

Riverbend



Friends

GOOD NEWS FOR SUPPORTERS OF RIVERBEND HEAD START & FAMILY SERVICES

Q3 2024 | NEWSLETTER

President's Message



Greetings Friends!

Over the course of a year there are highs and lows as a natural flow of life and work cycles. The past few months are no exception, but we are pleased to say they've been filled with more highs than lows.

It is no secret that across the nation there has been a shortage of educators. The issue has affected us as well. In addition, the pandemic has left all of us trying to return to a new normal. For our agency, this means the realization of a generational transition of workforce. This is neither good nor bad, but a factor of great importance as we examine where we are in space and time and what we need to change in order to sustain the success we've grown accustomed to. The primary factor for us is recognizing that we have a largely developing workforce with fewer years of experience, but infinite potential. We can only unlock that potential to our benefit if we achieve improved retention and ensure that staff feel engaged and supported as they learn to master their respective fields of profession. This will take embedded and intentional mentors and coaches to a degree in which we previously had not built into our staffing pattern. This past summer, the Office of Head Start approved grant changes that have freed up the necessary resources to hire additional coaches and mentors to help support our teachers and social workers as they encounter new and challenging experiences. We consider this to be a big win!

Next, we have been working for nearly five years with the Office of Head Start to provide a supplemental grant that will allow us to purchase the facility and property that our Alton Essic Robinson Site is currently housed upon. With this support we can accomplish a few key goals. First, we will be able to remain in the space in which our center has been serving children for more than 30 years. We will also be able to renovate the adjacent space and use it for our program and agency administrative offices, as well as for our transportation hub. With the ownership of this location, we will be relieved of lease payments - providing an annual savings of nearly \$350K.

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President's Message



As noted on the previous page, our nation has been in the throes of an educator shortage. With this realized savings, we will be in a position to reinvest these resources into our staff wages and benefits which have outpaced our annual increases. It's another win to ensure that we are making progress in achieving competitive wages and are able to provide healthcare coverage options for our staff that did not suffer from tradeoffs and a weakening plan design just to be affordable.

And finally, what I think was the highlight of the summer is the tremendous success of our 2nd annual Back-to-School and Donor Appreciation event. The event was hosted at the Vera Lee Meeting & Event Venue in Alton, and was catered by the Fairview Heights based business, Takozz Food truck.

We enjoyed a relaxed evening of engaging with our donors and community supporters. There is no greater feeling than the opportunity to thank those who not only share a belief in our work, but more importantly, a belief and confidence in our ability to deliver upon our mission and in partnership create stronger, caring communities that send a message of hope and love to all. We are thrilled to have so many incredible partners in our community!

Sincerely,

President & CEO
Riverbend Head Start & Family Services

Meet Your Policy Council: Samantha Jolliff



Head Start parent **Samantha Jolliff** (pictured along with her family) has been involved with Policy Council since October 2023. In this photo, they visited the State Capitol.

Head Start parent **Samantha Jolliff** joined Policy Council in October 2023. Prior to that, she served on Policy with BCMW Head Start (Centralia, IL) for several years before relocating to Granite City.

When approached with the opportunity to become more involved with Riverbend Head Start, she jumped at the chance.

“I was always volunteering my time in the classroom with my oldest son and they asked if I would be interested in helping more,” she says. “I was happy to! As a stay at home mom, Head Start has always given me purpose and helped to shape my adult life.”

She’s had four children who have either gone through the program(s), or they’re currently enrolled.

“My 10-year-old son Gage previously attended Early Head Start and Head Start,” says Jolliff. “My 6-year-old son Robert is also an Early Head Start/Head Start graduate. And now, my twins Raylan and Ryland are in their final year of Head Start.”

Her twins, Raylan and Ryland, are four years old and attend Granite City South. Jolliff is planning to remain a part of Policy Council after they graduate. Her goal is to be a community representative.

In March 2024, Jolliff, along with fellow Head Start parent, **Leasia Swink**, traveled to Springfield to attend the IHSA (Illinois Head Start Association) conference.



“I had the privilege of meeting **Senator Erica Harriss** and **Representative Amy Elik**,” she says. “I spoke on behalf of the Head Start program.”

Months later, their paths would cross again.

“In May 2024, I got another chance to meet with **Rep. Amy Elik** at her Alton office,” says Jolliff. “Then in June, I attended a family event that was hosted by **Senator Erica Harriss** in Granite City.”

“Samantha demonstrates great passion and drive as she shares her story on a local, state and national level,” said Operations Director **Cathy Blevens**. “She wants what is best for all of the children and families we serve, and she stops at nothing to make it happen.”

The opportunity to give back to Head Start and help make a difference is something she says means the world to her.

“The best part of being on Policy Council is knowing my voice is heard and my opinion matters when it comes to my children,” she says. “It gives me a sense of purpose and has become a humbling part of my adult life.”



The 2nd Annual Back-to-School & Donor Appreciation Event Tuesday, August 27th

In August 2023, the agency resumed its annual in-person donor event, the Back-to-School and Donor Appreciation event. It was the first such event since the pandemic ended, replacing the very successful Circle of Care fundraiser.

“What an amazing show of support for the agency,” said President/CEO **Gene Howell**. “We listened to the community, and you said you wanted a more casual event post-pandemic, and so we came up with the Back-to-School & Donor Appreciation fundraiser.”

In August 2024, we held the second annual donor appreciation event, with its casual attire and atmosphere, and it was another success! Once again the Fairview Heights based food truck, **Takozz**, served delicious Mexican food, including street tacos and quesadillas. The Alton based **Vera Lee Meeting & Event Venue** hosted the event, and served margaritas.

Remarks were given by President/CEO **Gene Howell** and our recently-elected Board Chair **Monica Bristow** and Board Vice Chair **Damian Jones**. Policy Council members and Head Start parents **Samantha Jolliff** and **Leisia Swink** also gave remarks.

Nearly a hundred attendees came out to show their support of the program, including State Representative **Amy Elik**, Alton Mayor **David Goins**, Granite City Police **Chief Nick Novacich**, and Sergeant **Manny Espinoza** with the **Alton Police Department**.



*Pictured left: Representing Policy Council are Head Start parents **Leisia Swink** and **Samantha Jolliff**.*



*Pictured left: Recently-elected Board Vice Chair **Damian Jones**.*

RHSFS takes part in



LC's annual Summerfest



The annual Summerfest is presented by Lewis & Clark Community College. This year, it was held on Thursday, July 11th from 4:00 – 7:00 pm on the Godfrey campus. More than a thousand people attended the event, in spite of the extreme temperatures. Representatives with the agency met lots of families and gave away plenty of Head Start swag!





Shawn Phipps currently works as a Teacher Assistant II at Bethalto. He was hired in December 2022 as a Teacher Assistant I at Essic Robinson, but was promoted after obtaining his CDA credential.

“Every day I plan for activities that enhance the students learning experiences and deepen their understanding of the topics we cover,” says Phipps. “In my class I also like to work one-on-one with students who struggle in large groups.”

If you ask any of Phipps’ co-workers they’ll tell you he goes above and beyond “...showing up every day with a smile and a passion for the job...” They also say that he works well with the kids and his co-workers.

“The best part of working at Bethalto specifically, is that the whole center really works together to help support the students and their families,” says Phipps.

But in any job, there can be good days and some challenging ones too.

“Communication is key and most issues that arise will come from difficulties communicating,” says Phipps. “Whether it’s communication between teachers and students or families or staff. Not all of the students can communicate verbally with us so we often have to guess or try to understand the situation by reading the context clues during the conversation.”

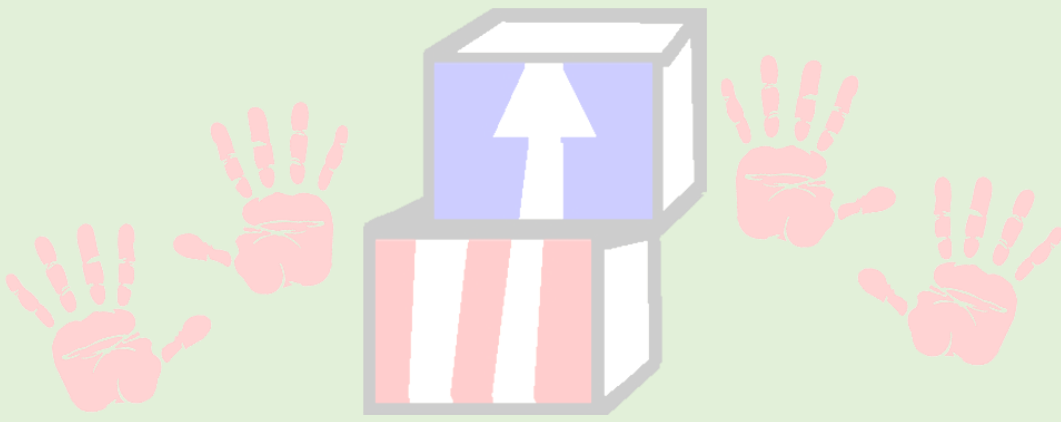
“Shawn shows initiative in the classroom daily,” according to Center Supervisor **Sarah Hettinger**. “He works to find solutions and answers to help support the kids in his classroom. He encourages them to explore freely, and they love Mr. Shawn!”



“They love Mr. Shawn!”

Sarah Hettinger
Bethalto Center Supervisor



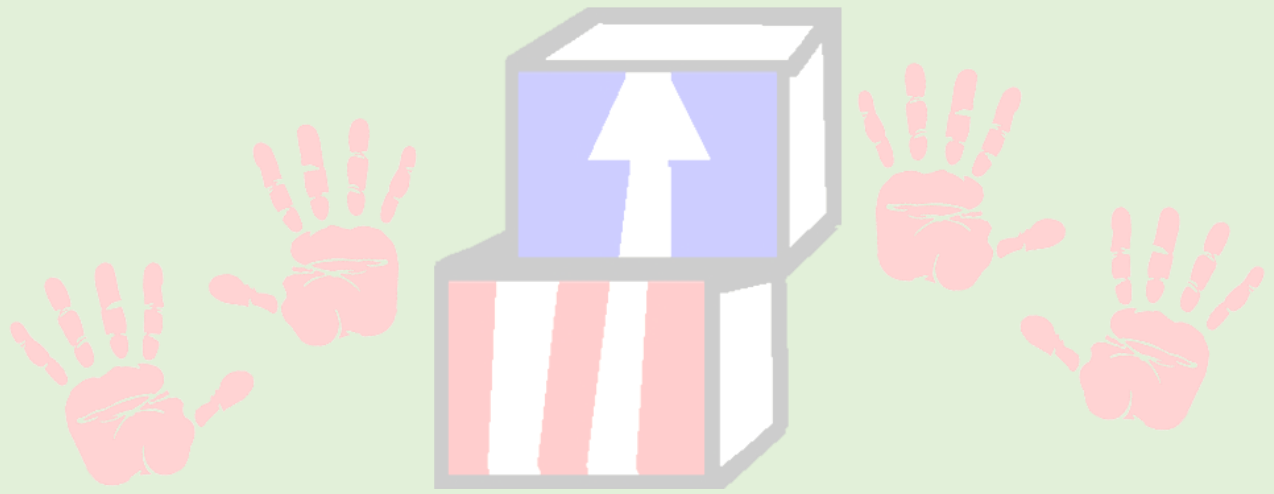


Hello from our Head Start students at Bethalto!



And from our students at Collinsville!





Hello from Granite City South and Granite City North!



And from our students at Essic Robinson & Edwardsville!



PEOPLE WHO MAKE A
DIFFERENCE



Idalia McNulty has been with the agency just under three years, but her positivity and infectious personality are hard to miss throughout the agency!

McNulty was hired in September 2021 as a Bilingual Family Advocate at Granite City North (GCN).

“Idalia is extremely hard working and determined,” says Lead Family Advocate **Kate Jenkins**. “I wish I had half of her energy! She is always smiling, singing, and dancing through the halls at GCN.”

McNulty is considered the resident translator at GCN, which is an asset when providing information to those Spanish speaking families. Her responsibilities include assisting the families in helping to keep their children healthy in every sense of the word. This includes making doctor appointments for the families and going to appointments and translating conversations between the parent or caregiver, and the health care provider. This helps to ensure that any medical concerns or issues aren’t missed.

McNulty has helped to plan several family events, or assisted in other ways, translating for parents so they can understand and participate in program activities. Her goal is to help as many of our families as possible, which can sometimes be a bit challenging, and leaves her working to maintain a sense of balance.

“...I have many families and they mostly want to meet with me for visits and appointments,” says McNulty.

“There has been a huge increase in participation of Latino families since she started as the advocate in the community,” says Jenkins. “She can recruit, fill and maintain her own caseload - making everyone's job easier.”

“I love being able to help the children and the Hispanic community,” says McNulty. “The best part about the job is getting to know the families and seeing the children grow and learn so much.”

“Idalia encourages her families to set goals and achieve them,” says Jenkins. “Her families NEVER want to miss visits with her because she offers help, resources, fun, and positive energy.”

“I don’t know what we would do without Idalia,” says Center Supervisor **Jody Warren**. “She is a ball of positive energy that can lift the spirits of anyone around her! She cares deeply about the children and families on her caseload and is always ready to assist them with their needs.”

Outside of work, McNulty is the founder of the dancing group, **Grupo Folklórico Panameño**, which has been performing in and around the St. Louis area for the past 15 years. She’s also a longtime zumba instructor, inspiring and encouraging women who come from low-income backgrounds through the **LifeWise STL** program.



Idalia McNulty

*Bilingual Family Advocate
Granite City North*

A Letter from the Editor



Dear Riverbend Friends and Supporters,

The fall season is finally here! Thinking about autumn can bring on some happy thoughts like crunchy leaves, your favorite sweater, football, comfort foods, and some of our favorite flavors like pumpkin spice and peppermint.

In fact, a recent survey showed that 41% of people chose fall as their favorite of the four seasons. Fall is considered a good time for reflection, awareness and mindfulness.

Over the past few months, we have welcomed new students, while others have moved on to kindergarten. We're thankful that so many families have entrusted us to help educate and empower their children in the classroom, and beyond.

As you have read the message from our President/CEO **Gene Howell**, we have a lot to be thankful for. But the work goes on. Because of your encouragement, we're able to continue providing vital services to the children and families who call Madison County their home.

Once again, we thank you for your ongoing support of our e-newsletter, and of the agency and its mission.

If you have a story idea that you'd like to share, or if you'd like to arrange for a donation during our coat drive, feel free to reach out to me directly at: msteen@riverbendfamilies.org.

Sincerely,

Melanie Steen
Public Relations & Development Director

Riverbend Head Start & Family Services

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United Way
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