July 2024

LCSC Communicator

Regional News, Views, and Information

LAKES COUNTRY Service Cooperative
Together we achieve

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GOVERNMENT & NONPROFIT- *Electronic Edition*



Working to ensure safe, reliable water for all rural Minnesotans

The Minnesota Rural Water Association (MRWA) is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization dedicated to supporting rural municipalities across Minnesota, primarily those with populations under 10,000.

With over 1,000 members, MRWA has served the state since 1978 and is affiliated with the National Rural Water Association in Duncan, Oklahoma.

The association's mission has evolved to encompass various water and wastewater management aspects, including source water protection, wellhead protection, and energy efficiency. MRWA offers crucial training for water and wastewater professionals to help maintain their licenses through the Minnesota Department of Health and the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency and effectively manage these essential systems.

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Source: Lori Blair, Minnesota Rural Water Association Executive Director; US Department of Agriculture, United States Environmental Protection Agency
Author: Mary Phillipe, LCSC's Communications Coordinator



> The advocacy for clean water is really important to us.”
> – Lori Blair

As the executive director of MRWA, Lori Blair plays a pivotal role in advocating for the professional recognition of water system operators. She emphasizes their critical role in community health and safety, promoting them as Operations Specialists. Blair's commitment extends to educating communities about career opportunities in rural water management, highlighting the dynamic and impactful nature of these roles.

Blair, who has been with MRWA for 24 years, is dedicated to raising awareness about the importance of clean drinking water and proper waste disposal. She regularly advocates for federal funding in Washington, D.C., and strives to ensure that water system operators receive the recognition they deserve.

Lori Blair's journey to becoming the executive director of MRWA is a testament to her dedication and hard work. Hailing from Northwest Iowa, she moved to Marshall, Minnesota, to pursue higher education at Southwest Minnesota State University, where she earned a degree in business administration. It was during her college years that she met her future spouse. After graduation, Blair worked as a loan officer for the former Schwan’s company. She and her spouse then relocated to Elbow Lake. Blair then briefly held a position in Alexandria, Minnesota, before securing a role as office support staff at the MRWA. Over the past 24 years, she has ascended the ranks at MRWA and now proudly serves as the executive director.

MRWA is governed by an eight-member board that includes representatives from five rural water districts in Northwest and Southwest Minnesota and two members from Minnesota cities. The board meets three times yearly and once in St. Cloud at its annual meeting.

The Rural Water Districts in Minnesota include:

- **Kittson Water System**
- **Marshall-Polk Rural Water System**
- **Red Rock Rural Water System**
- **Lincoln Pipestone Rural Water**
- **Rock County Rural Water**

MRWA's commitment to supporting rural water systems is evident in its various programs, including the Circuit Rider initiative. This program, funded by federal resources from the National Rural Water Association, offers technical assistance to communities facing operational, financial, or managerial challenges within their water systems.

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MRWA ensures that even the smallest communities can receive expert guidance, as local officials or Rural Utilities Service staff can request help.







This support is crucial for towns struggling with inadequate water infrastructure due to limited tax revenue or funding. Additionally, MRWA assists Minnesota communities in complying with state laws mandating source water and wellhead protection plans. With a dedicated team of five specialists, MRWA helps small communities develop and implement these vital plans, ensuring safe and sustainable water resources for all residents.

Right now, across Minnesota, communities are working to comply with the Federal Lead and Copper Rule by identifying and documenting the presence of lead service lines. This effort involves creating an inventory of the number of lead lines to be submitted to the Minnesota Department of Health. Homes built after 1985 are generally safe from lead pipes due to the ban implemented that year, yet verification is required to ensure that no lead pipes are accessible. This comprehensive identification process extends to every service line, including those in empty lots where future construction might occur. Once identified, federal and state government funding is available to assist with the costly removal of the lead pipes. The Minnesota Department of Health estimates that the overall cost for lead pipe removal across the state could reach up to two billion dollars, highlighting the significant financial and logistical challenge communities face in ensuring safe drinking water.

Blair was excited to share information about their new apprenticeship program, officially approved by the Department of Labor and designed for individuals who feel that college might not be the right path for them or are looking to make a career shift. This program focuses on training Water Operation Specialists. The apprenticeship includes a pay standard that the community has agreed upon, ensuring fair compensation for participants. Blair is optimistic that this initiative will help address some of the workforce shortages and provide a viable career path for many while supporting the essential water infrastructure in rural areas.

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"It is a costly treatment to get PFAS out of the water systems," said Blair.
In Minnesota alone, 22 communities or nonmunicipal facilities have reported PFAS levels exceeding the 4.0 parts per trillion limit. As this issue continues to escalate, legislators are increasingly focusing on addressing the problem at the state level, recognizing its growing impact on public health and the environment.

Currently, an emerging concern for water treatment is PFAS, which stands for perfluoroalkyl or polyfluoroalkyl substances, a group of synthetic chemicals often referred to as "forever chemicals." The EPA has recently set enforceable Maximum Water Contaminant Levels (MCLs) at 4.0 parts per trillion for these substances. PFAS have been used in various industries and consumer products since the 1940s, leading to their abundant presence in the environment and the blood of people and animals worldwide. "It is a costly treatment to get PFAS out of the water systems," said Blair. In Minnesota alone, 22 communities or nonmunicipal facilities have reported PFAS levels exceeding the 4.0 parts per trillion limit. As this issue continues to escalate, legislators are increasingly focusing on addressing the problem at the state level, recognizing its growing impact on public health and the environment.

Since Blair took over as Executive Director, the Minnesota Rural Water Association (MRWA) has seen significant growth, expanding its staff from 16 to 25 employees and broadening its impact across rural communities in Minnesota. Blair is committed to sustaining the organization's positive momentum and continued growth. She noted the critical need for infrastructure improvements in small communities, highlighting that many communities in Minnesota are grappling with deteriorating water systems. These aging infrastructures are particularly vulnerable to emerging contaminants such as PFAS, nitrates, arsenic, and manganese. Blair emphasized the importance of updating these systems, especially for communities that lack the financial resources to undertake such essential improvements. With her leadership, MRWA aims to address these urgent issues and ensure safe, reliable water for all rural Minnesotans.

If you would like to learn more about MRWA's work, contact Lori Blair at lori.blair@mrwa.com or visit their website at www.mrwa.com.

From the

Executive Director

"We Advocate for Strong Communities through Service and Leadership."



Jeremy Kovash
Executive Director

Understanding Character AI: Transforming Our Communities

I recently attended the Association of Educational Service Agencies Summer Leadership Conference: Leading Through Change in New Haven, Connecticut. One of the most exciting topics discussed was Character Artificial Intelligence (AI). This technology has the potential to improve our communities, help government agencies, and support nonprofits by enhancing community engagement, streamlining services, and fostering innovation.

Matt Mervis, Director of AI at EdVance, explained that Character AI refers to AI systems designed to act like humans, with personality traits and behaviors. These AI systems can interact with users naturally, making them useful for many applications like customer service and educational support. By using Character AI in our local initiatives, we can create more personalized and responsive experiences for our community members.

One of the main benefits of Character AI is its ability to improve communication. For example, chatbots on city websites or virtual assistants for non-profits can provide quick responses to questions, making information more accessible. This helps to engage the community and encourages people to participate in local programs and activities.

Character AI can also make service delivery more efficient for government and nonprofit sectors. By automating simple tasks like scheduling appointments or processing requests, staff can focus on more complex issues that need human attention. This efficiency not only improves service but also reduces costs, allowing agencies to use their resources more effectively.

According to Microsoft's 2024 Work Trend Index Annual Report, 66 percent of leaders say they wouldn't hire a worker without AI skills. Moreover, 71 percent would prefer a less experienced candidate with AI skills over a more experienced candidate without them. The potential of Character AI is huge, but to integrate it successfully into our communities, we need collaboration. By working together—cities, counties, government agencies, and nonprofits—we can use this technology to create more connected, responsive, and thriving communities.

Character AI is not just a trend; it's an opportunity for significant change in how we serve our communities. By thoughtfully embracing this innovation, we can enhance engagement, streamline services, and foster a culture of collaboration that benefits everyone. Let's move forward together into this exciting future. Together we achieve.





Our new Local Grant Development Assistance program provides free technical assistance and support to apply for state, federal, and private grant funds related to infrastructure improvements and clean-energy production and storage.

Source: West Central Initiative

This program is for municipalities, nonprofits, cooperative utility companies, and unique public or private partnerships that serve the region.

Entities that have applied or intend to apply for grants under this program are eligible to apply for matching funds through the State Competitiveness Matching Fund Program.

Book Review by

Jane Eastes, LCSC's Deputy Executive Director

HEROCRATS

by Allison Bell

There is no shortage of books about leadership and management in all types of workplaces. It's much harder to find a self-help book about surviving, leading and not burning out focused specifically on the government workplace, and state and local government in particular. Herocrats, by Minnesota's own Allison Bell, takes on a celebratory superhero theme, but this is a book firmly grounded in reality. The book is styled as a "guide for government workers leading change."

What I appreciate most is her recognition and celebration of the integral work of those in the government ranks, starting with her mashup of hero and bureaucrat, herocrat. Bell starts from this base, "I know from experience that most people in government are there for the right reasons. They're smart, dedicated, and trying their best."



This book is focused on how to build your "herocrat" skills of connection, courage and creativity to feel effective. It does so with a respectful understanding of why the work is challenging and complex, and the pitfalls of disconnection, apathy and fear of change that are so easy to fall into.

There are plenty of nuggets of wisdom to underline for both newly hired and seasoned "herocrats," in this book. Many people who pick up this book may not identify as a "change agent," and may be put off by Bell's discussion of systemic change. You'll still find practical advice on staying mentally and physically healthy in an often challenging environment.

Bell interviewed thousands of paid state and local government employees whose voices, some named and many not, fill the read with authentic stories and wisdom. What could be a dry read is brightened with real-life quotes and personal stories from people living the work every day.

Bell authentically shares her own journey from her time in state government, all the way from dream job to leaving in frustration and burnout. "I had no guide for how to be successful and healthy in my work, and I desperately needed one," describes how this book was born. We know she is not alone, which makes this book particularly timely.

A final note, if you are not working in government, don't be put off from reading this book. There are many universal truths that can be translated into most organizations, especially if your role includes leading change.



New Contracts: Webber Recreational Design, Midwest Groundcover, and SafetyFirst

CPC has awarded contracts to **three** vendors in the Facility and Grounds category, **two** of which are new to the CPC Contract!

Webber Recreational Design - NEW

Webber Recreational Design offers: Playgrounds, Safety Surfacing, Waterslides, Water Play Events, Pool slides, Outdoor Sports Equipment, Tables, Benches, Site Amenities.

Services include design, technical documents and renderings, installation, and integrated project management by Certified Playground Safety Inspection certified team members.

Member Benefits

- 5 to 23 percent off List Price
- Free Design Services

Learn more about CPC's contract with Webber Recreational Design →

Midwest Groundcover - NEW

Midwest Groundcover offers blower-truck installation of IPEMA Certified Engineered Wood Fiber. Our blower trucks allow us to contain all material inside of the trucks and we simply stretch out our hose and blow the wood fiber into place with no damage to any turf, sidewalks, curbing or playground equipment. We also offer additional services including supply and installation of decorative mulches for landscapes and tear outs of existing playground equipment and surfacing.

Member Benefits

- CPC members receive exclusive discounts on the majority of products and services, including volume discounts.

Learn more about CPC's contract with Midwest Groundcover →

SafetyFirst Playground Maintenance

SafetyFirst services include: surfacing, playground relocation, maintenance/repairs, inclusion, and problem specific solutions. They feature IPEMA Certified Nature'sPlus Playground Safety Surfacing (100 percent tamarack engineered wood fiber) compliant to fall heights of 18 feet.

Member Benefits

- Best pricing on installation, maintenance and products including:
- Free Annual Surfacing and Maintenance Assessments
- Volume discounts on large or multisite projects (10 percent - 14 percent)

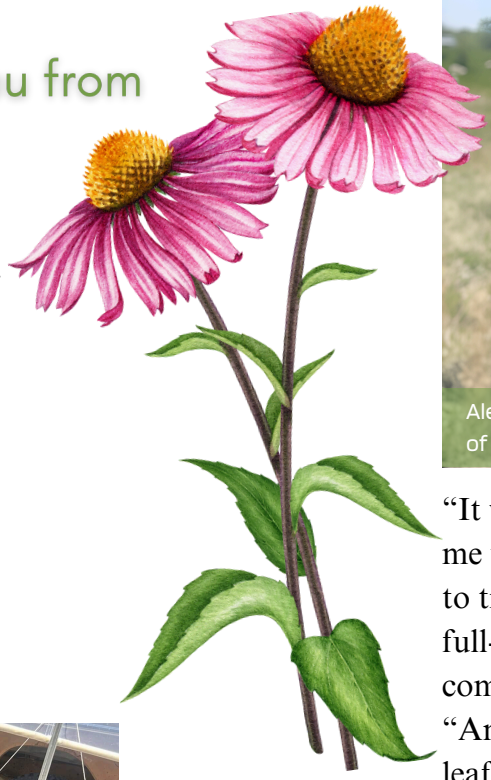
Learn about CPC's contract with SafetyFirst Playground Maintenance →

To ensure your sales discount, ask your sales representative to use the CPC contract and include the contract number on your quote.

The Importance of the Native Plants:

Hear from Alex Blondeau from Windflower Natives

Source: Brogan Ludwig, West Central Initiative's ACC AmeriCorps member





Alex Blondeau is the owner and founder of Windflower Natives.

Native grassland habitats are some of the most endangered in North America according to the University of Minnesota. Less than 1% of the original tallgrass prairies remain. To combat some of this habitat loss, planting native grass and restoring parts of west central Minnesota's prairie has become a popular choice among home and landowners.



Windflower Natives is a company focused on cultivating native plant communities, specializing in prairie flowers. Alex Blondeau started Windflower Natives because of his love of the prairie and pieces of land that have never been converted to agriculture.

"There's an interconnected diversity that occurs in those places that you just cannot find anywhere else," Alex explained. "I noticed that I felt it immediately upon being in those places."

Getting Started

Alex tells the story of how his passion for native plants took root while on a run through a park near his home in Fergus Falls.

"It was April, and everything around me was completely dormant. I stopped to tie my shoe, and at my feet was a full-fledged, beautiful purple flower coming out of the ground," he recalls. "And there wasn't even so much as a leaf on a tree anywhere around me except for that flower. I started to do some research and found out that it was a native prairie flower."

Alex later learned that the park he had been running in had never been converted to agriculture. That's why he noticed the difference in plants, identifying the purple flower as a Pasque flower. Inspired, he decided to start his own restoration project in his backyard, using a seed mix from the Fish and Wildlife Service. But he quickly noticed in those seed mixes that certain flowers, like the Pasque, had a difficult time growing from seeds.

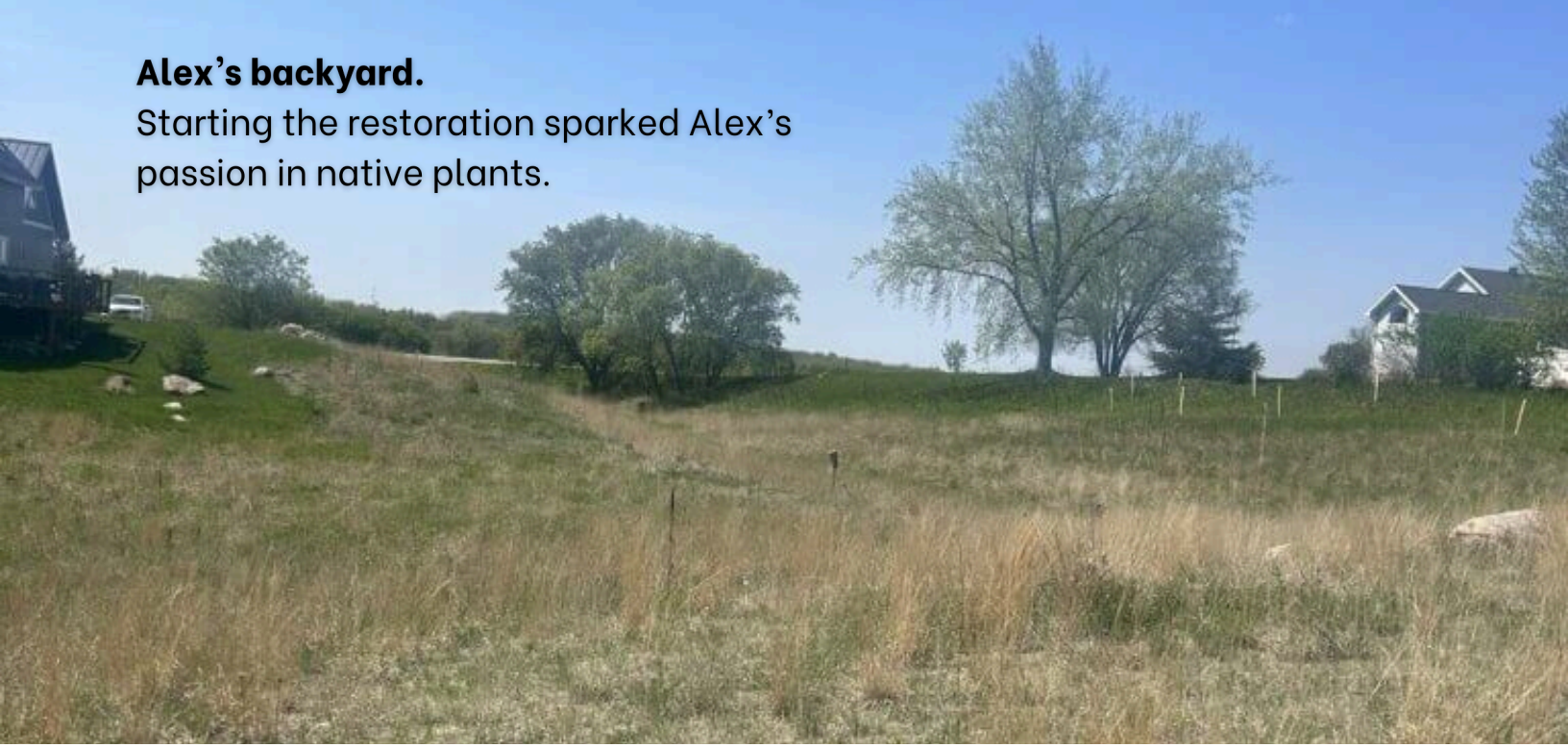
That's when Alex started growing Pasque flowers on his windowsill, then his furnace room, and as his passion grew, Alex began Windflower Natives, selling native prairie plants. With help from the United Prairie Foundation, Alex was able to start his company, specializing in flowers.

The Importance of Flowers

Other companies that do larger-scale restorations use seed mixes. Rather, Windflower Natives specializes in plugs, or already started plants, as opposed to seeds.

"You can't get a lot of important species, in particular early season flowers, into restoration projects using seed," Alex explained. "It is hard to grow. It doesn't establish well just from chucking seeds out there. So, I started a program of growing mass quantities."

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Alex's backyard.
Starting the restoration sparked Alex's passion in native plants.

Along with working with larger restoration companies to provide flowers, Windflower Natives also helps with small pollinator gardens.

Helping the Pollinators

Planting native has given the public a visible way to combat the plight of the native pollinator. Many native pollinators are specialists, meaning that they rely on specific plants. They can't pollinate on any plant like a generalist species. For specialists, the pollinator and the plant have co-evolved together. Lose the plant; lose the insect.

A good example of this is the monarch butterfly and milkweed. If there's no place for monarchs to lay their eggs—there will be no caterpillars.

Lawns to Legumes

Alex says that a great way to help combat habitat fragmentation is to plant a pollinator garden. A way people can get started with this is through the Lawns to Legumes Program.

The program, run through the Board of Water and Soil Resources, offers a combination of workshops, coaching, planting guides, and cost-share funding for installing pollinator-friendly native plantings in residential lawns. Applications for spring 2025 will open in June 2024.

Cultivating Connections

Species diversity in any ecosystem creates the most energy for all organisms. According to the Windflower Native website, a single square meter of remnant prairie can support over one hundred species of plants and insects. Native plants are also more resilient to their natural environment, meaning they are more likely to survive droughts or extreme colds.

Choosing native plants conserves water, protects soil from erosion, and creates habitats for pollinators. They also bring a beautiful connectedness to communities and ecosystem.

"How cool is it to walk out my door and have these plants that have evolved in this landscape for 10s of 1000s of years?" Alex said. "The specific biotic communities— the soil, insects, birds, colors, and sounds—make the whole thing feel at home in a way that I feel like a lot of us are grasping for."

Interested in native plantings? Visit Windflower Native's website for more information. Fall preorders for plants open at the end of June.

PARTNERSHIPS STRENGTHENED AT

17 Rooms Community Solutions Event



Author: Jane Eastes, LCSC's Deputy Executive Director

In June, several of us at Lakes Country Service Cooperative had the opportunity to attend, along with many of our partners across the region, the 17 Rooms Community Event held at the University of Minnesota, Morris.

Sponsored by West Central Initiative, UMN-Morris, and the Morris Model, the 17 Rooms event brought together people from all over West Central Minnesota interested in community growth and development.

The concept behind the 17 Rooms event is simple yet powerful. Participants are divided into working groups, each dedicated to one of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The 17 goals are diverse and range from ending hunger, to quality education (4), to decent work and economic growth (8), ending with partnerships for action (17).

There is a room for just about every interest in building strong communities. These "rooms" serve as think tanks where participants brainstorm, strategize, and develop actionable plans that address specific targets within their goal. The format encourages cross-sector learning and leverages the collective expertise and resources of the community to discuss solutions that fit locally.

The 17 Sustainable Developments Goals are sweeping goals addressing issues that are universal. The goals are not mandates but focus points for community partners to discuss regional solutions and local action steps that make sense for each community.

As WCI Executive Director, Anna Wasecha, said in opening remarks, “We’ve got a lot of work to do here. I don’t want to be caught up in the division. I think we need to be caught up in what unifies us.”

We couldn’t agree more with Dr. Wasecha, and are excited to move forward with existing and newfound partners from our “rooms” to collaborate on actionable and effective steps toward fostering community spaces where all youth are heard, welcome and participate in building inclusive, safe and connected communities.

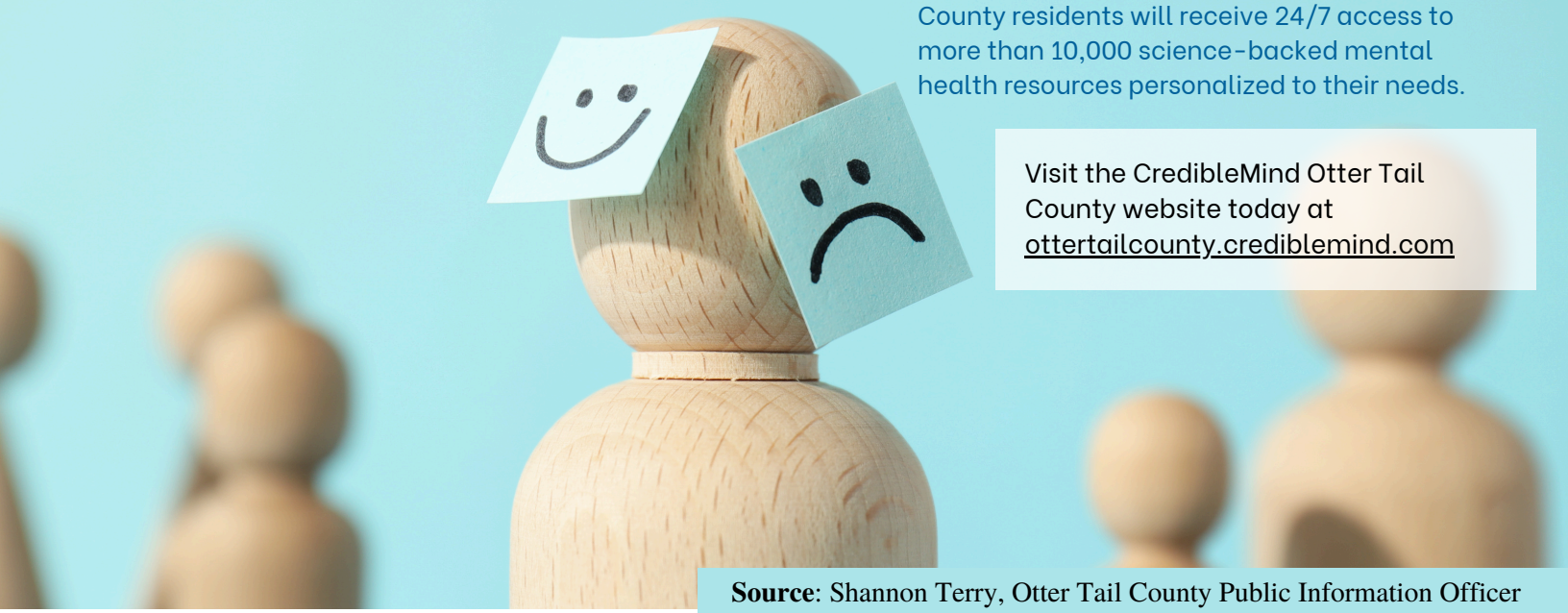
You can listen to the morning speakers and the short reports on the results of each room here.



Otter Tail County Public Health Announces Partnership with CredibleMind

Using the CredibleMind platform, Otter Tail County residents will receive 24/7 access to more than 10,000 science-backed mental health resources personalized to their needs.

Visit the CredibleMind Otter Tail County website today at ottertailcounty.crediblemind.com



Source: Shannon Terry, Otter Tail County Public Information Officer

CredibleMind is an online platform that provides personalized mental health resources, enabling the local community to support and protect their well-being. This partnership has made CredibleMind accessible to approximately 60,000 Otter Tail County residents.

CredibleMind focuses on early intervention and prevention around mental health issues. It contains over 10,000 science-backed resources to provide users with free, confidential, and credible self-care options to improve their overall well-being. Wellness-related content includes various articles, podcasts, videos, and more.

"Mental health and wellbeing have been identified as a high priority health need in Otter Tail County," said Health Educator Reese Ellison. "Partnering with CredibleMind is just one way the County and Public Health can work towards prioritizing and meeting this need in our community."

"We are facing a mental health crisis in our country, and the demand for mental health services is higher than ever," said Deryk Van Brunt, CEO of CredibleMind. "We are thrilled to partner with Otter Tail County Public Health and provide on-demand, reliable self-care, and mental health resources to help its local community members improve their overall well-being and flourish."

About CredibleMind

CredibleMind enables payers, public health departments, employers, insurers, healthcare providers, and community organizations to provide their constituents with a comprehensive and holistic ecosystem for preventing and intervening in mental illness. Complete with assessments, education, and interventions that empower users to engage in mental well-being, each customized platform offers connections to local community resources and population-level analytics.

Minnesota Healthcare Consortium
Participating Minnesota Service Cooperatives

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Explore our upcoming events for more ways to boost your well-being.
Click here for details.

LCSC's MEMBERS CityConnect



You are cordially invited to a networking luncheon on Friday, August 16, 2024, from 11:30 a.m. – 1:00 p.m. at City Hall in Osakis. **Virtual option for registration is available.**
You will have the opportunity to network and discuss current and relevant topics with fellow City Clerks, Deputy Clerks, City Administrators, and City Managers working in Lakes Country Service Cooperatives' nine-county region.
Our speaker for this luncheon will be Lori Blair with the Minnesota Rural Water Association. Lori will highlight the EPA's Lead and Copper Rule and the Minnesota Rural Water Association's apprenticeship program.
Do you have items/topics you would like the group to discuss during this session? Let us know what you are interested in discussing, and we will do our best to get your topic on the agenda. You can attend in person or virtually.



We look forward to seeing you in Osakis!
Together We Achieve...



A New Dawn for Community Wellness: YMCA of the Northern Sky

Source: Source: Katie McCormick, VP of Marketing and Communications at YMCA of the Northern Sky

The communities of Cass, Clay, and Otter Tail Counties are celebrating a significant milestone with the merger of the YMCA of Cass and Clay Counties and the Fergus Falls Area Family YMCA, effective July 1. This merger forms the YMCA of the Northern Sky, which is dedicated to enhancing community wellness, engagement, and support services across the region.

Why YMCA of the Northern Sky?

The name "YMCA of the Northern Sky" was carefully chosen to symbolize the geographical expanse and unified vision of the newly formed organization. The northern sky represents the vast, inclusive, and interconnected community we serve, reflecting our commitment to fostering connections, promoting wellness, and supporting every member. Our hope is that the YMCA of the Northern Sky will invoke a welcoming and expansive atmosphere, an open space where everyone can find a place, further connecting to the concept of the Y being for all. Under the Northern Sky, we are **Better Together**.

What This Means for Our Communities

The YMCA of the Northern Sky will leverage the strengths of both former organizations to deliver superior services and opportunities for personal and community growth. The community can look forward to our continued dedication to enhancing the spirit, mind, and body of all persons through:

Youth Development: Our existing youth programs, including after-school activities, summer camps, overnight camp at Camp Cormorant in Lake Park, Minnesota and more will continue to provide positive and enriching experiences for young people in our communities.

Healthy Living: We remain committed to providing a wide range of fitness classes, sports leagues, and wellness programs to meet the diverse needs of our community members.

Social Responsibility: The YMCA of the Northern Sky will maintain its mission of social responsibility by continuing our outreach efforts, providing support for families in need, and fostering inclusive environments for all.

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A Shared Vision for the Future
This merger represents not just a blending of resources but a coming together of visions. Both organizations have always prioritized community well-being, and the YMCA of the Northern Sky will continue to build on these foundational principles. By joining forces, we are better equipped to address the evolving needs of our communities and create a more cohesive, supportive network for all members.

Join Us in Celebrating
We look forward to welcoming you to the YMCA of the Northern Sky. Visit our facilities, meet the team you already know and love, and learn more about our programs and services. We are truly Better Together.

We are here to answer your questions and assist you in any way we can. Let's make the YMCA of the Northern Sky a beacon of hope and health for all!

For more information, visit our **website** or contact our member services team.

LCSC HAS A NEW EVENT REGISTRATION SYSTEM!



We've upgraded our event registration system for a better user experience. Visit our website at www.lcsc.org and click the "LCSC Event Calendar" tab to explore upcoming events including networking groups, training sessions, and professional development opportunities.

We look forward to your participation!

Run4Rural™ WEST CENTRAL MINNESOTA

August 6 & 7
at West Central Initiative in Fergus Falls

Run4Rural is a nonpartisan 1 ½ day public leadership training program designed for people interested in local elected office and other forms of public leadership.

Training topics include:

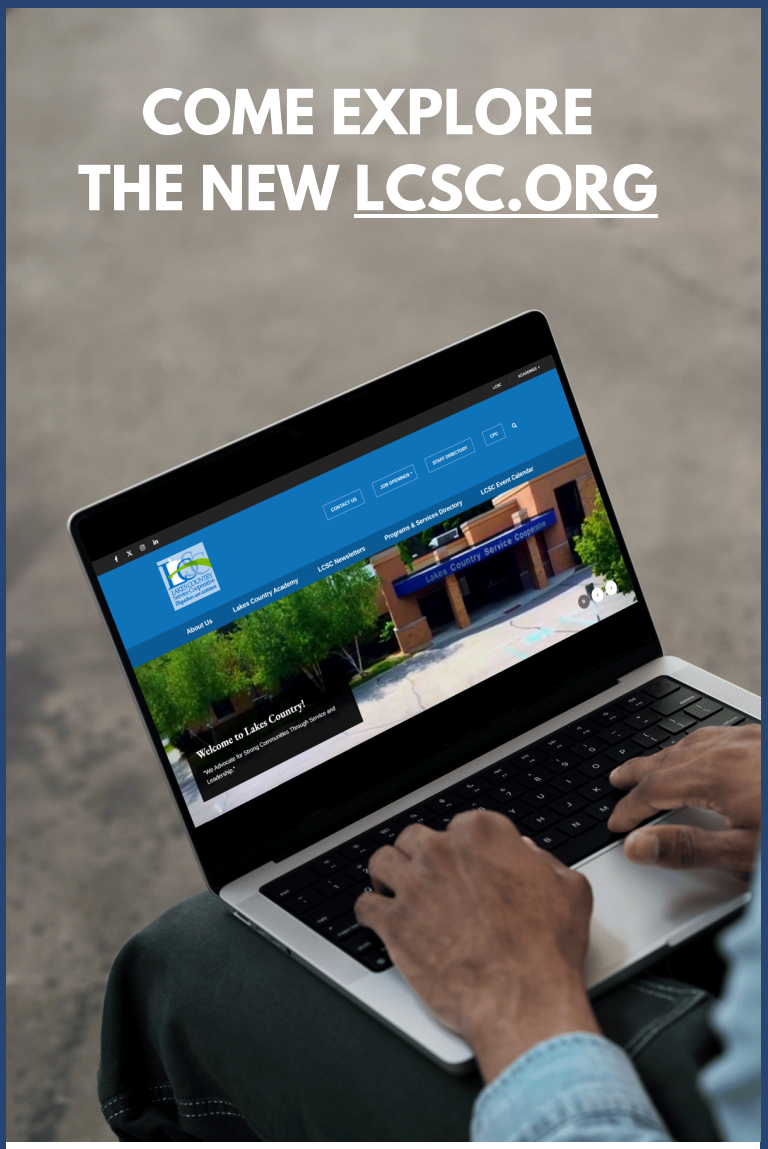
- Understanding what's at stake in our communities and the role local elections play.
- Finding personal motivation and the right position to serve.
- Communicating through stories and shared values.
- Implementing community engagement strategies and refining messaging to bring the community together.
- Fundraising techniques for those who do not consider themselves rich.

The training is free for anyone who hasn't filed to run for office. A $160 fee is required for those who have filed to run for office, are actively running for election, or are running for reelection.

Learn more and apply by July 31 at wcif.org/rural-democracy.

West Central Initiative

COME EXPLORE THE NEW LCSC.ORG



A NEW CLEANER LOOK

We've redesigned our website to make it even easier for you to register for events, and learn about our programs and membership.

EASIER NAVIGATION

LCSC's NON PROFIT LEADERS Networking Luncheon



Nonprofit Leaders are invited to a networking luncheon on Friday, September 13, 2024, from 11:30 a.m. – 1:00 p.m. at Lakes Country Service Cooperative.

You will have the opportunity to network and discuss current and relevant topics with fellow nonprofit leaders in Lakes Country Service Cooperative's nine-county region.

Do you have items/topics you would like the group to discuss during this session? Let us know what you are interested in discussing, and we will do our best to get your topic on the agenda. You can attend in person or virtually.



We look forward to seeing you at Lakes Country Service Cooperative!
Together We Achieve...



From left: Jim Fish, Kurt Mortenson, Paul Ness, David Meyer, Kevin Campbell, Judith Moeller, Andy Siira, Reed Reinbold, Jon Karger, Jeremy Kovash, Suzanne Wing, Marc Hasbargen, Dan Posthumus, and Phil Jensen

2024 LCSC BOARD OF DIRECTORS

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