

Riverbend



Friends

GOOD NEWS FOR SUPPORTERS OF RIVERBEND HEAD START & FAMILY SERVICES

Q1 2025 | NEWSLETTER

President's Message



Greetings Friends!

Every year brings new successes, new challenges and of course, new opportunities. And this year has been no exception.

As of first quarter, I'm proud to report that our program is fully-staffed. This has not been the case over the years as we have endured an educator shortage during a period of great transition. Along with being fully staffed, this has allowed us to achieve full enrollment. As we maintain full enrollment, we are able to make the biggest advances in our outcomes for kindergarten readiness. In other words, as our staff stay longer, so does our ability to serve even more children and their families.

In January, our program had our on-site federal monitoring visit. While we would have loved to have been perfect in every category, we did have one area of non-compliance where it relates to complete background checks for staff within 90 days of hire. All of our staff must pass a state and FBI background check pre-hire, and within 90 days we are to ensure that a Department of Children & Family Services (DCFS) background check has been received. In two individual cases, we worked hard to complete these background checks within the designated time frame, but unfortunately, it took longer than 90 days. While this does not pose a threat to our funding, it is an area we will work to improve upon with DCFS. We're pleased to report that half of the areas that were reviewed, were noted as a program of strong practice, or demonstrating best practices.

Our challenges remain in large part beyond our control with a new national administration in place. We are working hard to understand how to implement and support the program, while at the same time shifting some practices to support the new administration's priorities and goals. To this end, we continue to make needed adjustments and hope that you, our advocates, will join us in letting our members of Congress know how important our services are, and the critical role of investing in our youngest learners in order to build strong and successful communities for years to come.

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President's Message



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As we enter spring, our agency is conducting the necessary work for a new strategic plan. As we plan for the future, we have the opportunity to absorb the many changes surrounding our work and create a plan that continues to place our agency in a premiere position to serve and support the community who believes in our mission and in our capacity to carry it out.

In closing and mindful of those who believe in us the most, I regretfully share that in February we had to say goodbye to one of the most generous, kindest and positive people I have met in this position. Our good friend, **Shirley Emons**, passed away at a spry age of 95. With boundless energy and a heart of gold at 82-years-old, Shirley founded the annual campaign "Shirley's Kids." Since then, this wonderful bundle of passion and compassion raised in excess of \$265,000 to support services for children and families to help sustain a stronger community for all. We could never thank Shirley enough.

Take care and be well,

President & CEO
Riverbend Head Start & Family Services

Shirley Emons - The Heart behind Shirley's Kids



Pictured above: **Shirley Emons** (at age 92) along with her daughter, **Gayle Joehl**. Joehl is the chairperson of the 2025 Shirley's Kids campaign.



Emons truly enjoyed spending time with children.



Emons and a friend donate handmade hats to Head Start children.



Pictured above: Daughter **Gayle Joehl** with **Mariela** during a mission trip to Guatemala. Pictured below: **Joehl** holding Esvin in Guatemala. It was through these mission trips that **Emons** was touched and wanted to help local kids. That would spark the idea to help area children through the creation of Shirley's Kids.



"I always enjoyed seeing Shirley. The one thing about her that I'll remember is that she was always happy and always wore a smile."

-Chuck Parr
RHSFS former President/CEO
(March 1997 – January 2018)

Shirley Emons - The Heart behind Shirley's Kids

Dear Friends and Supporters,

We are excited to share the journey and impact of Shirley's Kids, a campaign founded by **Shirley Emons** in 2012. At the inspiring age of 82, Shirley's dedication to underprivileged children's education and well-being started a movement that continues to change lives today.

Emons passed away on February 21, 2025, at the age of 95. Her dedication to the children in our community has left a lasting mark on so many children and families in need.

The Beginning of "Shirley's Kids"

In 2012, Shirley and her daughter, Gayle, sponsored two children in Guatemala, Mariela and Esvin. They supported these children financially and corresponded by mail, creating a meaningful bond. After a mission trip to Guatemala, Gayle met Mariela and Esvin in person. When Gayle returned from her mission, she shared stories and pictures with Shirley, highlighting the terrible conditions and lack of education these children were facing. Moved by the experience, Shirley's response was "we need to help our local children too!"

Determined to make a difference, Shirley contacted our agency and shared her vision of raising funds to support the less fortunate children in our community. That's when Shirley's Kids was founded.

Shirley's Tireless Efforts

With natural energy and enthusiasm, Shirley reached out to everyone she knew. Her passion and commitment resonated deeply with her friends and family. During its inaugural year, the Shirley's Kids campaign raised more than \$9,000 and provided essential resources and educational opportunities for local children living in poverty. The campaign is now entering its 14th year.

A Growing Legacy

Over the years, Shirley's Kids continued to grow, thanks to the support of various co-chairs who helped Shirley reach out to potential donors within the community. Shirley's dedication extended beyond fundraising; she visited classrooms to read to the children and brought joy through acts of kindness such as helping to give out handmade winter hats, made for the children by two of her close friends.

Continuing Shirley's Mission

Even though Shirley's health declined, her concern for the future of Shirley's Kids grew. She entrusted the campaign to her daughter, Gayle, who accepted the responsibility of chairperson. Gayle also volunteers weekly with children at the Essic Robinson location in Alton, seeing firsthand the impact of donations on the children's lives.

Our community Impact

Shirley's Kids improves not only the lives of the children we serve but also our own. We are grateful for Shirley's vision and efforts, and we are committed to continuing her legacy of hope and education for local children. This helps our community become a better place for all of us.

We truly thank you for your continued support and generosity. ❤️

Robert F. Kennedy, Jr. visits Head Start in VA

RFK Jr Visits Head Start Program

The U.S. Secretary of Health & Human Services (HHS) Robert F. Kennedy Jr. recently visited the Greater Mount Vernon Community Head Start program in Gum Springs, Virginia to spotlight the department's focus on nutrition and healthy eating. The visit coincides with National Nutrition Month.



Photo credit: The National Head Start Association, or NHSA

2025 Penny Rush Campaign

Riverbend Head Start held its annual Dollar Per Child/Penny Rush campaign between January 27th and February 28th. The goal was to raise two-dollars for each of our 646 children, or **\$1,292** for this year. All donations have been counted and turned in to the **Illinois Head Start Association (IHSA)** in Springfield. The IHSA is the only state organization advocating solely for Head Start and Early Head Start children and their families. Dollar Per Child is the only source of support for IHSA's state of Illinois advocacy efforts.

Below are the totals for each of our locations:

Central Office: \$86.55
Essic Robinson: \$386.19
Bethalto: \$141.13
Edwardsville: \$94.86
Collinsville: \$33.83
Granite City South: \$347.21
Granite City North: \$225
Bus Depot: \$63.40

2025 GRAND TOTAL: \$1,378.17

We did it! We exceeded our goal and raised more than two-dollars per child. The money raised can help to ensure that the voices of Head Start children and their families are heard by our local and state legislators. Now more than ever, it's important to shine a spotlight on all the positive ways Head Start is making a difference. And because of our staff, students, parents and community partners, we've exceeded our annual goal – thank you!

Happy Birthday Head Start!



47TH ANNUAL CONFERENCE

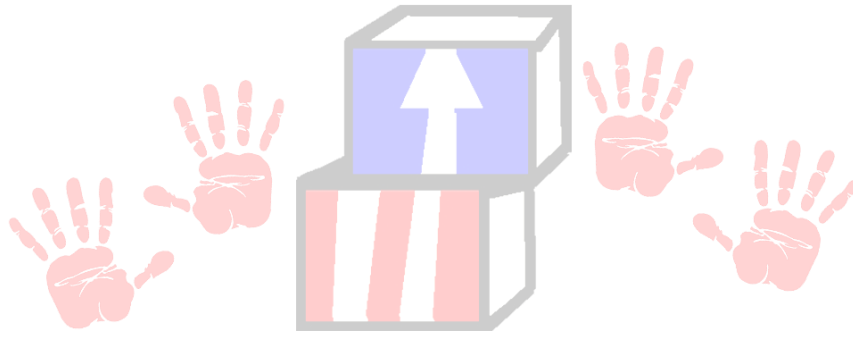
Illinois Head Start Association
February 19 - February 21, 2025
Springfield, IL

Celebrating 60 Years of Love, Learning, and Lifting Up Families



“For six decades, our programs have led the industry as a laboratory in developing, implementing and modeling best practice approaches to serving children and families. To that end, it is a source of great pride to know how well our work is regarded and respected across the field of early childhood and the great value that we contribute.”

- Gene Howell, President/CEO



Illinois Head Start Association Awardees

The Illinois Head Start Association (IHSA) held its annual conference from February 19 – 21. Several of our staff members and parents attended 47th annual conference, which was held in Springfield, Illinois. This year, the Head Start organization is celebrating its 60th birthday. Conference attendees were a part of the celebration at the Illinois State Capitol building. Proudly wearing their yellow shirts, they gathered in the rotunda, listening to congratulatory remarks from legislatures, honoring and sharing stories of Head Start success. The birthday party was filled with Head Start supporters from all across the state.

We were honored to have stories on display from many of the staff and families in our program. In addition, two of our own were recognized, **Samantha Jolliff** and **Kerry Sheppard**.

Samantha Jolliff, Parent of the Year

Jolliff is a parent at Granite City South (GCS). She is the mother of six children, with two currently enrolled in our full-day program. Jolliff is our current Policy Council chairperson and executive committee member at GCS. In addition, she serves on the board for BrightPoint, local PTA's, and is an advocate for our program at the local, state and national level. Jolliff was also elected to the Illinois Head Start Association (IHSA) Board of Directors.

"Head Start has been life-changing for my family," says Jolliff. "What started as a way to stay engaged became an opportunity to advocate - not just for my children, but for families like mine. I've had the privilege of speaking to senators, state representatives, and even marching in D.C. to share the impact of Head Start. Riverbend Head Start has empowered me as a parent and I'm forever grateful for the confidence, support, and opportunities it has given my children and me."

Kerry Sheppard, Leota Brown Memorial Scholarship

The Leota Brown Memorial Scholarship is awarded to help support the college education in a field of study for any current or past Early Head Start/Head Start parent or child. Kerry Sheppard is a Head Start parent, turned educator. She shows a deep commitment to our mission, and is actively pursuing her education for her own personal development, while supporting the children in her Head Start classroom.



*Pictured left: **Kerry Sheppard** holding the award for the Leota Brown Memorial Scholarship. Pictured right: **Samantha Jolliff** takes the podium after receiving the Parent of the Year award.*





Cheryl Jones, Health Advocate
Granite City North

Cheryl Jones is a longtime employee of the agency (24 years total). She first joined Head Start in September 1996, and was a Program Aide, working at the Venice location until its closing. Jones had been with us for 13 years, before leaving the agency to return to nursing school. She was rehired in February 2014, and has been here ever since. She currently works as a Health Advocate at Granite City North.

Some of her responsibilities include: entering medical and attaching documents, hearing/vision screenings in the center as well as in the home, growth assessments, making referrals for children who need dental treatment, and have vision and hearing problems or other health issues that require a referral. She completes health staffing(s) for children who have chronic illnesses and/or require medication to be kept at the center, obtains medical records and well-child exams from healthcare providers and dentist offices as needed. She also makes sure that our medication and first aids kits are checked on a monthly basis.

“As the Health Advocate for GCN, Cheryl makes all children feel special during yearly screenings - while explaining what she is doing and why she is doing it,” says Center Supervisor **Jody Warren**. “She is an integral part of our center and we thank her for her years of dedication and service to children and families. Plus, Cheryl makes a delicious banana pudding!”

During the past few years, Jones had been working while also attending college to earn her RN (Registered Nurse) degree. Her pinning ceremony was held in December 2024 at Lewis and Clark College.

“This is a very important ceremony for nurses,” says Health Advocate **Julie Mouser**. “It’s a celebration of their hard work and completion of all educational and clinical requirements. Cheryl has worked very hard for this.”

“I agree,” says Health Specialist **Casey Cope**. “Cheryl has been working very hard at going to nursing school, doing clinicals and still working full time with us and fulfilling her duties as a Health Advocate.”

While Jones enjoys her job as a Health Advocate, it does come with its share of challenges. Most of them stem from a desire to help even more of our families within the community.

“One of the challenges is families not always taking advantage of the services which our agency/program offers,” says Jones. “Having limited health resources for the families (i.e., dental homes) which can cause the children and families to not receive preventative treatment before it becomes a complex or an urgent need. And misinformation on social media and the internet that’s not backed by science, which can cause families to not be proactive. Because there’s so much misinformation out there, it’s sometimes difficult to get parents to take advantage of preventative health measures, because sometimes they cannot differentiate between fiction and truth.”

Jones has had lots of rewarding experiences during her time here, with the most recent being a situation that arose during the start of the 2024-25 school year.

“We had a child that we didn’t have a lab result that was drawn, but it was pending and I was unable to reach out to the doctor’s office,” she says. “When I contacted the mother in order to obtain this information, mom stated that the child’s physical and labs had been completed at a school clinic in the area, but she was unaware of who the doctor or agency was. When I tried to ask further questions, the mom was very distraught as she stated that she had been crying and was an emotional wreck as she was having a health issue of her own that needed immediate attention.”

Jones immediately got to work, trying to find help for the child’s mom.

“I was able to find a provider who took her insurance, and explained to them the mom’s situation and the fears and concerns that she had,” she says. “That’s when they told me that mom could come and get examined that day. The best part was that mom was able to be seen because of my willingness to help her during a crisis. In nursing school, they teach you that if you want a patient to be compliant when they are in pain, you have to first take care of the pain. It was rewarding to be able to help that particular mom, and the families that rely upon us.”

Alton Plaza Update

In December 2024, the agency began leasing the entire Alton Plaza space for our new central office and bus depot location. Then on January 3, 2025, we officially purchased the now vacant space. Also in January, we sent out an RFP (Request for Proposal) to locate a contractor to manage the construction process for the facility.

Then in March, we selected a local company to work with. The tentative goal is to move out of our current central office location at 550 Landmarks Blvd., in the fall of 2025. In the meantime, here's a look at where our new central offices will be located, pre-construction.



Riverbend Head Start & Family Services has a brand new social media channel: TikTok. The account was launched in mid-January. We hope you'll follow us. Just search for @riverbendheadstart on the platform. We are also on Facebook, X, Instagram, LinkedIn, YouTube and Vimeo.

**RHSFS is
now on
TikTok!**



Making a
Difference



*Paige Simmons
Lead Family Advocate, Granite
City South*





Paige Simmons
Lead Family Advocate, Granite City South

Paige Simmons celebrated her second year with the agency on January 3, 2025. She was initially hired as a Family Advocate, before transitioning into her current role.

Her responsibilities include: supervising the facilitation and enrollment for Early Head Start, figuring out processes and organizing people and activities necessary to ensure that parents and children's needs are met. She also works to ensure that Family Advocates are meeting Head Start performance and outcome objectives for child health, development, early childhood education, family development and case management.

"The main challenge as Family Advocates is the inability to do more for our families," says Simmons. "There are so many families with unstable housing or who don't have reliable transportation, and all we can really do is to provide resources."

It's evident that Simmons truly cares for the families on her caseload. She says the best part about working for the agency are the relationships she has built over time. Her weekly visits with our families make her feel like she's truly a part of the family.

"I love working for Head Start because I love being a part of the support system for parents and children," she says. "I love being the biggest cheerleader for a parent when things are good, and a listening ear when things are hard. Those moments when a child learns a new skill and the parents are so excited to tell you, that's what you work so hard for."

...continued...

If you ask any of her colleagues (past and present), they'll tell you Simmons gives it more than a 100% for the children and families we serve:

Paige is a leader who exemplifies going above and beyond in her role. She is energetic, helpful and pitches in wherever she is needed. Her excitement is contagious and she enjoys the children and families at Granite City South. An example of her energy and excitement was when the children's fall photos were delivered to the center. Paige was excited about each and every picture, talking about the children and describing how each picture and child meant something to her. Paige values developing her staff and works to create ways to support them in knowing and understanding their respective role(s). We are lucky to have Paige supporting the mission in all she does at Granite City South!



A Lesson In Healthy Eating for Head Start

While Americans are consuming more fruits and vegetables than we did in 1970, the average U.S. diet still falls short of the recommendations in the *2020–2025 Dietary Guidelines for Americans* for these major food groups.* For anyone that's raised a child, or a grandchild, the struggle to get them to eat their fruits and vegetables is all too real.

To help make fruits and veggies fun, we enlisted the help of St. Louis-based author, **Simonne Kimble**. She brought her passion for storytelling straight to the classrooms at Riverbend Head Start in March with three special readings of her debut book, *Picky Mya: A Lesson in Healthy Eating*.

On Friday, March 14th, Kimble visited the Granite City North location. Next, was a stop in Alton to spend the day with staff and students at Essic Robinson on St. Patrick's Day, March 17th. Her final stop was at our Edwardsville Head Start location on March 24th.

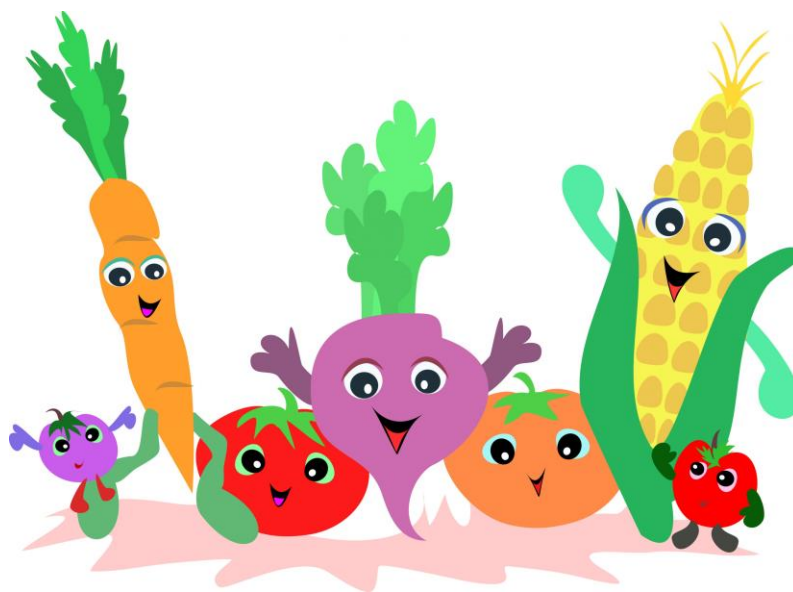
Our students were very curious as she read from *Picky Mya*, a colorful and rhyming tale that encourages children to explore new foods and embrace balanced eating without saying goodbye to a sweet treat, on occasion. Students asked lots of questions and even pitched in about their own favorite healthy foods they like to snack on at home!

Inspired by her daughter, Mya, and her own personal journey of growth, healing, and motherhood, Kimble created *Picky Mya* about a decade ago as a way to spark healthy conversations within families. Eventually, she took the steps she needed to get the book published in January 2025.

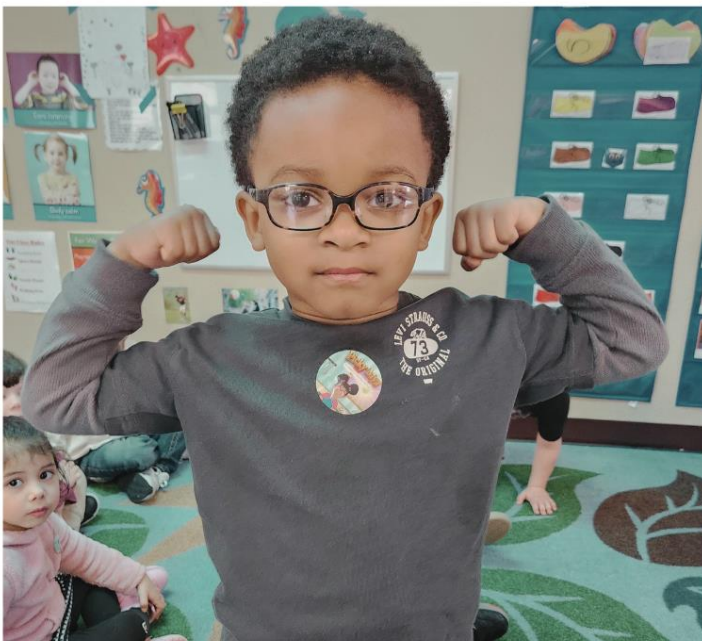
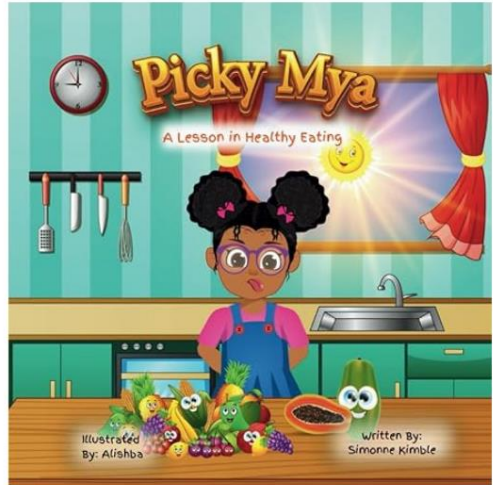
"This book is so special to me because I wrote it at such a young age, trying to navigate life as a teen mom," Kimble stated after the release of *Picky Mya*. "I always wanted to publish the book, but time passed, and life happens."

Kimble's readings weren't just about story time, it was about leaving the impressionable students with a better view on healthy eating. Ideas that, in the long run, can help them make healthy food choices as they continue to grow.

Following the book reading, Kimble donated a book to each of the ten classrooms she read to in March. She also brought fruit and veggie stickers for the kids to wear, which they loved. After that, she provided each classroom with healthy snacks to eat, following their regular meal, of course.



*Source: www.usda.gov



Making a Difference



Angela Garrett
Substitute Teacher
Granite City South



Angela Garrett recently marked her one-year anniversary with the agency, she joined the team in March 2024 as a Substitute Teacher at Granite City South.

“Angie has been a breath of fresh air for our site,” says Family Advocate **Lisa Brumley**. “She came to us as a substitute teacher but she has been much more. Angie has demonstrated to staff and clients alike how to address difficult or challenging behaviors in the classroom and at home.”

Prior to joining Head Start, Garrett worked for the **Alton School District** for 37 years, where she retired as an Early Childhood Special Education Teacher. In her current role, she enjoys working one-on-one with our students.

“I enjoy meeting all of the needs of the special education students,” says Garrett. “I like meeting people and getting to know them. I especially love working with the children!”

Brumley calls Garrett a “...miracle worker...” and beyond that, she couldn’t help but mention Garrett’s great sense of style!

“Angie has reached out parents to ensure that what she teaches in the classroom is reinforced at home,” says Brumley. “She readily answers questions from staff and parents alike with regard to addressing behaviors in a positive fashion. Angie is a natural cheerleader and demonstrates a positive attitude each and every day.”

A Note from the Editor



Dear Riverbend Friends and Supporters,

Spring is here! It's a season of renewal and new beginnings. We thank you for your ongoing support of our e-newsletter. We love sharing the great news from our agency with you, and introducing you to some of our amazing employees.

Before we know it, summer will be knocking at our door. For some of you, it's a time to hit the road for vacation, or plan something closer to home with a staycation. But most importantly, it's a time to catch up with family and friends.

The final day of class is on Thursday, May 22nd. As you make your summer plans, we hope you'll remember us. We're already planning ahead to our 3rd annual Back-to-School and Donor Appreciation event. This year, it will be held on **Tuesday, August 5th** at the Vera Lee Meeting and Event venue in Alton. Once again, the theme is Taco Tuesday. We will send you an invitation with all of the details in the coming months.

Because of your ongoing generosity, we're able to continue helping Head Start and Early Head Start children and their families in Madison County. We hope you'll mark your calendar, and join us for food and fellowship as we show our appreciation to you, our amazing donors!

Once again, we thank you for caring about Head Start, and showing your love and support for the children and families we serve.

Sincerely,

Melanie Steen
Public Relations & Development Director

Riverbend Head Start & Family Services

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