October 2022

LCSC Communicator

Regional News, Views, and Information

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CHOKIO

Where Neighbors Take Care of Each Other

Source: Scripps website – Jerri Ritter, Chokio City Clerk
Author: Mary Phillipe - LCSC Communications Generalist

Chokio is a farming community with fields, as far as you can see. “This is a tight-knit community where the neighbors take care of each other,” said Jeri Ritter, Chokio City Clerk, about the hometown she loves. Ritter has served in this role for the past 18 years, and when asked what she loves about her job, she said, “I love the variety! On any given day, I might serve as the delivery office for local businesses receiving packages, a visitors’ bureau for people driving through who need information, and an information and referral office for residents who need help finding local services.” With a budget of $260,000, the City of Chokio employs two full-time and one part-time employee, who, with limited resources, have learned to wear many hats to help the city run efficiently.

Jeri takes enormous pride in her community. She happily provided me with a walking tour of the downtown area on a beautiful fall day. Our first stop was at the Senior Center, where we visited Kathy Asmus, the center’s director. We were fortunate to arrive while 20 local seniors played a game of “Schmier” and enjoyed coffee, fellowship, and a pan of good ol’ Minnesota bars. Kathy shared that she is a “lifer” of Chokio and stated, “people in our community pull together and help each other out when there is a need or crisis for a family or individual. That is what we love about our community.”

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CHOKIO MEMORIAL PARK

Cared for by local volunteers.

While we walked, Jerri stated there is not enough time in the day to accomplish the goals she sets for herself. She would like additional grant writing assistance to support existing and potential community improvement initiatives that attract new residents and visitors. These projects include continued community pool and park maintenance, housing development, and road improvement projects. Ritter also mentioned that the vast hunting land in the area is another major attraction to the community. She shared that the Chokio area is appealing to hunters and provides another source of tourism to the community. In addition to hunting, families are also drawn to the area because of the robust broadband available for remote working capabilities and the Chokio-Alberta Public School for their children's education.

"We need to keep the school in Chokio. It keeps our community strong," stated Ritter. "My husband graduated from Chokio, my children graduated from our local school, and I hope to see my grandchildren graduate from this school."

As we continued our walk along the main street, Ritter pointed out businesses that had closed, changed ownership, or are presently under construction. One such business was under renovation and soon to open as a childcare center. She noted a great need for childcare in their community for families, many of whom travel daily to their employers outside Chokio. "People are moving back to our community with their families because it is safe to raise their children," said Ritter. A few major employers in the area are Federated Telephone, Hooter's Lumber, New Horizons CHS, and SJJK Plumbing Heating and Electrical.

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As we continued our tour, we saw a colorful children's path painted on the sidewalk in front of a second childcare center currently in operation. We stopped and enjoyed visiting with the childcare director and said hello to the children while they played.

Next, I had the opportunity to visit with Kay Grossman, the editor of the local newspaper, the Chokio Review. We spent some time with Kay touring the former Dacotah Bank building, which is home to their office, a new community event center, and several local businesses.

Our walking tour was finished, and we returned to Jeri's office. On my drive home that afternoon, I thought about our time together, how welcoming everyone was, and how Jeri knew each person by name. Every person I met was happy to greet me and interested in telling their story. Each embodied the word neighbor and the gift of living in a tight-knit community where neighbors care about and support each other.

Do you want to learn more about this welcoming community? You can email Jeri Ritter at chokio@fedteldirect.net or call 320-324-7450.



Jerri Ritter
Chokio City Clerk



Chokio
Senior Center



Kay Grossman
Chokio Review
Publisher



Kathy Asmus
Senior Center
Director

COOPERATIVE Purchasing CONNECTION

Express online marketplace

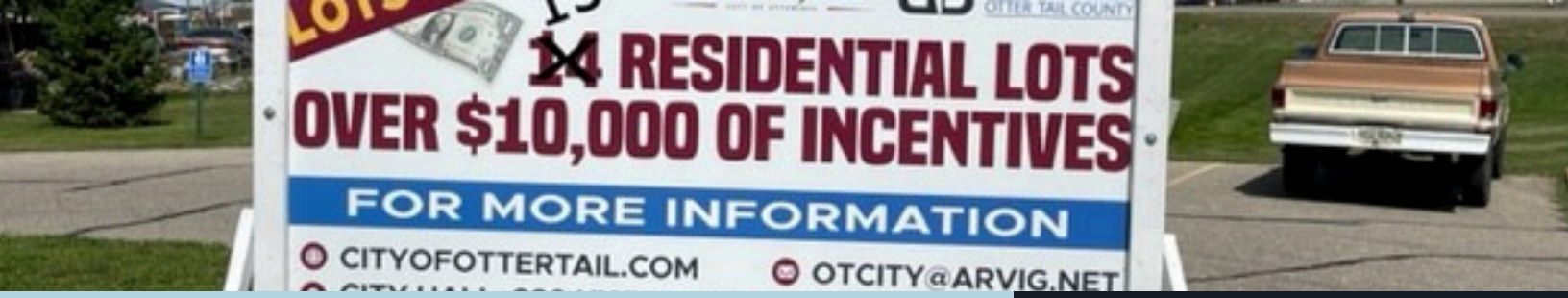
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SCHEDULE A TRAINING

Mary Juliot
CPC's Express Specialist
Express@PurchasingConnection.org



MEET THE NEW CITY OF OTTERTAIL CLERK!

"We want people to keep an open mind about small towns in Minnesota," said Amanda Thorson, the new Clerk for the City of Ottertail. Thorson, originally from Roseau, MN, moved to Ottertail from Fargo, ND, to enjoy a slower pace of life in the lakes area. She has been working for the City of Ottertail since October 2019 as the Deputy Clerk and, this past June, was promoted to Clerk when long-time City Clerk Elaine Hanson retired.

A slower pace is what Thorson has found living in this beautiful area. Surrounded by five lakes, the City of Ottertail offers so much recreation and retail business to its seasonal vacationers and 642 permanent residents.

The lakes area population significantly increases when the warm weather arrives, and as people settle into their cabins, resorts, and homes, the phone calls, questions, and seasonal resident needs begin. Thorson enjoys the seasonal population growth but also loves the Ottertail small-town feeling. "We have a great small-town feeling," stated Thorson. "I enjoy walking into a local business and seeing faces of people I know and having positive conversations about the events and changes in our community."



"I want to continue to grow in my position. There is so much to learn and many opportunities to help our community grow!"

AMANDA THORSON

CITY OF OTTERTAIL CLERK



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Source: Amanda Thorson, City of Ottertail Clerk
Author: Mary Phillipe - LCSC Communications Generalist

When asked what she enjoys most about her new position, she stated, “Working with our city staff to solve problems for our residents and help find solutions.” The City of Ottertail employs three people. The City Clerk, Deputy Clerk, and Maintenance Coordinator.

With the five area lakes being a primary recreational attraction for residents, Ottertail City also provides amenities for community members, such as the increasingly popular pickleball courts, basketball courts, and community center. A few of the Ottertail businesses that offer retail, hospitality, and residential services in the local community include Thumper Pond Resort and Golf Club, Carr’s Tree Service and Convenience Store, Precision Landscape, Ottertail Home Center & Hardware, and more.







In the last 20 years, over 100 people have moved into the community, and welcoming new residents is a big priority for the city. Thorson is working on several improvement projects, such as the recent beautification of the city’s water tower and the cleanup of a few residential properties.

Thorson was also excited to share that Ottertail City has created a special incentive to help individuals and families become a resident. The Ottertail City Building Big program entices potentially interested parties to purchase one of thirteen available lots for $1. To learn more about how you can qualify for this program or download an application, you can visit their website at cityofottertail.com

Thorson also shared her excitement for several new businesses that have opened or will soon be opening in Ottertail City. NEVO Electric golf carts, Hume Plumbing and Auto Fix, are three businesses recently located in Ottertail.

Ottertail residents Kenny and Kim Nelson recently contributed $100,000 to a new loan program to encourage business development.

This program can provide existing qualifying businesses with a $5,000 loan to assist with the operation and building improvements. Companies wishing to open a new location in Ottertail can receive a $10,000 loan from the program, and nonprofits can receive up to $15,000 to help them open a new location in Ottertail. Businesses and nonprofits may qualify to have the loan forgiven if they remain open for seven years.

With the summer season ending, leaves falling and temperatures cooling, it is now the season of planning for Thorson, and she is currently working with the city council to finalize their budget. “I want to continue to grow in my position. There is so much to learn and many opportunities to help our community grow,” said Thorson!

Do you want to learn more about the business and residential incentives at work to provide economic development to the City of Ottertail? *Call Amanda Thorson at 218-367-2250, email her at* ***otcity@arvig.net****, or visit their website at cityofottertail.com.*

IMPACT
The ICS Newsletter

Check Out Our Latest IMPACT Newsletter
Have you read our latest ICS IMPACT newsletter? From looking back on over $200 million in construction this past summer and a new fire station in Grand Rapids to enhanced long-range planning, check out what's happening at ICS **here**. If you would like more information on ICS, contact Karen Klein at karen.klein@ics-builds.com or by phone at 651-728-1880

ICS is an LCSC Business Partner

Lakes Country Service Cooperative partners with ICS to offer our members innovate facility solutions that help you plan, build, and operate your building well. The mission of ICS is to positively impact people through innovative facility solutions.
The customized services at ICS integrate the planning, funding, construction, and ongoing operations of your facilities as ICS helps you throughout all phases of a building project. ICS works on projects from the ground up or anywhere in-between. From facility assessments and planning to construction management, and even ongoing building commissioning, ICS helps build a bright and successful future for their clients.

LCSC MEMBERS RECEIVE A DISCOUNT ON ICS SERVICES.

Get to Know Your Local Public Library

Lake Agassiz Regional Library has been serving the communities in its region for decades and offers many services and resources that may come as a surprise. For example, did you know that the Moorhead Public Library offers notary services? Two staff members are certified, enabling them to notarize documents on-demand, free of charge. Or, maybe it's time to cut that cable cord or cancel that streaming subscription and start using hoopla, a free-of-charge movie and television streaming service (similar to Netflix) available to all Lake Agassiz Regional Library cardholders.

Source/Author: Hillary Stevens
Marketing Coordinator
Lake Agassiz Regional Library



LAKE AGASSIZ
REGIONAL LIBRARY

Libraries in Moorhead, Crookston, and Detroit Lakes have also recently invested in virtual meeting technology for their meeting rooms, enabling civic groups and organizations to host meetings at the library with other participants from all over the world. Ready to hit the road? Check out a wireless Internet hotspot from your local library or LINK Site and stay connected.
Do you have a phone, tablet, laptop, iPad, Kindle or other device that you're struggling to use? We can help! Library staff are available to offer on-the-spot technology assistance for those with an immediate need.

All of these unique services are offered in addition to the library's collection of thousands of books, movies, magazines, newspapers, eBooks, Audiobooks and much more, all of which are available to borrow free-of-charge for library card holders. Stop by your local library or LINK Site



A Unique Twist on School-Based Mental Health Services In Stevens County

BY: JACKIE WOLLSCHLAGER, MSW, LICSW &
MOLLY WESTERMAN, MSW, LICSW

Children and youth spend most of their time in school and schools play a large role in supporting students by providing a safe and supportive environment. Just as we've incorporated specialized services such as speech within school buildings, why not incorporate access to mental health services that can support prevention, early intervention, and treatment through a school-based mental health professional? This is a question various partners in Stevens County had been asking, as we know mental health is an important part of children's overall health and well-being.



Mental health affects how children think, feel, and act. It also plays a role in how children handle stress, relate to others, and make healthy choices, which are all important aspects for excelling in school. Having a mental health professional within the school building not only reduces barriers for students and families, such as transportation challenges and additional time outside of the classroom, but easily connects students with mental health services that they may not otherwise receive. Early diagnosis and appropriate services for children and their families can make a difference in the lives of children with mental health needs and has been shown to improve truancy and discipline rates, increase the rates of high school graduation, and help create a positive school environment in which students can learn and be successful (youth.gov).

"So, what can this look like in rural Minnesota?"



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Through a partnership between Stevens County Human Services and the Chokio-Alberta and Morris Area School Districts, school-based mental health services are being provided on a consistent basis. Initially, it was one mental health professional employed through Stevens County Human Services providing individual therapy services to students in all school districts, though it was quickly realized that one clinician was not enough. As a result of high demand and an extensive waitlist, monetary contribution from Morris Area Schools, Chokio-Alberta Schools, and the Midwest Special Education Cooperative allowed for an additional mental health professional to be employed by Stevens County Human Services. As a result, not only are individual therapy services provided to three school districts, but consultation and training opportunities for school staff as well as the additional option of school-based group therapy services is now being established for the 2022-2023 school year.

“THE BENEFITS HAVE PROVEN TO BE WORTH THE EFFORTS.”

The services are available to all students, regardless of insurance status (thanks to the Minnesota Department of Human Services' School-Linked Mental Health Grant), and regardless of a student's qualification for an Individual Education Plan (IEP). Referrals can come directly from school personnel, easing the processing of getting students connected to needed services, but can also come directly from parents or county-based case managers. A significant benefit of having the mental health professionals employed through Stevens County Human Services is that the collaboration between collaterals, such as county case managers or special education case managers, is enhanced due to the partnership with having a county-based mental health professional providing services within the school. This approach increases communication between providers and with the family, enhances service delivery, and improves support for all involved in order to best support the student and their unique needs.

Getting to this point has taken a lot of communication, collaboration, and open-mindedness. It has taken resilience and persistence. This initiative and the desire to include increased mental health support for students in our schools has had strong support from the Stevens County Board of Commissioners, Morris Area School Board, Chokio-Alberta School Board, and the Midwest Special Education Cooperative, who collectively believe in the positive impact of mental health services for the students of Stevens County. The benefits have proven to be worth the efforts, and as we know in rural communities, thinking outside the box is required in order to meet the unique challenges we face.



The overflowing cart of shoes to be donated to school children in need.



CAPLP teammates, Colleen and Angie, delivering shoes to Wilkin County schools.



Large bags of shoes sorted by size to be delivered to schools.

CAPLP
Lakes & Prairies Community Action Partnership

SHOES FOR KIDS

CAPLP-Lakes & Prairies Community Action Partnership was thrilled to purchase 92 pairs of sneakers in various sizes and styles for Wilkin County students in need. The shoes will ensure that children of all ages have appropriate shoes for gym class. CAPLP distributed shoes to Breckenridge, Rothsay, Campbell, St. Mary's, and Valley Lake Homes Schools across the county. Our CAPLP Wilkin County team would like to extend a special thanks to Walmart in Wahpeton for being extra courteous and adding additional funds to purchase clean, well-fitting shoes for students this school year!

Our CAPLP Wilkin County team has served many families that don't have funds to purchase shoes for their children. This leaves their children with ill-fitting or worn-out shoes that are often unacceptable for gym class at school. The children experience shame, embarrassment, physical pain, and injuries from poorly fitting shoes. CAPLP seeks to rid children of the physical and emotional pain attached to ill-fitting shoes.

Teachers and administrators at each school will discreetly distribute the shoes to students in need to avoid any embarrassment. This fantastic effort was made possible by a grant through the Wilkin County Children's Collaborative.

The grant also provided families with recreational activities throughout the summer. Many families served by CAPLP don't have the economic means to experience summer activities that their peers take for granted. Thanks to the grant from Wilkin County Children's Collaborative, CAPLP was able to purchase pool and zoo passes for 40 people.

Large bags of shoes sorted by size to be delivered to schools.

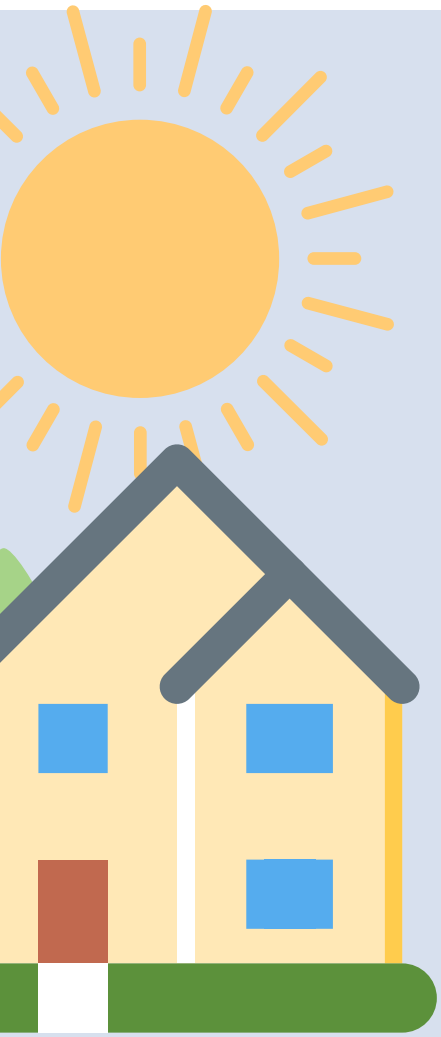
Allowing children to enjoy a visit to the zoo or a swim in a pool may seem like a small gesture, but the physical and mental health benefits can have a lasting impact. The cardiovascular exercise of swimming or visiting the zoo is great for the entire family. Children experience better digestion and sleep when they engage in activities such as swimming. Children also learn fun facts about animals and their environment through a visit to the zoo. Our CAPLP team is so grateful to the Wilkin County Children's Collaborative for their generous grant to help kids enjoy summer and transition back to school in comfort and style!

PANDEMIC POSITIVES

INNOVATIONS IN HOUSING COURT



Sometimes one event can push a low-income family into crisis. When a tenant faces a potential eviction, they face the sudden and disruptive loss of their home, children who cannot maintain school attendance, moving to an unsafe or unsanitary place, living far away from a supportive family, or off the bus line that they need to get to their employment and doctor appointments. When a low-income tenant misses work for court, they lose wages, and all bills become harder to pay. Court hearings are complicated and challenging to navigate without an attorney. Although there is no right to an attorney in a civil case, Legal Services of Northwest Minnesota is trying to change that in eviction cases.



In late 2020, while the pandemic was still a major global health crisis and economic emergency, Legal Services of Northwest Minnesota (LSNM) staff began planning for the end of the eviction moratorium. This year-long planning process involved multiple stakeholders and resulted in creating Coordinated Housing Calendars in all three Judicial Districts that LSNM serves.

In the fall of 2021, the eviction moratorium ended, and low-income Minnesota families faced eviction for non-payment of rent for the first time in 18 months. Because of the multi-disciplinary work done over the previous nine months, and the agency shifting significant resources towards this priority area, LSNM attorneys could attend every eviction hearing across three different Judicial Districts in all 22 counties in our country service area. This was only possible because Coordinated Housing Calendars offered remote eviction hearings on consistent days and times for an entire judicial district. In the 7th, 8th, and 9th Districts all had consolidated dates and times and because all hearings were held virtually. Remote hearings eliminated the need for tenants to travel to court hearings, thereby removing barriers such as childcare, gas money, lack of transportation and missed work. Additionally, this coordination of calendars and remote access allowed LSNM to leverage a small legal staff to appear at every first appearance for the Housing Court calendars across 24,000 square miles (about the area of South Carolina), a feat that would be impossible with in-person hearings.

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Instead of burdening a family facing a housing crisis to find the resources, call, and apply for services, LSNM legal staff were available for legal advice and representation at the hearing. In addition, LSNM partnered with Minnesota Housing Finance staff in real-time to access information about a client's pending RentHelpMN application or connect them with staff to begin their RentHelpMN application, thereby avoiding evictions for non-payment of rent. Giving tenants immediate access to legal advice aided the process, educated judges about housing law, increased the efficiency of the court hearings, ensured that the law was followed, guaranteed landlords received the rent owed to them, and, importantly, avoided homelessness for numerous families and individuals.

IThe presence of the civil legal aid attorney at the remote hearings educated the court on the rules and procedures of housing law. LSNM discovered that most tenants had not contacted LSNM before their hearings, even former LSNM clients. Because LSNM lawyers are available during Coordinated Housing Calendars, all eligible tenants that wanted it received legal advice on their cases.

When an LSNM attorney identifies a legal deficiency or an opportunity for a settlement agreement, they provide representation to the tenant. In either case, the intervention by the civil legal aid lawyer saves court time, ensures a fair process, and often mitigates the consequences for the tenant.

As a result of the changes to court proceedings brought on by the pandemic, LSNM has represented significantly more clients in contested housing cases. For example, in 2018, LSNM represented 33 low-income clients in eviction hearings. In the first half of 2022, LSNM had already provided representation in 77 evictions. In addition, from January 1 to September 20, 2022, LSNM attorneys gave free legal advice to over 600 tenants!

Currently, LSNM attends housing court in Clay County and the 8th and 9th Judicial Districts. We are working with court administration to add a coordinated calendar Housing Court for Becker and Otter Tail Counties by early 2023.

There are many valuable programs to help prevent homelessness; however, sometimes, you need the tools and skills of a lawyer to solve the problem. Although the post-pandemic flood of eviction cases has ended, LSNM remains committed to partnering with the District Courts and the right to counsel in eviction hearings.

LSNM LEGAL SERVICES OF NORTHWEST MINNESOTA

LSNM is a non-profit organization established to provide free legal services to low-income people in non-criminal cases across twenty-two counties in northwest Minnesota.

YOUTH ECO SOLUTIONS (YES!) AT MINNEWASKA



Source: Ben Velani, West Central Initiative AmeriCorps Fellow
Author: Yaiza Kinney, West Central Initiative, Climate Action Project Intern
Photo Credit: Clean Energy Resource Teams

Students may wonder about their extracurricular options with another school year upon us. What if these activities could also help conserve the environment and save money? Last year, 48 students at Minnewaska's W.I.N. Academy founded a Youth Eco Solutions (YES!) project team to accomplish that.

For the last fifteen years, students from all around Minnesota have participated in YES!, a statewide after-school program that "empowers youth to create solutions to today's ecological challenges through hands-on action projects." Each year, middle and high school teams do the hands-on work developing and implementing solutions that match their community's needs.

Minnewaska Schools is starting a Trash-to-Art project and a water quality improvement project this school year; Minnewaska Schools is beginning a Trash-to-Art project and a water quality improvement project. Students at Parkers Prairie High School will focus on improving our region's beautiful lakes by testing water quality at Lake Miltona and other local lakes and conducting lakeshore clean-ups.

Students may do much of the legwork on these local projects, but they also have the support of a YES! Coordinator. YES! Coordinators "work intensively with teams to assess community assets and needs, create action plans, identify and involve community partners, and link teams with further funding resources to match the students' passion with a real need and opportunity in their community."

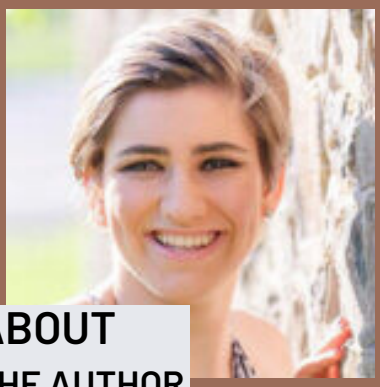


Ryan Rooney, Manager of Energy Services with Runestone Electric Association, volunteered to help Minnewaska students figure out how to reduce their energy and water consumption at home.

Rooney said he was pleased "that the project was not only about cleaning the environment but also was about making the most out of the resources we already have."

Rooney explained how he, along with the YES! The coordinator "helped the students set up a 19-point checklist to keep them on track in meeting their goals." This checklist asked students to write down their household's energy consumption, including details about water, heating, lighting, and HVAC systems.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Yaiza Kinney was a Climate Action Project Intern with West Central Initiative during the 2021-2022 academic year. She graduated from Wesleyan University in Middletown, Connecticut, in May 2022 after studying Earth and Environmental Science. Kinney plans to pursue a graduate degree in environmental communication.

To add incentive, each completed checklist would receive a 30-dollar reward. After students completed checklists and created a baseline of energy and water consumption data, they participated in a workshop on energy efficiency. “Students were provided with kits that included LED lights, a faucet aerator, a water flow test bag, and leak detector tablets. They then monitored their household’s energy consumption and compared it to the data collected earlier to see if their habit changes led to more money being saved,” Rooney said.

The impacts were staggering.

In just one year, through simple lifestyle changes, like turning off the water in the shower when you’re lathering your body with soap, and the efforts of W.I.N Academy’s Youth Eco Solutions project team, a network of 455 community members, was reached, saving 25,496 kW h (kilowatt-hours) of energy. That’s enough energy to power 85 large refrigerators for over a year!

Energy and water saved were not the only success of the project. One of the greatest triumphs, Rooney said, “was how the student's enthusiasm for their kits carried over to their parents once they discovered how much money they could potentially save. Energy efficiency doesn’t always have to be done on large scales. Even little changes compounded over time can make a huge impact and can save the planet and Minnesotans’ wallets as well.”

Sanvello

MEDICA Wellness Program

***This program is only available to current Insurance Pool Members.**

This app provides coping tools, daily mood tracking, guided journeys, and weekly progress check-ins to stay engaged and manage symptoms.

How to Sign Up:

1. Click the Sign-Up button or visit the site below and create a free account online, or download the app.
2. Once your account is created, click "upgrade through insurance" and enter in your Medica ID information to get the premium version for free.

SIGN UP

What to Expect

Coping Tools - Learn various techniques to help you relax in stressful situations.

Mood Tracking - Answer questions every day to capture your current mood, while identifying patterns and progress.

Personalized Progress - Set goals that are important to you and keep track of your progress through weekly check-ins.

Support - Find encouragement through your Sanvello peer community.

HOPE HAVEN

PROVIDING SHELTER AND WARMTH



United Way of Douglas & Pope Counties (UWDP), in partnership with West Central Minnesota Communities Action (WCMCA), piloted a Community Impact program called “Hope Haven” to serve individuals in Douglas & Pope Counties during the winter of 2022. Due to a successful pilot, we are offering this program again during the winter of 2022-2023. Hope Haven will begin on November 28th, 2022, and run until April 2nd, 2023.This program meets an emergency need in our community by providing shelter for homeless individuals. It will ensure that no one sleeps outside in our community during the winter months.

Over this past year, since the pilot of Hope Haven, WCMCA has continued to see an increase in the needs of those with housing insecurities. Between October 1, 2021, and September 30th, 2022, over 300 emergency housing applications have come in, with a record high in August.

Hope Haven provides an innovative solution to our community needs by offering shelter to homeless individuals in a setting where they are provided meals and have an opportunity to build relationships with community members increasing their circle of support. Churches serve as host locations for 2-3 weeks, seven days a week, with volunteers who prepare and serve meals and spend the night with guests in the program. During the day, guests in the Hope Haven program receive intensive and supportive case management from a Case Manager to navigate resources, reduce barriers and achieve self-sufficiency. This program’s success depends on the support provided by the many partners and volunteers.

United Way
United Way of Douglas & Pope Counties

WEST CENTRAL MINNESOTA
Communities Action

We have built partnerships to ensure safety for volunteers and guests, to provide COVID tests and supplies, and provide meals and shelter seven days a week. With over 600 volunteers and over 3,000 volunteer hours, we achieved something that could not have been done without the many partnerships formed and their unique strengths in collectively addressing community issues. These partnerships have created opportunities for additional collaborative efforts across all community segments. Hope Haven changes lives and has the potential to inspire other investments in the community to address our most pressing challenges. Success will come when an individual can live in safe, secure housing without choosing between food, utilities, and rent. We hope to build a relationship with each person so that progress and obstacles are shared on an ongoing basis, even after exiting the program. This encourages celebrating success, identifying service gaps, and providing critical feedback on modifying the program to best address the needs. Annually this program will be evaluated to determine if this is the best way to address the immediate need to provide shelter when temperatures are life-threatening, and solutions will be developed as a result.

Source/Author. *Jen Jabas, Executive Director - United Way of Douglas & Pope Counties*
Heather Molesworth, Director of Family and Community Services and Operations - West Central Minnesota Communities Action

ALEXANDRIA



AREA ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT Commission

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT
Doesn't Just Happen!

The Alexandria area is known as a leader for its economic development practices and the solid commitment of individuals, organizations, and companies to advance their economic growth. It is home to many diverse industries, including manufacturing, healthcare service, tourism, and retail.

Nicole Fernholz has served as the Alexandria Area Economic Development Commission (AAEDC) director since 2015. She knows bringing new business into the community through Economic Development doesn't just happen on its own.

To ensure long-term vitality for economic development efforts in the Alexandria area, the AAEDC pursued legislative authority and obtained authorization in 2003 to create the Lakes Area Economic Development Authority (LAEDA). This formal partnership between the City of Alexandria and City of Garfield, and the Townships of Alexandria and LaGrand is the first in Minnesota to unite communities and townships under a formal structure with designated Economic Development Association powers. The AAEDC works in partnership with the LAEDA to meet its overall goals.

Source: Nicole Fernholz, Executive Director, AAEDC
Author: Mary Phillipe - LCSC Communications Generalist

LIVING alexandria area

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Fernholz was proud to report that in 2020, when businesses were working to survive the devastating effects of the pandemic, in partnership with Douglas County and the City of Alexandria, Fernholz was able to provide $3.6 million in assistance in the first allocation through an AAEDC grant program. From early 2020 through 2021, much of her time was spent supporting businesses to help keep their doors open; fast forward to today, the loan programs have slowed down, and gap financing is the current need for companies. With the priority of the AAEDC focused on workforce development, much of Fernholz's time is now dedicated to solutions for workforce housing, childcare, and employee growth and retention strategies.

When asked what she loves about her work, Fernholz replied, "I love the variety in my job. I especially enjoy meeting people and making the connections that help their businesses develop and grow."

One of those connections is the local Alexandria Academies. Alexandria Area High School is organized into small learning communities known as the Academies of Alexandria. The Academies focus on three career pathways - engineering, business, and health and human services. Each is designed to help students explore career fields of interest to better prepare them for college and careers after high school. The AAEDC works with the Academies to coordinate internships and connections with the businesses and industries in the Alexandria area.

The AAEDC's economic development programs have assisted many companies with opportunities to grow and succeed. Several current development projects in Alexandria will ultimately provide job growth, retail space, and housing.

The Rune Project is a $25 million project in downtown Alexandria. The four-story structure will include underground parking, 35,426 sq. ft. of Class A professional and retail space, and 72 upscale apartments.

SUN OPTA, which characterizes itself as a pioneer in plant-based foods and beverages, organic ingredient sourcing, and production, is expanding to 250,000 square feet. According to the company, the $26 million expansion project will create more than 20 new jobs and quadruple their oat base production.

When asked what keeps her up at night, Fernholz responded, "I am worried about the business owners struggling financially and with their mental health. The past two years of fallout from the pandemic have created enormous pressures for business owners. From finding employees to supply chain challenges to the increased cost of goods and services. Right now, concrete is even hard to get!"

To help businesses escape everyday stressors for a few hours and provide an opportunity to celebrate their successes, the Alexandria Lakes Area Chamber of Commerce and the AAEDC are coordinating the Annual Business and Industrial Appreciation Day (BIAD). This community event has honored a Douglas County company each year since 1984. During this annual event, one company from the region is selected as the BIAD recipient based upon the following factors: The impact of the business on the job market, the impact of the industry on the local economy, capital investment; an indication of commitment by the business to increase community capacity and community contributions; evidence of the business' investment of time, skills, and resources to assist in community-oriented projects. This event will take place on Tuesday, October 25, at the Arrowood Resort & Conference Center. "This Business and Industrial Appreciation Day is where community and business collaboration happens," said Fernholz.

Would you like more information about the programs the AAEDC or LAEDA offer? Contact Executive Director Nicole Fernholz at 320-763-4545 or visit their website at **livingalexarea.org**.

Otter Tail County

AND CENTRAL MINNESOTA MANUFACTURERS ASSOCIATION (CMMA) LAUNCH AN ONLINE TOOL TO CONNECT SCHOOLS AND EMPLOYERS

The **K12 Navigator** is an online directory that allows employers of all industries and sizes to engage with schools and students interested in exploring careers within the career fields that they offer. The tool will also allow schools and students to connect with employers excited to build the future workforce and provide activities for students to do work-based learning. The expansion of the **K12 Navigator** includes adding all industry types and the ability to search based on the Minnesota Department of Education's (MDE) career wheel. Several school districts in Otter Tail County use the MDE career wheel for student career interest assessments. With the expansion of the **K12 Navigator**, students and teachers can take career exploration a step further and connect the student with a business that offers careers in their field of interest.

Otter Tail County was awarded a Youth Skills Training Grant from the Minnesota Department of Labor and Industry to fund the expansion project and further the County's Youth Workforce Navigation Program.

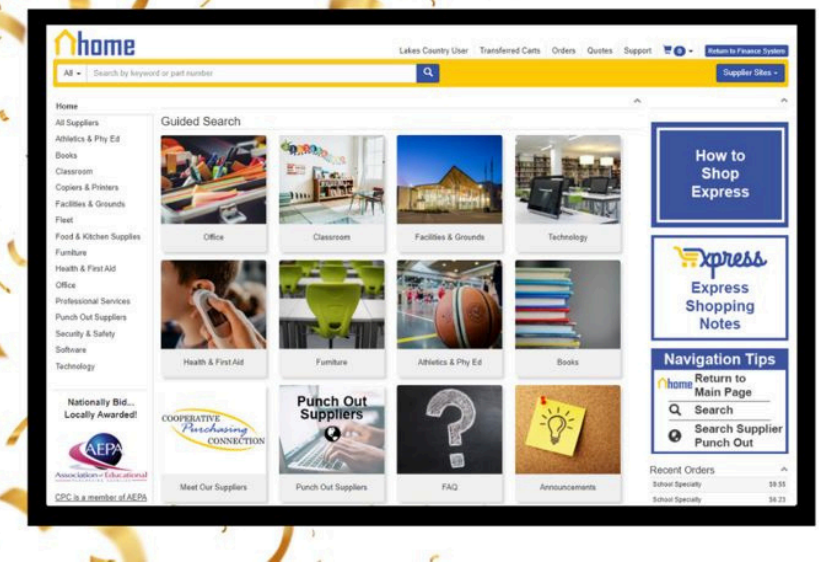
Otter Tail County is partnering with Amy Johnson of Cardinal Consulting Solutions to be the Program Manager of the Youth Workforce Navigation Program. Johnson said, "The Youth Workforce Navigation Program will build the future workforce of Otter Tail County and bridge relationships between schools and businesses. We needed a technology tool to create sustainability for this program and were impressed with the simplicity and functionality that makes the **K12 Navigator** such a powerful tool. We also knew the CMMA spirit of collaboration would make them the ideal partner."

CMMA is a manufacturing trade association that serves manufacturing, distribution and supplier, professional service, and K-12 education members in the St. Cloud region. "The **K12 Navigator** was a sleeping project for many years," said Les Engel, CMMA President. "We started to work on it the first time in 2009 but hit some snags. We finally got it funded and off the ground in 2020. We started the **K12 Navigator** with only manufacturers, but it was only natural that the next step was to expand it to include all industries. We are happy to partner with Otter Tail County and get this valuable tool in the hands of more educators, students, and parents."

Otter Tail County and CMMA encourage employers of all sizes and industries to register their company on the **K12 Navigator** tool to engage the future workforce.

To register, go to www.k12navigator.org.

More information about the K12 Navigator and the Youth Workforce Navigation Program can be shared by contacting Amy Johnson at ajohnson@ccsworkforce.com.



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