



Building for the Future

2022

ANNUAL REPORT



Building for the Future



I am proud to present to you KOOTASCA Community Action's Annual Report. Since 1965, KOOTASCA has continued to learn, grow, and adapt to the ever-changing landscape to better serve those in need. With our mission of "Building Community to End Poverty" we continue to strive not only to provide services to low-income families, but to also transform communities into places where everyone has the opportunity to prosper.

This year's theme "Building for the Future" highlights some of the work and accomplishments over the last year, but it is just a

fraction of the work done every day by our Board and most of all our dedicated, committed, and amazing staff. We know that there is much more work to be done and are ready for the task.

We hope you enjoy the report and remember...

"If you can't fly then run, if you can't run then walk, if you can't walk then crawl, but whatever you do you have to keep moving forward."

Martin Luther King Jr.












Maureen Rosato

Maureen Rosato
Executive Director



2022–2023 Board of Directors

-  Rick Blake, **Chair**
-  Molly French, **Vice Chair**
-  Dee Bretti, **Secretary**
-  Mona Johnson, **Treasurer**
-  Obed Matus
-  Charlene Waldron
-  Deb Krueth
-  Austin Rohling
-  Cory Smith
-  Roxanne Skogstad-Ditsch
-  Steve Winkelman
-  Valerie Winkelman
-  Ricky Roche
-  Pete Kalar

Outgoing Members

- ⊙ Kevin Adee
- ⊙ Carla Green
- ⊙ Annie Linekugel
- ⊙ Gina Maki
- ⊙ Terry Murray
- ⊙ Mary Jo Wimmer
- ⊙ Ben DeNucci

Thank you for
your service!

WELCOME NEW HIRES

We welcomed
19 people
to the KOOTASCA
Team!

Congratulations to the following staff for your service!

25 YEARS

- ⊙ Maureen Rosato
- ⊙ Donald Velo

10 YEARS

- ⊙ Marta Carrigan
- ⊙ Kristen Tveit

5 YEARS

- ⊙ Amber Black
- ⊙ Heather Niesen
- ⊙ Kim Siikanen
- ⊙ Sandra Jean
- ⊙ Corey Smith



HOUSING IMPACT

- **First-Time Homebuyer Program**
Provides tools to move forward in achieving successful home-ownership
- **Rental & Deposit Assistance**
Offers short to medium term rental assistance to prevent homelessness
- **Transitional Housing**
Provides supportive housing for single men and families in homelessness
- **Energy Assistance**
Provides financial assistance to pay a portion of an income-qualified household's energy and heating bills
- **Furnace Repair and Replacement**
Emergency heating system repair or replacement for eligible homeowners on Energy Assistance
- **Weatherization**
Provides free home energy upgrades to income eligible homeowners and renters



HEALTH IMPACT

- **MNsure Navigator Services**
Helps applicants navigate Minnesota's health insurance marketplace to shop, compare and choose health care coverage.
- **SOAR**
Assists eligible clients apply for Social Security Disability benefits



CHILD IMPACT

- **Early Head Start**
State-funded early childhood program that serves pregnant women and children ages birth through three
- **Head Start**
Head Start is a federally funded early childhood program that serves children ages 3-5
- **Teenage Parent Program**
Supporting pregnant or parenting teens to earn high school credits towards graduation

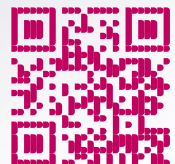


COMMUNITY IMPACT

- **Circles of Support**
Social support through human connections to help the effects of stress, depression, anxiety and more
- **Big View**
Provides a platform to engage the community around issues that impact people in poverty.

Scan here to
get involved!

kootasca.org or call
☎ 800-559-9491



From a Vision to Reality: The Grand Rapids Early Childhood Hub

KOOTASCA Community Action has a long history of providing quality Early Childhood programming in Itasca and Koochiching Counties. The Head Start program was the very first grant for the agency back in 1965. Since those early days, a lot has changed in how services are provided. However, the basic concept remains - provide quality early childhood programming that meets the needs of the whole child and the whole family by providing comprehensive health, nutrition, and education services to children in poverty.

Over the last 18 years, KOOTASCA has worked with our school district partners to provide seamless early childhood services for children 6 weeks to 5 years of age of all income levels and abilities. The new Grand Rapids Early Childhood Hub is located at the former Edna I. Murphy Elementary School and will offer many types of programming and services under one roof, including preschool and infant toddler classrooms, Early Childhood Family Education, and the Teen Parent Program (TAPP). Special Education staff will also be on site. In addition, the building will host support for families; Adult Basic Education and Jobs and Training will have staff on site weekly. KOOTASCA'S Family Support

staff will also be on site to assist families with breaking down barriers so that they can thrive.

The facility has two outdoor and two large indoor play areas. The new fully accessible playground will be a place where young children of all abilities can learn and play and will be open to the community.

The Grand Rapids Early Childhood Hub was made possible by a \$1.37 million grant from Minnesota Department of Employment and Economic Development, and many other generous grants and donations.

The new facility will be up and running and filled with the sounds of happy children and staff in September 2023. Plans include, employer supported childcare, community childcare providers, a food pantry, as well as open gym nights, and family-centered activities.

This dream has been a long time coming, and we are excited to be able to re-purpose this school that was at one time slated for demolition in such a way that will serve children and families for years to come.



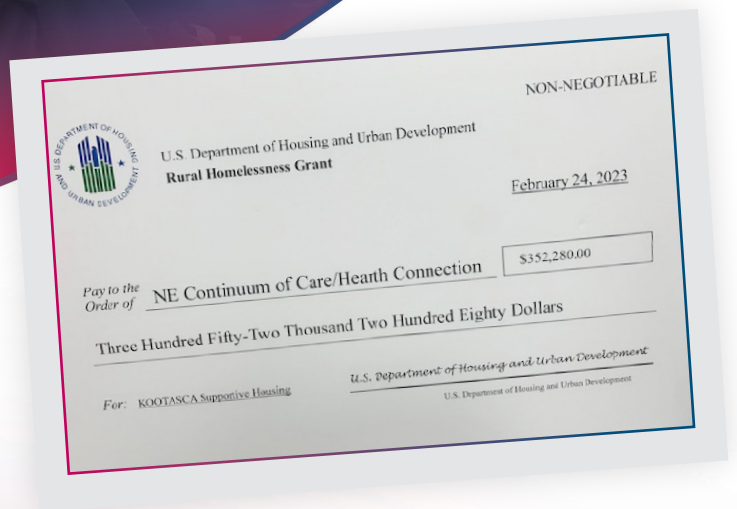


New Funding

On Friday, March 10, several representatives from the Minneapolis Field Office of HUD came to Grand Rapids to present KOOTASCA with a big check. The event was in celebration of KOOTASCA being awarded \$352,280 from the special RFP for the Federal Rural Set Aside for Supportive and Homeless Needs. This funding, which started June 1, 2023, is a three-year grant and will assist with the case management staffing at the Alexander Baker project in International Falls as well as supportive housing programming in Itasca County. KOOTASCA's portion of this grant was 21.4% of the statewide

award and the largest in the state. Minnesota is one of only eight states that have been awarded funding from this Federal opportunity. This event was covered by WDIO and Northland News.

“KOOTASCA’s portion of this grant was 21.4% of the statewide award and the largest in the state.”



Community Living Infrastructure Success Story by **Kathleen Saelens**

My journey with Annie began last summer. Escaping from domestic violence, she left the Twin Cities with her one and a half-year-old daughter to return to Grand Rapids. Despite facing the challenges of autism, she held an impressive position as a Maintenance Fleet Manager at Amazon in the Twin Cities. Working in her own office allowed her to enjoy the tranquility that suited her disability.

Upon arriving in Grand Rapids, Annie found herself without family support and was couch-surfing. She reached out to KOOTASCA seeking help with housing, childcare, and debt. Annie's needs were complex and extensive. Through her determination, she secured Public Housing via HRA in Taconite, became eligible for MFIP, Food Support, and county insurance. Her daughter was also enrolled in KOOTASCA's early childhood education partnering program, Invest Early.

With the assistance of KOOTASCA's Crisis Housing program, Annie's deposit and gas vouchers were covered. Energy Assistance also provided a helpful grant. Her new home in Taconite was conveniently close to one of our Head Start facilities, and her daughter loved it.

While progress was being made, Annie faced a setback when she fell behind on her car payments. The coverage from her Minnesota Family Investment Program fell short, and the threat of car repossession loomed. I advised her to negotiate a reduced payment with the lending institution, and they agreed to the arrangement. I applied for a Sharing Fund grant, outlining Annie's situation, and she received a \$1,000.00 grant to cover the car payment, ensuring she could keep it.

Despite the challenges, Annie pursued job training and employment through

the Career Force Center, even working outdoors in the winter. Her car was essential for work, making it such a necessity that AEOA covered the \$1,500 repairs when it broke down, including new wheel bearings and tires. This support paved the way for her financial independence.

As we discussed Annie's aspirations for her career, she confided that she wished to return to college. However, she couldn't transfer her 59 university credit hours due to unresolved student loans from her last semester. Her time in college had been marked by a suicide attempt and subsequent hospitalization. After being released, she withdrew from the university and appealed for the forgiveness of her student loan for that semester, citing her fragile mental health. Despite summoning great courage to present her appeal in person, she was denied, and her transcripts remained withheld. Determined to assist her further, I contacted the Registrar's Office at the university to inquire about the appeal process. Fortunately, a new policy had been introduced, allowing students to appeal for medical reasons. Annie is now in the process of pursuing this avenue.

Annie's journey has been one of resilience, from homelessness and the scars of abuse to her ongoing struggles with autism. While she remains in poverty and continues to see a therapist, her determination to build a better life for herself and her daughter is unwavering. Over the past six months, we've collaborated with 10 different agencies to support her journey. As housing navigators, we don't just assist clients in finding housing but stand by them when life throws unexpected challenges their way. Our commitment to Annie's success remains steadfast, and our door is always open.

SOAR Success Story

Kim Wirtanen is the dedicated SOAR Navigator at KOOTASCA. She had been facilitating child disability applications for over two years when she received a referral that would deeply impact her. The referral was for a grandmother who had taken in her three young grandchildren, aged four, seven, and nine. These innocent children had endured unimaginable living conditions practically since birth. When the grandmother assumed custody, the children bore physical evidence of their ordeal – marks, bruises, and even cigarette burns covered their bodies. They had been subjected to a life alternating between living in a car and being in the care of their biological parents, who exposed them to the harsh realities of sex, drugs, violence, and abuse. Beyond the physical scars, they struggled with severe emotional challenges and pervasive food insecurities. School was a foreign concept to them, and their speech difficulties further complicated their communication.

Under the grandmother's care, the children finally began to experience positive changes. They received essential medical and dental attention, and most importantly, they were enrolled in school. Kim undertook the task of preparing their applications for necessary benefits. This involved compiling extensive medical records, sending out questionnaires to their teachers, crafting function reports tailored to their respective ages, and creating comprehensive Medical Summary Reports (MSR) for each child. Once the meticulous groundwork was laid, Kim proceeded to complete and

submit the online child disability reports for each child. The grandmother remained in close contact with Kim, updating her on the children's progress, behavioral shifts, treatments, and any fresh medical insights provided by their individual counselors.

Joyfully, all three boys were granted Supplemental Security Income, marking a profound turning point in their lives as well as their grandmother's. The stability of safe housing replaced the uncertainty they had endured. They were no longer scavenging for food in garbage cans to survive, nor did they live in fear of abuse. They could now attend school like any other children. Additionally, consistent support for their mental and physical well-being offered them the chance to rebuild their lives in a more positive direction. The grandmother's determination was palpable as she actively searched for a larger house, aspiring to provide each child with their own room and a space of their own.

Kim's advocacy extended beyond this family, as she had successfully submitted a total of five child applications to date, including the three for this particular family. Each of these applications, driven by Kim's dedication, had been approved. This narrative underlines the significance of Kim's role in transforming the lives of these children and their grandmother, showcasing the remarkable power of determination and compassion in the face of adversity.



Circles of Support

Helping People Help Themselves

Circles of Support Social Assets Programming provides continuous fellowship that assists low-income people in feeling grounded, valued, and hopeful for the future.

The group format of Circles of Support encourages positive social interaction to reduce isolation and loneliness, improve mental health, build self-confidence, and assist low-income people in seeing themselves as valued and contributing members of our community.

“ I can't even explain how much this program has meant to me. Getting out of the house has helped so much with my depression and being able to talk with people about all kinds of random things has really changed my outlook on life.

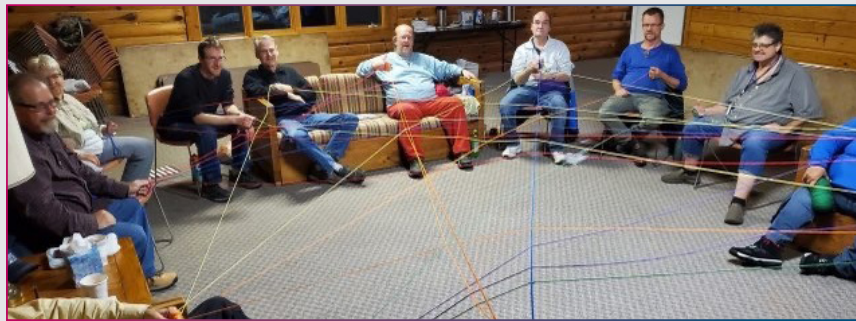


PHOTO: A Fall Retreat focused on the power of social connections and gratitude took place at Camp Hiawatha. Attendees engaged in fireside conversation and activities.



PHOTO: Circles of Support Celebrates 18 years

IMPACT

Circles of Support hosted 103 social events to encourage social growth and development, build confidence, promote laughter and gratitude, and celebrate sobriety and other life milestones.

49
people engaged
in social assets activities;

1,158
meals were served.



BIG VIEW

Big View programming focuses on issues of socioeconomic class, race, and social justice for the benefit of low-income people by providing community education to expand thinking and address attitudinal barriers.

2022 events focused on Asian American

discrimination, the history of Community Action, Juneteenth, LGBTQ advocacy, and improving community spaces for low-income people.

Big View programming served 203 people cumulatively across 9 events.



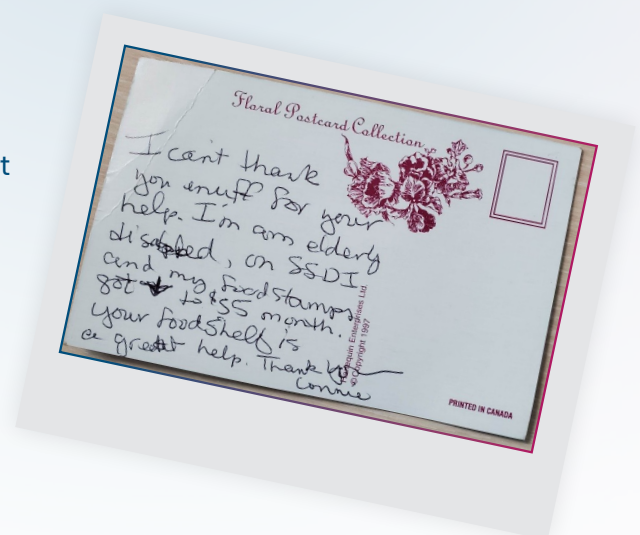
PHOTO: Big View Planting Hope project in partnership with Itasca County Health & Human Services.

Food Pantry

KOOTASCA's Food Pantry located at the Circles of Support office is open to anyone in need on a walk-in basis.



In 2022, this resource was accessed by people experiencing hunger 744 times.



Koochiching County Success

Beth Lindahl, Crisis Housing Case Manager

Miranda Salyers and Nicholai Smith discovered the invaluable support of KOOTASCA Community Action on their path toward a brighter future. When asked how they first heard about the organization, they shared that a friend at the shelter had mentioned it, which led them to make a call with just a few days left at the shelter. Their call was life-changing as they were accepted into KOOTASCA's transitional housing program.

Reflecting on the programs they have utilized, Miranda and Nicholai recalled their own experience as Head Start students during their childhood. They expressed gratitude for their son, Braxton, who had been enrolled in the home-based Head Start program the previous year. Looking forward, they were excited that their son would attend Head Start in person this coming fall.

KOOTASCA's impact extended beyond housing and educational support. The organization also connected Miranda and Nicholai with Koochiching County Health and Human Services, allowing them to explore potential eligibility for additional benefits. This referral proved invaluable in enhancing their overall well-being.

When asked about the influence of KOOTASCA's programs and staff on their lives, Miranda and Nicholai expressed appreciation. They believed that the organization had played a significant role in supporting their young family. They remembered the home visits from their case managers during their time in transitional housing. These visits held special meaning for them, as they had limited interactions with visitors at the time. Moving out of transitional housing and into their own apartment was another cherished memory, marking a significant milestone in their journey.

With their journey in mind, Miranda and Nicholai offered advice to others who might be able to utilize KOOTASCA's programs. Their

message was simple: **"Trust the process."** They emphasized the importance of embracing the support and guidance provided, knowing that it can lead to positive outcomes.

In their final thoughts on KOOTASCA, the couple expressed their wholehearted recommendation of the organization's services to others. Their own experience had shown them the transformative power of KOOTASCA, enabling them to overcome adversity, secure stable housing, access educational opportunities, and build a better future for their growing family.

Miranda and Nicholai's story serves as a testament to the remarkable impact that KOOTASCA has had on their lives. Their determination, combined with the unwavering support of the organization, propelled them forward, inspiring hope and resilience in the face of adversity.



Two KOOTASCA Signature Programs Celebrate 30 years of success

Homeownership

Throughout the years, the Homeownership Program has weathered a housing market that has seen its ups and downs. Interest rates have ranged from 10.5% to 2.25%, and KOOTASCA's Homeownership Program has assisted with purchases ranging from 102-year-old homes to newly built ones. 749 home purchases have been facilitated by KOOTASCA Community Action, enabling new homeowners to settle in 23 local cities. HOME funds totaling \$3.9 million, supported buyers in covering down payments and closing costs. KOOTASCA Community Action firmly believes that housing security stands as the single greatest factor in enhancing health, safety, education, and economic potential for both individuals and our communities.

Teenage Parent Program

In 1993, KOOTASCA was approached by a steering committee from the school district, seeking assistance with the Teenage Parenting Program (TAPP) due to decreasing funding within the schools.

Since then, KOOTASCA has been the cornerstone of the Teenage Parent Program (TAPP). Over these years, the TAPP program has collaboratively worked

with the Area Learning Center and numerous community partners, including Public Health, Jobs and Training, Advocates for Family Peace, Support Within Reach, and MN Extension, to provide education and resources to students pursuing their high school diplomas.

In 2003, TAPP joined forces with Early Head Start, significantly expanding the resources and services available to students within the TAPP Program. Through this partnership, KOOTASCA can offer full-time childcare for the children of student parents, affording them the time needed for coursework, employment, and addressing the multitude of challenges that young parents or soon-to-be parents grapple with. Additionally, the Early Head Start program includes home visits and assistance in connecting with necessary resources and support.

Over the past 30 years, we've witnessed significant changes in both the needs of the students and the pressures they face. Mental health concerns, substance abuse, and homelessness are more prevalent than ever. Without the TAPP program, many of these students would find themselves lost in the system, potentially never graduating from high school, and their chances of escaping poverty would be significantly diminished.

Looking ahead, with the relocation to the Grand Rapids Early Childhood Hub, the TAPP program will, for the first time in 30 years, have a dedicated classroom. This pivotal development will allow the program to introduce additional offerings for teen mothers and provide more meaningful support for fathers.



Minnesota Community Action, Advocacy Award Recipient

KOOTASCA Community Action is thrilled to announce that Dee Bretti was honored with the Steve Chadwick Advocacy Award at the annual conference of the Minnesota Community Action Network. Nominees for the Steve Chadwick award must showcase an unwavering dedication to reducing poverty, display effective advocacy in addressing poverty's underlying causes, and exhibit leadership within the local or broader community, while being connected to a Community Action Agency as a Board member, staff, or program participant.

Among the nominees, Dee stood out for her lifelong commitment to eradicating poverty within her communities. Dee served as a Head Start Teacher and Education Manager at KOOTASCA Community Action, Inc. for over 34 years before her retirement. However, retirement wasn't enough for Dee, as she returned to KOOTASCA to contribute an additional 12 years of her time as a member of the Agency's Board of Directors.



Dee is incredibly generous with her time and is always the first Board Member to volunteer for special projects and committees without hesitation!

Dee's profound dedication lies in her passion for families. Throughout her tenure on the KOOTASCA Board, she has also played a crucial role as a Community Representative on the Head Start Policy Council. In this role, she harnesses her skills and experience to empower parents in their engagement with the program. Even at 80 years of age, Dee continues to cherish encounters with past families who approach

her in the grocery store, expressing the lasting impact she's had on their lives.

Dee's commitment extends beyond Community Action, as she serves as a community leader and dependable volunteer. For years, Dee has been an active participant in the Grand Rapids Tall Timber Days Event Committee, ensuring that individuals of all income levels have access to a positive and inclusive community event.

Dee's presence within the realm of Community Action has been invaluable, leaving an indelible mark on thousands of lives through her boundless dedication and unwavering passion. We consider ourselves incredibly fortunate to have had the privilege of working alongside her.



Programs helping the community through Winter

Weatherization

Living in rural Northern Minnesota during winter can have its own unique set of challenges. Now imagine also living alone, wheelchair bound due to multiple sclerosis (MS), and you wake up on a cold winter morning to find your furnace has stopped working. These were the circumstances when we received an early morning call from one of our local HVAC contractors.

Having been this client's HVAC contractor for years prior and a family friend, they knew the financial hurdles the cost of a new furnace would bring. After reaching out to KOOTASCA's Weatherization Assistance Program to see if there was any assistance available, we were able to determine their eligibility for a free furnace replacement and the contractor was able to install the new furnace in record time. Being able to help create safer, more energy efficient homes for our clients now is how we help our community build for the future.

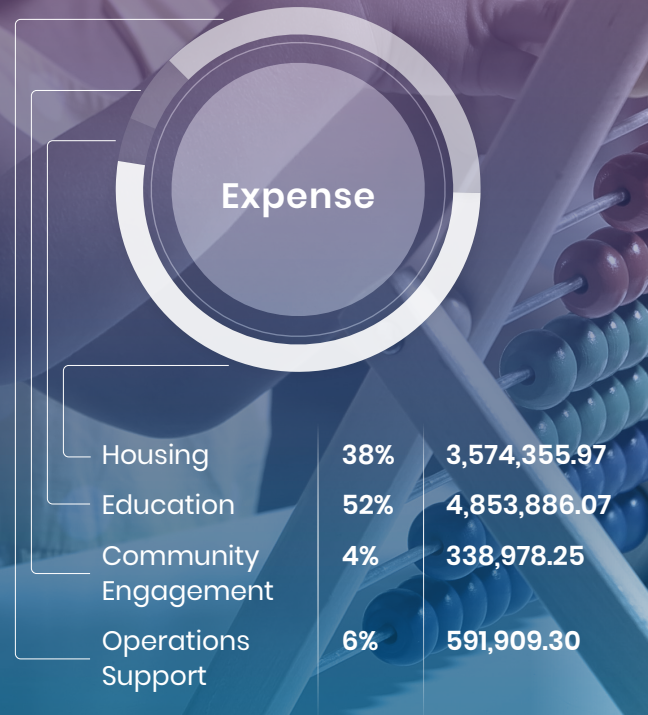
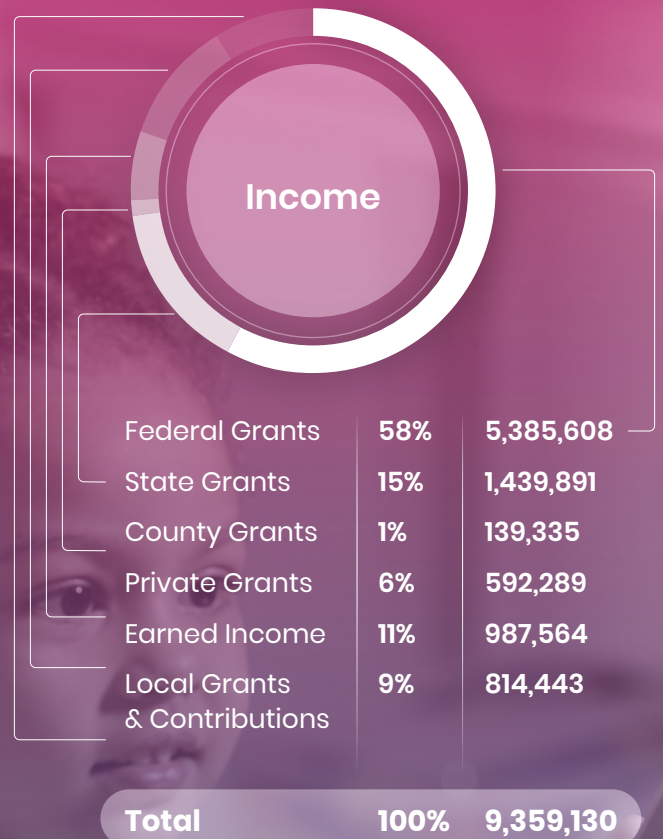
IMPACT

In 2022, the Weatherization Assistance Program helped an average of 1.5 homes per week receive long term energy efficiency upgrades.

Energy Assistance

KOOTASCA's Energy Assistance Program processed more than 3,500 applications from households, which is the most since 2013 when a polar vortex brought below zero temperatures for an extended period. Each approved application received up to \$3,000 of grant funding to assist with continuous heating and electricity services when low-income community members needed it the most; and empowering them to focus on their other immediate needs such as shelter, food, and medicine. The increase in grant funding was made possible through the Department of Commerce which benefited low income residents and local heating and electrical vendors, as well as mechanical contractors for those with heating systems needing repairs or replacements.

Financial Summary



OUR MISSION: Building Community to End Poverty

VISION

- ✔ All people are valued regardless of race or socio-economic status
- ✔ Systems are just, non-discriminatory, and fair to all community members
- ✔ All people are trained, supported and lead the on-going development of their community
- ✔ Education prepares all children to fulfill their potential and secure their future
- ✔ All people live in safe, decent, affordable housing
- ✔ All people have access to the resources they need for good health
- ✔ Poverty does not exist in Koochiching and Itasca counties

VALUES

- ✔ Poverty is eliminated through community engagement and leadership;
- ✔ Creating a strong, healthy economy where everyone has opportunities to prosper requires responsible planning and public/private partnerships;
- ✔ Our communities have the resources to eliminate poverty;
- ✔ The individual and the community are interdependent and thrive together;
- ✔ All people have value and deserve just treatment, respect, and courtesy.

Help us make a Bigger Impact

Not everyone fits neatly into the specific requirements of the grant funding Community Action receives for core services.

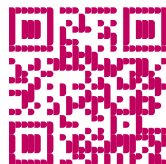
Flexible, unrestricted funds are needed so Community Action can quickly respond to emerging needs and to ensure that everyone in poverty becomes empowered to help themselves.

Donations currently make up .04% of our revenue. Imagine the impact we could make with your donation.

You can also donate your time and talents. Contact us to see how you can get involved.

Scan here to get involved!

kootasca.org or call
☎ 800-559-9491





Scan here to
get involved!

kootasca.org or call
☎ 800-559-9491

