

Riverbend Friends



GOOD NEWS FOR SUPPORTERS OF RIVERBEND HEAD START & FAMILY SERVICES

Q3 2025 | NEWSLETTER



A MESSAGE FROM CEO & PRESIDENT **GENE HOWELL**



Greetings Friends,

During a time when so much is changing or in some sort of dynamic flux, our mission is seeing increasing signs of stability and improvement which we are excited to share with you, our partners, in delivering on a promise to our community. As you may be aware, as a primarily federally (tax payer) funded program, we are open to routine and frequent monitoring visits to ensure that we perform due diligence to design and implement quality services, utilize our funds as they are intended and leverage the investment to improve life in our collective communities.

This past year, our agency completed an onsite federal monitoring visit. During the visit, we did have one area of non-compliance related to pre-employment background checks (an external process that we do not control). This past spring, we worked internally and externally with our background check source to create and implement process adjustments. These adjustments met the satisfaction of our funding source, the Office of Head Start, and we were issued a statement of a clean review. This was the third and final review of a three-phase process that ensures that our agency will not have to compete with any outside agency for our Head Start grant. More recently, we submitted a grant that will renew our 5-year funding cycle, resulting in uninterrupted delivery of these important services to our community.

Additionally, our Alton Plaza purchase and renovation project is moving along well and we hope to be in our new space by year's end, or the early part of 2026. The move will provide greater stability for our agency and program services while saving lease money that we can reinvest in the mission.

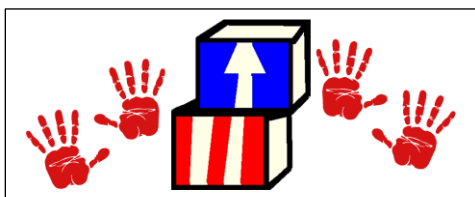
Finally, over the past year we have seen a stabilization of our staff which elevates institutional knowledge. This leads to improved program implementation fidelity and improved outcomes for our kids and their families as they prepare for kindergarten and beyond.

These factors combined - point in a direction of stable and dependable services which can be counted on for quality and efficiency. We are proud to be able to deliver this to our community, who wrap their arms and love around our mission and those whom we serve.

Thank you for all that you do,

Gene Howell

President & CEO



Longtime Riverbend Head Start supporter Erma Maloney passes away

We've lost a longtime friend and supporter, as **Erma Lee Maloney**, 88, passed away on April 24th at her home in Carmel, Indiana.

A few months after her passing, we learned that she gifted Riverbend Head Start with a financial endowment of just over \$60K.

"Our agency could not be more honored to be remembered in this way by a true treasure to our community," said President/CEO, **Gene Howell**. "Just as Erma Maloney invested in a career as an educator preparing children for future success, this donation speaks to her love of education and love for our community's children. We will honor this gift, as with all gifts, through continued quality services and diligent stewardship of our community's trust and investment."

Maloney was born in St. Louis, MO. She attended Southeast Missouri State University, where she received a Bachelor of Arts in teaching. Following college, she would go on to teach middle and high school students in St. Louis for a few years.

Eventually, Maloney chose to receive an advanced degree, so she put herself through college at Colgate University in New York where she received a Master's Degree in Biology. Maloney proudly finished Colgate and graduated in one of the very first classes of women to earn a degree from the prestigious university.

Shortly after graduating, Maloney met and married **Jack Foster**, who previously served on Riverbend Head Start's Board of Directors. She moved to Alton, IL and taught at North Middle School before moving on to Alton High School where she taught Biology for many years. She retired in 1990.

Maloney dedicated her life to being an educator, and valued the importance of a quality education for all children. We are forever grateful to her for her many years of support and dedication to our nonprofit.



Erma Maloney (pictured right)
Photo credit: The Telegraph



Erma Maloney
Photo credit: Riverbender.com

ASHLEY
Washington

LEADERSHIP SPOTLIGHT



Leadership Spotlight: Ashley Washington

Ashley Washington was hired in April 2022 as the Center Supervisor at our Collinsville location.

Her responsibilities include: ensuring that our licensing standards are being met, making sure that Collinsville staff complete all required training hours, communicating with CUSD 10 (Collinsville Community Unit School District #10) regarding children who attend the school district. Other duties include collaborating with Specialists and Coordinators for support with staff and children.

With so much to do, sometimes it can be tough to strike the right balance.

“Some of the challenges that come with the job are balancing work and home life - not just for myself, but for staff as well,” says Washington. “There's a very fine line between understanding personal situations and attempting to accommodate them. I must make sure it doesn't affect the overall operations of the center.”

“Ashley has been with the agency for nearly three years and only has two staff members that have been at Collinsville longer than she's been there,” says **Veneta Wadlow**, Center Operations Coordinator. “So, she was leading and learning a new team - all at the same time! In addition, Ashley and her staff are navigating all of the ins and outs of Head Start while learning about the Collinsville community. Ashley has a strong understanding of Early Childhood, and has demonstrated a strong passion for all families in the community and is committed to providing developmentally appropriate services for all children.”

As most employees at the site level can attest to, there's always a very special reason(s) as to *how* and *why* they show up day after day, in spite of the challenges that can occur.

“The best part about working here is having a front row seat to the growth and development of the children and our staff,” she says.



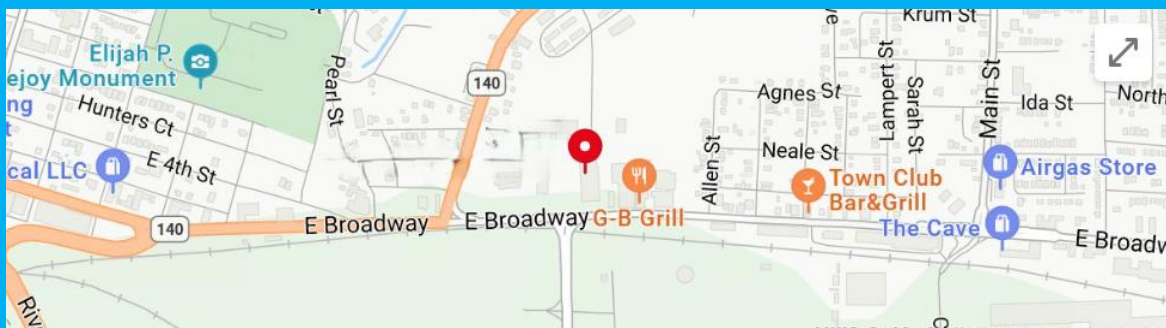
THE WORK CONTINUES...

We are pleased to share updates on the construction efforts at the new Central Office location. Recent progress includes: offices being drywalled and painted, doors being installed, and additional exterior work. The project remains on track for completion by the end of this year, or early 2026. We will continue to keep the community informed of any major changes to our schedule.



PRESENT DAY PICS

Alton Plaza – 1848 E. Broadway, Alton, IL 62002





Nicole Lough joined the agency in September 2023 as a Family Advocate – previously based at Granite City South (GCS).

In her prior role, her responsibilities included: planning and conducting home visits for our Early Head Start (EHS) families, keeping consistent contact with center-based families, and providing supports to the families as a whole.

“The main challenge I’ve encountered while working at Riverbend is that my ability to support a family is limited to their willingness to accept that support,” says Lough. “The best part about working here is our unique mission statement and the commitment everyone has to it. It’s phrased in way that forces us to never be satisfied, its ambiguity ensures we are always striving to be better.”

From the parents in our program, to her colleagues and supervisor(s), they describe Lough as someone that’s truly dedicated to the mission.

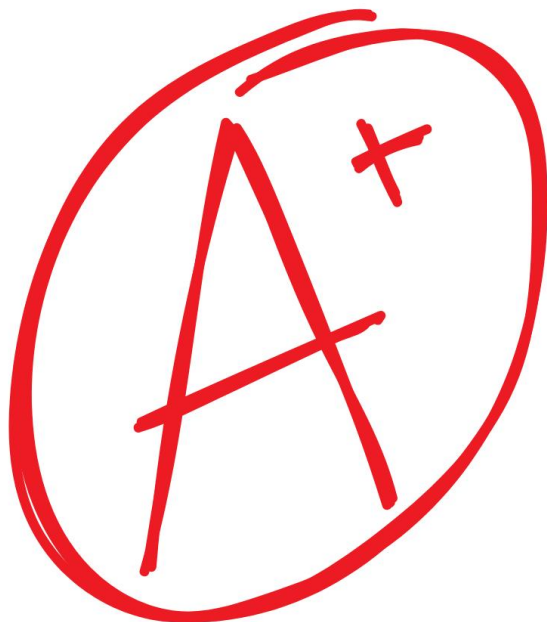
“Nicole is such a team player, helping her coworkers with planning and organizing center activities,” said GCS Lead Family Advocate **Paige Simmons**. “She always stepped up and utilized her artistic skills to create decorations for center events. She has such a positive attitude and encouraged not only her families, but fellow staff to share in her positive outlook. Plus, she’s always found new ways to help her families by connecting them with various community resources. We’ll miss her!”

In August, Lough took on an exciting new role – that of Social Emotional Specialist. She’s now based at Central Office, but will cover Essic Robinson, Bethalto and our Edwardsville site(s).

“I miss the families I worked with, the connections I made with them, and getting creative with planning home visits,” says Lough. “I also miss my coworkers at GCS who were so supportive throughout my time there. In my new role, I’m looking forward to having a wider range of impact, more tools at hand to help families and staff, and a better understanding of the inner workings of Head Start.”

Renee Collins

Teacher / Granite City South



Renee Collins

Teacher / GCS

Meet The Teacher

"Miss Renee has shown an outstanding amount of patience, integrity and professionalism. I have gotten to know her over the summer, and she has really shown up. There were times when things felt tense, but she shows extraordinary grace through every challenge. She is absolutely an amazing person!"

– Connie Gray, Bus Driver



Renee Collins was hired at the agency in December, 1991. She currently serves as Lead Teacher at Granite City South (GCS).

Throughout her years with the agency, Collins has held various positions including becoming the agency's first Special Needs Assistant. She's also worked as a TA (Teacher Assistant) before being promoted to Teacher and now, Lead Teacher. In addition to Granite City, she's worked at other locations including Venice and in Collinsville.

Her mission: leading and helping to guide those who come into the classroom become all that they can be.

"Many years ago, someone did that for me," she says. "Jerri Hughes took me under her wing and poured into me the professionalism that I carry with me today. I try to do it for anyone who comes into my classroom, or into my life."

"I have known Renee for over 25 years," says **Veneta Wadlow**, Center Operations Coordinator. "She started as a parent in our program and worked diligently to pursue her degree and become a Lead Teacher. She has deservedly won the Teacher of the Year award from the Illinois Head Start Association (IHSA). She inspires other Teachers to reach their full potential. In addition, she is a champion for children and their families in the program. Renee is truly an asset to Riverbend Head Start and Family Services."

Even though she's spent years pouring into others, Collins is grateful to get so much in return.

"The best part about being here is being able to touch so many lives," she says. "I see so many families and children who I meet all over the community and surrounding area who have said that I made a difference in their life. The reward is seeing the fruits of my labor."

A Letter from the Editor



Dear Riverbend Friends and Supporters,

We are knocking on the door of another holiday season! How quickly the weather has changed, and summer seems like a distant memory.

Are you celebrating the holidays this year? It seems you can't enter a retail store right now without seeing Christmas trees, ornaments, and gift ideas for friends and family.

As you plan your holiday shopping list, we hope you'll remember our Head Start families. Our annual 'Coats for Kids' drive is now underway, and will conclude by Thanksgiving. We're also collecting new toys for our students, and toiletries/personal care/cleaning items for our families that cannot afford them. These are necessities that many of us simply take for granted, but they are vital to our students and their families.

As you have read the message from our President/CEO **Gene Howell**, this year has been a constant state of "dynamic flux" and for many of us, that includes our nonprofit. But your support never wavered, and for that, we are truly thankful. It was wonderful seeing so many of you - our community supporters this past August at our Back-to-School & Donor Appreciation fundraiser. We love catching up with you in person!

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

If you have a story tip to share, or if you'd like to arrange for a donation during the holiday season, 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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