Lennhoff, and I'm the Executive Director of Champaign County Health Care Consumers. I am presenting the Harry J. Baker Community Service Award to two recipients this evening – they are Community Elements and the Champaign County Sheriff's Office.

For the first presentation, I would like to ask Sheila Ferguson to join me on stage.

The Harry J. Baker Award honors community members or organizations whose dedication and work toward improving the lives of people in our community exemplifies community service of the highest level.

Sheila Ferguson is the CEO of Community Elements, and tonight we are recognizing both Community Elements as an organization, and Sheila as its leader.

Community Elements is our community's non-profit mental and behavioral health service provider. Sheila Ferguson joined Community Elements as a Master's in Social Work intern in 1991. Since then, she has held every position there, and this fall will mark her tenth year as CEO of the organization.

We are recognizing Community Elements tonight, and Sheila as its leader, not just for the astounding array of necessary services they provide, and not just because they find ways to provide those services even under the most severe funding constraints you can imagine. Believe it or not, but mental and behavioral health services for low-income individuals are not highly paid and generously funded.

So, we are recognizing Community Elements and Sheila Ferguson not just for what they do for our community, which is plenty, but for the innovative, strategic, and collaborative approach that they take in addressing our community's needs.

First, let me tell you just a little bit about the services Community Elements provides. Their services include mental and behavioral health services to adults, and to youth and family. They provide a variety of counseling programs, psychiatric services, crisis services, community based case management, and residential and housing programs. Their strong clinical services, treatment services and residential services are provided on a continuum of options. Many people don't know that Community Elements operates shelters for homeless and runaway youth, respite and transitional housing, and apartments for individuals or families who have household members who have a psychiatric disability and are low or extremely low income, and they provide supportive services available on site.

Community Elements has developed these services in response to our community's need, and they have done so against a backdrop of a very harsh funding environment, which right now, thanks to Gov. Rauner, is about to get even worse.

The organization has gone through a lot of changes in the past few years, and the Board and Leadership along with staff have created new and innovative programs guided by their focus on holistic wellness.

Community Elements and Sheila Ferguson as its CEO, have helped to forge a new direction for serving our community – and it is one that holds great promise and creates new opportunities for collaboration. They are working hard to integrate primary health care and behavioral health. Believe it or not, they believe that wellness should be approached from a holistic perspective, and that people's physical health is important to their mental and behavioral health.

As an example of this innovative and collaborative approach, Community Elements is working with Promise Healthcare to have Frances Nelson Health Center provide on-site primary care services at Community Elements. This way, Community Elements clients who do not already have primary care, or who have significant health issues like high blood pressure or diabetes, can get easy and immediate access to Frances Nelson's services.

It only makes sense, right? But this is easier said than done. What looks like a simple, smart idea actually reflects a sea change in the culture of service delivery. Health Care Consumers collaborates with Community Elements and the Sheriff's Office to provide our Advocacy and Enrollment services to incarcerated individuals in our County Jails. The Mental Health Board funds Community Elements to provide services in the County Jails, and asked Community Elements to expand the scope of services they provide to include the kind of work that we do. Sheila negotiated with the Mental Health Board to allow Health Care Consumers to become a subgrantee and to have us be the ones to provide these services because she recognized our expertise and effectiveness.

While this sounds like I'm using this Award to pat Health Care Consumers on the back, I'm actually trying to make the point that Community Elements and Sheila Ferguson took a new approach to this opportunity – they reached out to another group and in an environment of scarce financial resources, shared the funding in order to create a new way of delivering an important service to an underserved population. In the world of social services and health care, this is pretty unheard of. The motivation is to do what is best for the community and to make best use of our resources by leveraging and respecting each other's expertise.

We are so fortunate to have Community Elements and Sheila Ferguson as its CEO as our community's mental and behavioral health provider. Because of their leadership, their dedication to serving the needs of our community, their commitment to the most vulnerable among us, and their innovative, collaborative, and respectful approach to integrating services in our community, our community has a brighter and healthier future.

Sheila, on behalf of Health Care Consumers, it is an honor for me to be able to present the Harry J. Baker Community Service Award to Community Elements and to you as its leader this evening. Thank you for your great work!