

RIVERBEND FRIENDS  
1ST QUARTER 2026



www.riverbendfamilies.org

# NEWSLETTER

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



Greetings Friends & Supporters,

As we welcome the fresh energy of spring, we're also celebrating the meaningful progress underway across Riverbend Head Start & Family Services.

This year began with a major transition: relocating our administrative offices from Landmarks Boulevard to our newly renovated space at 1848 E. Broadway in Alton. While our former location served us well, the new layout allows for closer collaboration between agency administration and program leadership—strengthening communication and deepening our shared understanding of one another's roles.

Next door at our Alton Essic Robinson Center, significant renovations are in progress. Updates include a modernized HVAC system, kitchen improvements to better serve our students, enhanced safety and security features, and refreshed spaces for our Family Advocate team and staff break room. And, just as exciting for our children, the playground will be fully replaced this summer with equipment designed to transform the area into an outdoor classroom that supports our curriculum through purposeful play.

In Granite City, we are also moving forward in partnership with the Granite City School District. Renovations have begun at the historic Niedringhaus School on State Street. When the school year ends in May, we will consolidate our two Granite City centers into this location, with plans to be fully operational by August for the start of the new program year.

Thank you for your continued support and belief in our mission. We invite you to reach out and visit our new and newly renovated spaces, you are always welcome!

In service to children and families,

A handwritten signature in cursive that reads "Gene Howell".

Gene Howell, President/CEO  
Riverbend Head Start & Family Services

## Congresswoman Budzinski Visits Riverbend Head Start



Riverbend Head Start & Family Services was delighted to welcome **Congresswoman Nikki Budzinski** to our Essic Robinson location in Alton on February 17. The visit was filled with joyful moments as she spent time in one of our preschool classrooms—reading a story, participating in a craft, and receiving many warm hugs from our students.

During her visit, the children invited her to help complete a special friendship tree project, adding her own painted fingerprint beside theirs. The Congresswoman shared that spending time with our early learners was a highlight of her day and offered a meaningful reminder of why she continues to advocate for strong support of early childhood programs.

“Head Start services are a lifeline for families throughout the district, providing children with the foundation they need to succeed long before their first day of kindergarten,” said Rep. Budzinski. “It was a privilege to meet with the students and faculty at Riverbend Head Start and see firsthand how these federal investments are being put to work. In Congress, I will continue to fight for the funding our Head Start programs rely on to ensure every child in our community has a safe environment where they can learn and thrive.”

After touring the building and meeting with staff, she spoke about the vital role Head Start plays in supporting working families and children across Madison County. She acknowledged the growing need for early childhood services, the rising costs faced by programs, and the importance of preserving federal investments that ensure children have access to safe, high-quality learning environments.

President & CEO Gene Howell expressed appreciation for the opportunity to share with the Congresswoman both the daily realities faced by local families and the deep impact of early learning and family support services. The visit allowed us to highlight the dedication of our teachers and staff and to show how community partnerships help children build confidence, friendships, and a strong foundation for school.

We are grateful to Rep. Budzinski for spending time with our children and for recognizing the importance of programs like Head Start. Moments like these remind us that when the community comes together in support of our youngest learners, the future grows a little brighter for everyone.

## Celebrating Black History Month at Essic Robinson Head Start



Students and teachers at our Essic Robinson Head Start location in Alton created a powerful and engaging display in honor of Black History Month, transforming the hallway into a vibrant learning environment centered on history, courage, and community.

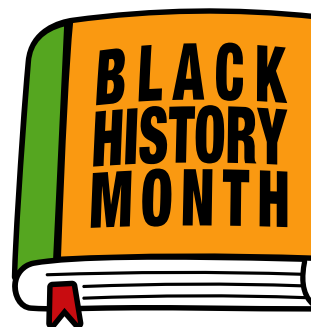
This year's theme focused on the legacy of the Freedom Riders—the brave individuals who challenged segregation in the early 1960s by riding interstate buses throughout the South. To help children understand these concepts at an age-appropriate level, teachers incorporated storytelling, art, and hands-on activities that illustrated the ideas of fairness, bravery, and standing up for what's right.

The hallway display featured a bright yellow "Freedom Riders" bus surrounded by student-created artwork. Each child learned about a historical figure connected to the Civil Rights Movement and participated in creating visuals that celebrate these leaders' contributions. The project allowed students to connect history to real people, real actions, and real courage.



In another section of the display, students created colorful handprint art inspired by the guiding phrase: "I can change the world with my own two hands." Each child completed a short reflection about how they can help make their classroom, community, and world a kinder place. These reflections highlight the connection between learning about historic acts of bravery and recognizing the power of small actions today.

Projects like this are a meaningful way for children to learn about identity, community, and the values that shape the world around them. We are incredibly proud of our Essic Robinson students and the teachers who guided these thoughtful activities. Their creativity, curiosity, and compassion shine through in every piece displayed.



## Guiding Our Mission: Meet Board Chair Monica Bristow

### What originally inspired you to join the Riverbend Head Start & Family Services Board of Directors?

*I have a long history with Riverbend Head Start dating back to the early 1990's, when my boss at Olin served as Board Chair for several years. He emphasized the importance of being involved in community organizations. During my time at the RiverBend Growth Association, Head Start stood out as a stellar nonprofit—highly respected for helping local children thrive and essential to the health of our economy. It wasn't until I met Gene through the Rotary of the Riverbend that I was invited to serve and truly began to understand the depth of the organization's impact.*

### How long have you served on the board, and what has kept you engaged over the years?

*I've served on the Board for more than six years and am now in my second term as Board Chair.*

### In your role as Board Chair, what part of your work do you find most meaningful?

*Since I'm not directly involved with the children, I find the most meaning in supporting the staff—the true superstars who keep everything running. They navigate all the complexities, challenges, and unpaved roads with dedication and heart.*



“Do you have a favorite leadership philosophy, quote, or guiding principle?”

*The harder I work, the luckier I get.*”

### What strengths or experiences do you feel you bring to the board's leadership?

*My strengths include deep knowledge of the community—who does what, who can help, and who needs help. This allows me to make meaningful connections between people and organizations.*

### From your perspective, what is the most important role the board plays in advancing our mission?

*Staying involved and bringing our diverse perspectives to the table.*

### What resonates most with you about Riverbend Head Start's work with children and families?

*These children are our future—our workforce, our leaders, our community investors. They need this lift, and Riverbend Head Start provides that critical foundation.*

## Delta Dental of Illinois Community Grants Reception



*Pictured left to right: Chad Pedigo, Delta Dental Foundation Grants Committee; Dr. Nancy Cozzi, Grants Committee; RHSFS Health Advocate Michelle Baalman, RHSFS Health Specialist Casey Cope, Joe Leo, Grants Committee Chair & Delta Dental of Illinois Board of Directors*

Riverbend Head Start & Family Services was honored to be represented at the Delta Dental of Illinois Community Grants Reception on March 11, 2026, in Naperville. It's an annual gathering that celebrates nonprofit organizations working to improve health, access, and well-being for Illinois children and families.

Each year, Riverbend team members **Casey Cope** and **Michelle Baalman** attend the event to connect with fellow grant recipients and share the impact of Delta Dental's generous support on the communities we serve. This year's reception brought together 29 nonprofit organizations from across the state.

"We appreciate the work Riverbend Head Start is doing within the Madison County region; they have been a partner of ours for many years," says **Lora Vitek**, Executive Director of the Delta Dental of Illinois Foundation. "When children have access to quality health care, their potential is limitless. Oral health is the foundation of overall well-being. Through our Community Grants Program and statewide partnerships, we're paving the way for every child to access the care that supports a lifetime of healthy smiles."

As part of their commitment to transparency and measurable results, Delta Dental highlights the importance of outcomes reporting each year. Riverbend Head Start submits an annual update detailing how funds have directly supported children's oral-health education, access to preventive care, and family-centered wellness resources.

This ongoing partnership continues to strengthen the health and learning opportunities available to the children in Madison County. We are grateful for the Delta Dental of Illinois Foundation's continued trust in our mission and for their role in helping families build brighter, healthier futures.

## Penny by Penny, Our Community Shines

### *Riverbend families, staff, and partners help us surpass our 2026 Penny Rush goal*

Each year, our Head Start community comes together for a small-but-mighty tradition: the annual Penny Rush campaign. What begins with a simple plastic bag sent home with students quickly turns into a powerful reminder of how collective generosity can make a real impact for children and families.

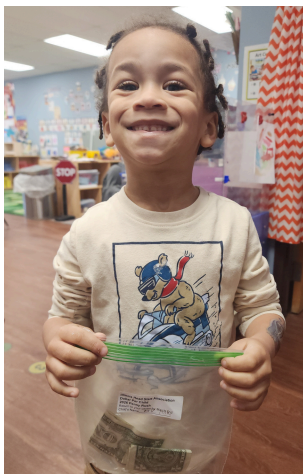
Supported nationwide by the **National Head Start Association**, the Penny Rush (also known as Dollar Per Child) challenges programs across the country to raise two dollars for every child served. With funding for 646 children, Riverbend Head Start & Family Services set a 2026 goal of \$1,292.

Thanks to the enthusiasm of our students, families, staff, and visitors, we surpassed that goal — raising a combined total of \$1,621.84 across all seven centers (including central office). That's \$329.84 over our goal!

“Our families, staff, and local partners look forward to the Penny Rush every year because it’s a chance for everyone to play a part,” said President/CEO Gene Howell. “Whether someone donates a handful of pennies or a jar full of change, it all adds up to meaningful support for the children and parents who depend on Head Start.”

All funds raised are contributed to the **Illinois Head Start Association** (IHSA), the only statewide organization dedicated solely to advocating for Head Start and Early Head Start families. IHSA relies on Dollar Per Child contributions to ensure that children and parents have a strong voice in Springfield and Washington, D.C.

We extend our heartfelt thanks to the families and partners who dropped pennies, quarters, dollars, and everything in between into our jars this year. Your generosity strengthens our mission — and reminds our children what it looks like when a community comes together.



## Community Partner Spotlight: IL American Water Invests in Local Families



On January 30th, the agency received a generous \$1,000 unrestricted gift from **Illinois American Water** in support of our mission to help families thrive. Representatives from the company joined President/CEO Gene Howell for a celebratory “big check” photo at our new administrative offices. The moment helped to capture their longstanding commitment to strengthening Madison County communities.

Illinois American Water’s investment goes beyond dollars; it reflects a shared belief that lasting community well-being starts by supporting children and the families who nurture them.

In a statement provided for this newsletter, **Sarah A. Bowman**, Sr. Operations Manager for Illinois American Water – Central Division, shared:

*“Illinois American Water supports early education, family services, and community partnerships because we understand that strong communities don’t happen by accident; they’re built through long-term investment in people. Access to clean, reliable water is essential, but so is supporting the well-being of the families and children who make up the communities we serve.”*

She continued:

*“When young people have opportunities to learn and grow, and when families have resources to thrive, the entire community becomes more resilient. Early education lays the foundation for future success, and we see it as an extension of our commitment to public health and safety. Riverbend Head Start & Family Services ensures that households remain stable and strong, and community partnerships allow us to work hand in hand with local organizations that are already doing meaningful work.”*

Bowman added that for Illinois American Water, this contribution is more than a donation — it’s community support. It reflects the company’s belief that a utility’s responsibility extends beyond providing water; it includes investing in the people, partnerships, and future of the communities they serve every day.

We are deeply grateful for this generous gift and for Illinois American Water’s continued partnership. Their support directly strengthens the work we do with children and families across Madison County — helping build the strong, resilient communities we all want to see.

## A Legacy of Leadership: Veneta Wadlow's Commitment to Madison County Families



Veneta Wadlow (top left) along with Teacher's Assistant Pam Dayton and their class. The photo was taking during her first year working at Riverbend Head Start.



Pictured left to right: Mark Ellebracht, Big Z Radio; Veneta Wadlow, Sarah McGibany, Alton Main Street; RHSFS President/CEO Gene Howell

**Veneta serves on the IHSA and Region V boards where she proudly represents our staff in Illinois. She says it's an "honor" to help educate Congressional leaders about the impact of Head Start on families and the community.**



Senator Dick Durbin is photographed with Wadlow inside the White House



Senator Erica Harriss presents Wadlow with a proclamation during Showcase Week

## A Legacy of Leadership: Veneta Wadlow's Commitment to Children & Families

For more than 35 years, **Veneta Wadlow** has helped ensure that Riverbend Head Start & Family Services delivers safe, high-quality early childhood services to families throughout Madison County. As Center Operations Coordinator, Veneta's work sits at the intersection of quality and care—aligning policies with DCFS, ISBE\*, and Head Start Performance Standards, supporting site leaders, strengthening transportation procedures, and monitoring incidents to drive continuous improvement. It's detailed, diligent work that keeps our classrooms strong and our families supported.

Wadlow also champions professional standards across our sites—supporting staff in meeting INCCRRA\*\* requirements, which helps centers maintain Excelerate Illinois GOLD status. And her leadership extends beyond our region: she serves as president of both the **Illinois Head Start Association** (IHSA) and Region V boards, regularly educating Congressional leaders about Head Start's impact on children, families, and communities.

### Community voices on Veneta's impact

"Veneta's passion for Head Start is seen in everything she does. She gives 100% to everything she does and will do anything for you. Her role is compliance, which is not always popular, but she is diligent in meeting and exceeding excellence. Her mission is to create awareness of Head Start both locally and nationally. She will advocate for Head Start to anyone who will listen. Veneta's personal Head Start story defines what success looks like, I encourage anyone to ask her to tell you her story, it will impact you and help shape your understanding of why this program is so special to her."

— **Cathy Blevens**, Operations Director, Riverbend Head Start

"I had the great privilege of visiting Riverbend Head Start earlier this year, and it was an incredible experience, in large part due to Veneta. She has been a reliable and communicative partner, and I know we share the same passion for protecting Head Start funding and the life-changing impact it has on countless young students in our community. That commitment is evident in her work every day, and I hope every Head Start location has someone like Veneta."

— **Congresswoman Nikki Budzinski** (IL-13)

When asked what keeps her inspired after all these years, Veneta points to the mission:

"Knowing that I'm part of proven programming that impacts the future of children, families, and the community—while providing quality, caring, nurturing steps toward their future."

\*Illinois State Board of Education

\*\*INCCRRA: Illinois Network of Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies

## Board Member Spotlight: *Brett Briggs Invests in Families Through Volunteerism and Giving*



Riverbend Head Start & Family Services is grateful for the dedication and leadership of Board Member **Brett Briggs**, whose commitment to children and families extends far beyond the boardroom. As a longtime Madison County resident and a colleague at Associated Bank, Brett brings both professional expertise and a deep personal passion for strengthening his community.

Brett recently designated Riverbend Head Start & Family Services as the recipient of a personal volunteer-grant contribution in the amount of \$250. It's a gift inspired by his firsthand connection to the organization's mission.

"Living in Madison County, serving on the Riverbend Head Start board, and volunteering directly with Riverbend, I've seen the impact this organization has on our communities. The work is only possible with continued volunteer and financial support."

### **Community leadership at Associated Bank**

At Associated Bank, volunteerism isn't an afterthought — it's part of the culture. The bank's volunteer program, *Roots in Our Community*, encourages colleagues to support local nonprofits, whether through board service, financial education efforts, or hands-on volunteer projects.

In 2024 alone, colleagues contributed more than 60,000 volunteer hours, a community value of over \$2 million, demonstrating the bank's commitment to investing in the places where employees work and live.

One of Briggs' favorite experiences has been Associated Bank's annual Day of Service, where colleagues across the organization volunteer together in a coordinated effort. Having joined the bank in late 2024, 2025 marked Brett's first Day of Service — an experience he describes as inspiring and energizing.

### **Why Riverbend Head Start matters to him**

"Providing support to underserved families who may not otherwise have access to critical resources is essential to uplifting our entire community."

Brett believes deeply in Riverbend Head Start's role in creating stability, opportunity, and hope for families — and he sees his philanthropic support as a natural extension of that commitment.

### **A partner who leads by example**

In addition to his board service, Brett actively champions the mission of Riverbend Head Start & Family Services in his personal and professional circles. His volunteer grant, attributed personally at his request, reflects his belief that investing in children and families is one of the most meaningful ways to strengthen the future of Madison County.

We extend our sincere appreciation to Brett for his leadership, generosity, and ongoing support of the families we serve.

## Riverbend Head Start featured on KMOV's 'Great Day St. Louis' as a Finalist in the Ameren Power Play Goals for Kids Campaign



Riverbend Head Start & Family Services was honored to be selected as one of four regional finalists in the **Ameren Power Play Goals for Kids** campaign with the St. Louis Blues. It's a program created to highlight nonprofits making a meaningful impact on the health and well-being of children and families.

As part of the campaign, Riverbend was featured during a segment on **KMOV-TV's Great Day St. Louis**, where the finalists were introduced and celebrated for their work in the community. The exposure brought valuable awareness to our mission and allowed us to share the importance of early childhood education and family support services with a wider audience.

Although Riverbend was not selected as the grand-prize winner, we are proud to share that we were named one of three runners-up and will receive a \$1,000 donation to support the children and families we serve. This recognition reflects both the strength of our programs and the incredible support we receive from our community.

Throughout December and January, our staff, families, alumni, partners, and supporters rallied behind us—voting, sharing the campaign, and lifting our mission into the regional spotlight. Your enthusiasm helped elevate the agency's work and demonstrated the powerful role community advocacy plays in shaping brighter futures for families.

Thank you to everyone who helped spread the word. Your voice matters, and your support fuels the impact we make every day across Madison County.

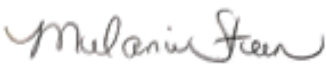
## From the Editor's Desk

Dear Riverbend Friends and Supporters,

As we move into spring, there is a renewed sense of energy and possibility across Riverbend Head Start & Family Services. This season always brings growth, but this year feels especially meaningful as we settle into our new central office on East Broadway. The transition has given our team, families, and community partners a brighter, more accessible space to learn, collaborate, and feel supported—and we're truly grateful for everyone who helped make this move possible.

This first quarter has been full of momentum: new partnerships, new opportunities for our children and families, and new ways of showing up for the community we serve. And as we near the close of our Program calendar in May, we carry forward the same commitment that has guided us for more than a century—ensuring every child has the chance to learn, grow, and thrive.

Thank you for walking alongside us, season after season. Your support continues to strengthen the families of Madison County, and we look forward to all that lies ahead.



Melanie Steen  
Public Relations & Development Director



***“As we settle into our new space and move into spring, we’re grateful for the continued support that makes our work possible.”***

Proud member of

United Way  
of Greater St. Louis

