



Empowering Tomorrow

2023
ANNUAL REPORT

Empowering Tomorrow

I have been privileged to spend over three decades dedicated to Community Action, beginning with four years at AEOA in the Head Start Program and the last 27 years here at KOOTASCA in various capacities. Throughout this time, I've witnessed many transformations. Leaders and staff have come and gone, and our programming and services have evolved. Yet, the unwavering spirit and commitment to our mission have only been strengthened. I feel incredibly fortunate to be part of KOOTASCA, surrounded by dedicated staff and Board members who are passionate about our work and serving individuals and families in need.

America was founded on the promise that every family should have the opportunity for success. Community Action Agencies across the nation embody this promise, fostering hope, changing lives, and improving communities. With over 1,000 Community Action Agencies across the US, national, state, and local leaders can leverage these agencies' experience to promote effective solutions that connect more families to opportunities, making America a better place for everyone.

In this report, you'll find highlights of KOOTASCA's progress over the past year. It's gratifying to look back and see the positive impact we've had in the communities we serve. I am proud to have devoted so many years to this challenging yet rewarding work. I believe we make a significant difference for many and help amplify the voices of those who are often unheard.

Thank you for your continued support and dedication to our mission.

Sincerely,

Maureen Rosato


Executive Director

KOOTASCA Community Action

I feel incredibly fortunate to be part of KOOTASCA, surrounded by dedicated staff and Board members who are passionate about our work and serving individuals and families in need.



2022-2023 Board of Directors

-  Rick Blake, **Chair**
-  Molly French, **Vice Chair**
-  Obed Matus, **Secretary**
-  Mona Johnson, **Treasurer**
-  Austin Rohling
-  Bob Wilson
-  Charlene Waldron
-  Cory Smith
-  Dave Holmbeck
-  Pete Kalar
-  Ricky Roche
-  Roxanne Skogstad-Ditsch
-  Steve Winkelman
-  Valarie Winkelman

Outgoing Members

- Deb Knueth
- Dee Bretti
- Leann Landrus
- Mary Jo Wimmer

Thank you for
your service!

WELCOME NEW HIRES

We welcomed
18 people
to the KOOTASCA
Team!

25 YEARS

- ☑ Laurie Chellico
- ☑ Patti Grossman

10 YEARS

- ☑ Jody Kalisch
- ☑ Rachel Sanders

10 YEARS

- ☑ Shala Holmes
- ☑ Shelly Bundy
- ☑ Steph Pfuhl
- ☑ Tina Silvis
- ☑ Kim Wourms

5 YEARS

- ☑ Allen Gordon
- ☑ Kim Wirtanen
- ☑ Tammy Warren
- ☑ Shawna Sether

Congratulations to the above staff for your service!



Get to know KOOTASCA's Programs



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
☎ 877-687-1163

Grand Rapids Early Childhood Hub

Transforming the Murphy Elementary School into the Grand Rapids Early Childhood Hub: **A Vision Realized**

KOOTASCA Community Action has breathed new life into a 38,000-square-foot former elementary school, transforming it into the vibrant Grand Rapids Early Childhood Hub. From the outset, our goal was to create a dynamic center for Early Childhood Education partners, a place teeming with energy and purpose.

Our network of collaborators is extensive and diverse, encompassing Head Start and Early Head Start programs, integrated classrooms with the local school district, and the Teenage Parent Program. Additionally, the hub accommodates two family childcare providers who operate their private childcare businesses on-site. United in our mission, we are addressing the critical childcare needs of our community. As a result of our collaborative efforts, the Early Childhood Hub has become the largest childcare facility in the region. It offers 156 slots for infants, toddlers, and preschoolers, supports families through Early Childhood Family Education, and provides 22 family childcare spots.

However, our vision extends beyond merely providing childcare. We are dedicated to expanding access to social and workforce services for families and teen parents, and fostering an environment that promotes community growth. The HUB partners with our neighboring Community Action Agency, AEOA, to provide Adult Basic Education and job training services to families. We are also

tackling food insecurity by partnering with the local Farmers Market for a monthly food distribution program. Moreover, we offer valuable long-term early childhood education internship opportunities for college students, enriching both our future workforce and educational experiences.

Thanks to generous grants and donations from entities including Minnesota Department of Employment and Economic Development, our facility features a fully accessible community playground. We have exciting plans for community programming, including open gym nights and family movie nights.

This project has faced many challenges, but witnessing the magic happening within its walls makes it all worthwhile. With two indoor large motor spaces and one of the largest playgrounds in the area, the children, staff, and families love being part of the HUB. One of our childcare providers mentioned that she would no longer be in business if not for this space, while another new provider found the space she needed outside her home here.

The transformation of this former school into the Grand Rapids Early Childhood Hub exemplifies our commitment to community and education. We are proud of the positive impact we are making and look forward to continuing to serve and support our community.

Maureen Rosato



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Building for the Future



Revitalizing History: The Alexander Baker School Transforms into Affordable Housing

Once listed in 1999 as one of the most endangered historic buildings in the state, the historic Alexander Baker (AB) School will see a new life as affordable housing for International Falls residents. Following many years of efforts, 12 months of construction, and an \$18.6 million investment the Alexander Baker Apartments are soon to be ready for the next 100 years of life as a landmark in this community.

“It’s incredible to see this community’s hard and fought decades long process to save this school building come to an end with such an incredible outcome. As Alexander Baker’s doors open to welcome families to their new homes, let’s remember that when this building was dedicated in 1914 it was as testament to this community’s hope for the future as a commitment to this land and place and the people that school would serve for generations;

it’s preservation and beautiful restoration holds that same promise. This building showcases out community resilience and the embrace of change, while honoring our past. Just like its original construction, this would not have been possible without this community’s fierce support” said Isaac Meyer, KOOTASCA Housing Development, following 8 years of leading the redevelopment effort.

Organizations including Citizens for Backus/ AB, KOOTASCA Community Action and Trellis Co. Partnered to preserve and develop the historic building into an affordable 27-unit multi-family apartment. As the first new multi-family apartment built in almost 40 years in Koochiching County its construction would not have been possible without the support of Minnesota Housing and a 2021 award of Low-Income Housing Tax Credits from Minnesota Housing.

History

Built in 1914, AB was the first school of modern construction built in the region. Created to meet the needs of booming growth in International Falls, the school was a source of significant public pride and investment. Surely well remembered by its former students, this is still evident today in the building's fine craftsmanship, beautiful wrought iron stairway galleries, spacious terrazzo hallways, and many architectural touches, which will soon be restored and preserved.

The school was in regular use by the community for generations, until 1995 when it became vacant as the school district moved its remaining offices and classes to the neighboring E.W. Backus Building (built in 1937). In 1994, Jim Lemieux put a blurb in The International Falls Daily Journal's classified seeking like-minded community members to save the Alexander Baker and E.W. Backus School Buildings from demolition. Thereafter, following the community's grassroots efforts to save the building, AB was purchased for preservation purposes from the School District in 2002 by Citizens for Backus/ AB along with the adjacent E.W Backus Junior High School (now the Backus Community Center).

A 2008 community fundraiser led by the Citizens for Backus/AB board and Ward Merrill, the then Executive Director to reroof the AB building would prove pivotal in ensuring the envelopes' integrity and the possibility of future rehabilitation.

In 2017, KOOTASCA and Citizens for Backus/ AB launched efforts to adaptively reuse the building for affordable housing which came to completion in 2024. These efforts are now a cornerstone of KOOTASCA's long-standing work to fill the gap in development capacity for Minnesota's Northland that has left so many communities in dire need of housing of all kinds.

"The evidence was there – almost 40 years' worth. Unless our community made it happen, we knew no one else would do it for us and we knew our community couldn't suffer through another 6 years with a zero percent vacancy rate," said Isaac Meyer of KOOTASCA Community Action referencing the Census Bureau's American Community Survey.



Post Rehabilitation

Beautifully designed by Bell, Tyrie, and Chapman in the Classical Revival style, the three-story 42,000 sq ft Alexander Baker building was constructed in 1912-1914 as a K-12 school in the heart of the City of International Falls.

Now, following historic rehabilitation and adaptive reuse to 27 units of housing, the building listed on the National Register of Historic Places for its local historical significance; boasts much of the original interior building layout and many of the original finishes have been restored. With 12'+ ceilings showcasing incredible full height historic replica windows and floor to ceiling stairwell gallery windows that once again flood the building with natural light, which showcases gorgeous terrazzo stonework and beautifully refinished historic wood floors which feature prominently in airy, bright, and new 1-, 2-, 3-, and 4-bedroom apartments.



“Plain and simple: this project will provide housing for our community, our neighbors, and our families, and it will be here and be affordable for the long-term.”

Isaac Meyer, MHP Connect September 2020



The Need for Affordable Housing in International Falls

As a rural border community, International Falls has been hard hit by our Nation’s long ongoing housing crisis. Since the United States Tax Reform Act of 1987, there has not been a single new market rate or affordable, general-occupancy apartment building built in Koochiching County.

This means, over the last 37 years, the stock of rental housing added to the International Falls community, (approximately 300 units) has come overwhelmingly from the loss of single-family homes from occupant ownership to landlord ownership. In a healthier market, many of those homes would have been purchased by working families and new apartments built to meet rental demand.





Addressing the Housing Shortage

Affordable housing is housing that a family can pay for and have money left over for other necessities like food, transportation, and health care. What's considered "affordable" depends on a household's income. The rent or home price that is affordable may vary from one household to the next, but the need for housing that is affordable is shared by everyone. Housing is considered affordable when it costs 30% or less of a household's income.

Holistic Living Experience

The Alexander Baker Apartments promise more than just living spaces. Lounges, a library, a fitness center, and in-unit dishwashers are just a glimpse of the amenities awaiting residents. The building's proximity to the Backus Community Center ensures a seamless blend of community events and activities, creating a holistic living experience.



Project Details

→ Units:

27

adaptive reuse units in the historic Alexander Baker School on

1.2 acres

- ✓ 6 one-bedroom units
- ✓ 14 two-bedroom units
- ✓ 4 three-bedroom units
- ✓ 3 four-bedroom units
- ✓ 10 subsidized units with rental assistance and Permanent Supportive Housing for persons with disabilities and high-priority homeless

→ Location:

901 3rd St., International Falls, MN

→ Project Cost:

\$18.6 million

→ Funding Sources:

Low-Income Housing Tax Credits, State and Federal Historic Rehabilitation Tax Credits, Energy Rebates, Sales Tax Rebates

→ Income Eligibility:

60% and 30% of Area Median Income (e.g., \$45,120 - \$62,160 annual income for a three-bedroom units.



KOOTASCA Care Kits: Essential Support for the Homeless

KOOTASCA Community Action launched the KOOTASCA Care Kits program to support individuals experiencing homelessness. These kits provide immediate relief for those sleeping outside or in their vehicles. Often, those without housing arrive at our agency with only the clothes on their backs. Our goal is to equip them with a backpack filled with essential items, crucial for those who must walk from place to place due to a lack of transportation.

Each backpack includes a sleeping bag, reusable water bottle, first aid kit, \$75 grocery store gift card, hand warmers, hats, gloves, and personal hygiene products. The cost to assemble each backpack is approximately \$170. Inspired by the testimony of a homeless

individual at Minnesota's Community Action Partnership Conference and supported by Lake Country Power's Operation Round-Up program, we have distributed 36 backpacks to 25 individuals and 11 families in Itasca and Koochiching Counties.



Isaiah, one of our backpack recipients, shares his story of transformation:

"KOOTASCA has helped me in so many ways that it is hard to know where to start. I became homeless when I lost my job and was living with my mother at the time. When this situation happened, my mom decided that I could no longer live there. It is an extremely challenging situation to be homeless because I had no clue how to survive or what I was even doing. I did not know how to camp, get food, wash my clothes, manage personal hygiene, and all the necessities it takes to live."

Receiving a backpack marked the beginning of Isaiah's journey to stability. "For the first time in five years, I am happier than I have ever been! KOOTASCA fights unfairness because they are not judgmental of people's backgrounds, and this gives them more of a chance to guide them in the direction of becoming self-sufficient." With support from KOOTASCA's Case Managers at Men's PEER House, Isaiah is now working on



obtaining his driver's license, GED, money management skills, and has found employment. "They meet with me weekly to discuss progress and future goals towards self-sufficiency. My next goal is to get a stable home for myself, and KOOTASCA will be helping me along the way to achieve this and face any new obstacles."

Isaiah emphasizes the importance of KOOTASCA's work. "It is important for people to know about KOOTASCA's work because they can help uplift people's spirits and give them hope for the future. One thing I have learned is that life will always give you obstacles to overcome. Many people in my life growing up told me that I would never succeed or make it on my own, and this is where I show them it is not true."

KOOTASCA Care Kits provide immediate relief and a path towards self-sufficiency, supporting and uplifting our community, one backpack at a time.

Early Childhood Education

The Impact of KOOTASCA Community Action and the Head Start Program

I have been involved with KOOTASCA for most of my life along with multiple siblings. They have helped my family in more ways than I can count, and I would not be where I am in my life without them.

I was specifically enrolled in the Early Head Start program with a woman I called Miss Brenda, whom I still stop and talk to at the store even fifteen years later. Brenda would make home visits with my family and help my mom ensure we were on track. Opportunities like these were too expensive for my family since we were low income and I come from a young mom.

When I got older, I was offered free schooling through the Head Start program, so my mom didn't have to pay for daycare. This, I know, was one of the biggest impacts they had on us. They also sent a home interventionist who helped my family set goals and supported us while encouraging our Native American values. They helped my mom go back to school to get a better education and a better job to support my siblings and me. When she finished, she decided to do her internship there.

Throughout the rest of my childhood, we utilized many other programs, including energy assistance, Circles of Support, PCs for People, and funding that helped fix our car to bring me to school every day. One year, I even remember them paying for me to participate in Dancing with Darcie. KOOTASCA showed my family so much kindness and helped us when we were at our lowest, picking us back up.

Now, my family is thriving. With the education my mom received with KOOTASCA's help, my little sister is living her best life. They taught me compassion for others and to always give a helping hand if you have one to offer. My mother always taught me to be grateful for assistance like this, which is why, when I was old enough, I started volunteering to give back all the help that I received when I was younger. I hope that one day I can work in a job that gives back to the world like KOOTASCA does because we certainly don't have enough programs like them.

Khia Porter
International Falls, MN



Khia is pictured helping the greater community as a part of a volunteer trip to the Amazon rainforest at the Taricaya reserve in Peru, South America.



CIRCLES OF SUPPORT

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 in order 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. Circles of Support hosted 139 social events to encourage social growth and development, build confidence, promote laughter and gratitude, and celebrate sobriety and other life milestones.



Circles of Support has taught me how to speak up for myself and related to people better. When I first started going there, I was really quiet. They helped me feel confident and open up. The group helps me stay in contact with other people. It is amazing how talking to someone can get you in a whole new state of mind, just by being there. I've learned how to be a better listener, how to let others know that I appreciate them and how to stand up for what I believe to be right. If a person has a problem and feel like they don't have anyone to depend on, they can find people there who will hear them and be there for them.



Circles of Support celebrates 19 years!

139

Social Events

117

people engaged in social assets activities;

1,293

meals were served.



Circles of Support hosted the 12th annual Artistic Expressions Tie Dye event at Veteran's Park.

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.

Our 2023 events focused on mental health, addiction, racism, voting, LGBTQ advocacy and improving community spaces for low-income people.

Big View programming served 247 people cumulatively across 19 events.



FOOD PANTRIES

KOOTASCA's food pantries are located at the Circles of Support office and the administration office. These offices are open to anyone in need on a walk-in basis

IMPACT

→ In 2023, this resource was accessed by people experiencing hunger **1,242** times.



Weatherization Assistance Program

What Is WX?

The Weatherization Assistance Program is federally funded through the U.S. Department of Energy (DOE) and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS). This program enables income-qualified households to permanently reduce their energy bills by helping to make their homes more energy efficient while protecting the health and safety of family members.

Common Energy Improvements

- Additional Attic and/or Wall Insulation
- Air Sealing Around Doors, Windows and Attic Areas
- Replacement of Boilers, Water Heaters and/or Furnaces
- Health & Safety Update Throughout the Home (New Smoke Alarms & Carbon Monoxide Detectors)

Participant Impact Story

"My elderly parents have worked tirelessly for years to heat their home with wood and fuel oil. With the rising cost of fuel oil, even with the help of the Energy Assistance Program, it has been a constant worry for us. This past year we heard about KOOTASCA's Weatherization Assistance Program, and they were able to help in a tremendous way. They helped convert the heating system from fuel oil to natural gas, replace my parent's 50-year-old furnace and they were able to tighten up the house for further energy conservation. The house is warm, and the wood heat has been eliminated. The amount it costs to heat the home now is minimal compared to the past – it is a true blessing!"

Energy
Saving
Tips



By the Numbers

- In 2023, we were able to complete long term energy efficiency and health and safety upgrades to **over 40 homes**.
- In 2023, the Weatherization Assistance Program assisted **86 household** members to receive permanent help in reducing energy bills and making their homes safer to live in; this includes **26 senior citizens, 36 children, 7 veterans, and 23 household members** with disabilities.
- In 2023, we distributed **over \$700,000** into our local economy to provide Weatherization Services to both Itasca and Koochiching counties.



Financial Summary

Income

Federal Grants	\$4,206,560	38%
State Grants	\$2,946,280	26%
Local Grants & Contributions	\$116,238	1%
Private Grants	\$926,544	8%
Earned Income	\$629,206	6%
Local Grants & Contributions	\$2,390,668	21%
Total	\$11,215,496	100%

Expense

Housing	\$3,511,018	31%
Education	\$4,476,487	40%
Community Engagement	\$311,603	3%
Operations Support	\$2,916,388	26%



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
☎ 877-687-1163

