

Riverbend Friends



GOOD NEWS FOR SUPPORTERS OF RIVERBEND HEAD START & FAMILY SERVICES

Q2 2025 | NEWSLETTER

President's Message



Greetings Friends,

As we look back over the recent months there has been a great deal of activity, progress and success all mixed together.

In the spring, we had great concerns about the funding future of Head Start. But after a great deal of education and advocacy work, we are delighted that the current Administration sees the value of Head Start as the program continues to invest in our nation's future. Though, like every administration, we believe that this Administration's priorities will be advanced through changes to our program, and we are excited that after celebrating its 60th birthday, Head Start has a bright and healthy future!

After many years of work, we have finally begun construction to renovate our new administrative offices and transportation hub/shop at the Alton Plaza. It's located next to the Alton Police Department and where our Essic Robinson Head Start center has been for over 30 years. We hope that renovations and our move will be complete in October, so that we can get settled in just before the winter weather hits. We have been blessed with support from our funding source as well as the lease holders for our administrative offices and transportation hub being flexible with us as we navigate this change.

Next, through quality improvement funds received from our Illinois **Pre-School for All Expansion** grant, we are able to implement salary recommendations from our independently conducted salary survey ensuring that our employees are competitively compensated throughout the metro east. This will allow us to continue to stabilize our staffing and build the critical institutional knowledge that our legacy of quality services has been built upon.

Finally, we completed our monitoring cycle with a recommendation for a renewed five-year funding cycle to bring Head Start and Early Head Start to our community without having to compete for our grant. Many thanks to our volunteers, community, Board of Directors, families, staff and administration for working so well together to ensure that quality services and outcomes were the headline of our federal monitoring visit - ensuring access to our services for years to come.

Take care and be well,

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

President & CEO
Riverbend Head Start & Family Services

The 3rd Annual Back-to-School & Donor Appreciation Event
Scheduled for Tuesday, August 5th



Riverbend Head Start & Family Services (RHSFS) is pleased to host its 3rd annual Donor Appreciation and Back-to-School celebration on Tuesday, August 5th from 4:00 to 6:00 p.m. at the Vera Lee Meeting & Event Venue in Alton.

In addition to our donors and corporate sponsors, Alton Mayor **David Goins** has confirmed his attendance, along with Police Chief **Jarrett Ford**.

‘It is without a doubt that we don’t say thank you enough or have the opportunity to personally thank those who believe in us the most,’ said President/CEO **Gene Howell**. “We look forward to seeing our mission partners on August 5th for the opportunity to thank them as we embark on our upcoming school year that’s filled with a world of possibilities.”

Our efforts to help families overcome generational poverty are successful because of the support of our caring and committed donors, volunteers and community partners.

Guest speakers this year include President/CEO **Gene Howell**, Board Vice Chair **Damian Jones**, Madison County Coroner **Nick Novacich**, RHSFS Policy Council parent **Samantha Jolliff**, and RHSFS Mental Health Specialist, **Tasha Meeks**. RHSFS Board Secretary **Megan Schranck** will serve as the program’s emcee.

People Making a Difference: Conner Foust, IT Technician



This past March, IT Technician **Conner Foust** marked two years with the agency. He's currently based at our Central Office location in Alton.

His responsibilities include: maintaining and troubleshooting computers and the network, providing technical support to teachers and staff, onboarding new hires, and training staff on new technologies and software.

"Conner is one of the most helpful, kind and patient individuals to work with," says Operations Director **Cathy Blevens**. "My experiences with him have always been positive, and I have never had an issue that he was not able to support. Conner is always available and never makes you feel like your issue or concern is irrelevant."

There's no arguing that Conner's cool-under-pressure demeanor can help put anyone at ease. Even so, the job does have its share of challenges, even for him.

"One challenge is handling multiple issues simultaneously, especially during peak times like the start of the school year," says Foust. "Another challenge is trying to keep up-to-date with new technology."

One recent project that he's proud of is the handling, setup and distribution of all the cell phones for the Family Advocates.

"It was nice to see a project through on my own, from start to finish," he says.

"Conner is consistently pleasant when approached, ensuring interactions are both enjoyable and stress-free," says IS Director **Connie Paruch**. "His eagerness to assist, combined with his patience, has earned him a reputation as a reliable and delightful colleague. He is a true blessing to our department and the agency!"



Foust is just one of the unsung heroes in the IS Department, who take pride in the work they do in keeping their colleagues up and running efficiently.

"The best part of my job is making your job easier," says Foust. "Anytime I solve someone's problem, I feel good. I may not directly make a difference, but I make it easier for those who do."

His humility and ability to go above and beyond in troubleshooting a problem is what leaves a lasting impression on his co-workers.

"When I think of mission partners, Conner is always living our mission, offering support," says **Cathy Blevens**. "Every day he has impacted some staff member at Riverbend Head Start in a positive way."

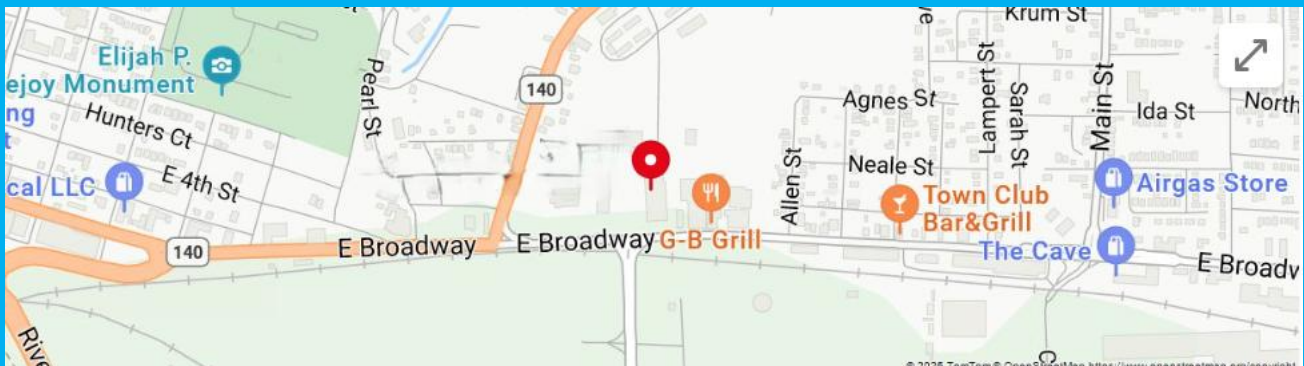
WORK IS UNDERWAY...

Check out the Alton Plaza building! This will be the home to our new administrative offices and transportation hub/shop. As you can see from the photos below, demolition is now underway. It should be complete within the next 2-3 weeks. The next phase of construction will be new sewer lines, and concrete work. Once that's complete, the walls will start going up. We will continue to provide regular updates as the project moves along!



BEFORE PICS

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



Happy Birthday Head Start!

The Head Start Project launched on May 18, 1965 as a comprehensive child development program. Over the last six decades, it has provided a window of opportunity to more than 40 million vulnerable children and their families. The program has provided better health, better preparation for kindergarten, and a greater likelihood of graduating high school and going on to post-secondary education.*

Head Start locations throughout the U.S. proudly celebrated Head Start's 60th birthday by spreading the word about the monumental impact the program is having on children and their families, as well as our communities and in neighborhoods throughout the U.S. For our part, Riverbend Head Start employees gathered during our Staff Appreciation picnic on Friday, May 23rd to wish the program a happy 60th birthday in grand fashion. We recorded a drone video with the entire staff saying "Happy Birthday Head Start" which was complete with noisemakers. To date, the video has been viewed about 10,000 times through our social media channels. It was a fun way to celebrate the program, and to mark the conclusion of another successful school year. ❤️

To watch the video on YouTube, click here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=idNK9YkfWjY>

**Source: National Head Start Association, NHSA*





Connie Gray, pictured left, is a Bus Driver at the Granite City South location.

Connie Gray was hired at the agency in January 2024 as a Bus Driver for Granite City South (GCS). Her primary responsibility is to provide safe and reliable transportation for our most precious cargo - to and from GCS.

As most of our employees can attest to, Connie says the best part about working here is the kids!

"Getting to know each and every child on my bus and their families is the best," says Gray. "It's amazing, the connections that are made during a 2-to-5-minute exchange with families. Each child has a different personality that often times can come with incredible stories to share, and stuffed babies that I'm required to pet and talk to as well."

In addition to the children, Gray looks forward to seeing her colleagues every day.

"Granite City South has a great staff, they're very helpful and work with us to accomplish the fulfillment of the Riverbend mission," says Gray. "I also have the best Bus Monitor (Carla Frazier), that makes my job so much easier."

"Connie's excitement and commitment to her job everyday shows through her interactions with the kids and their parents," says Lead Family Advocate **Paige Simmons**. "Connie is so positive and welcoming to every child that walks through the door. She connects with all of them. She is such a positive light to coworkers and other staff, making sure to greet everyone and to see how they're doing. It's clear that she loves her job and appreciates the uniqueness of each child."

Even though she's got a sunny disposition, Gray says that one challenge that comes with the job is when the kids show up having a "rainy day" as she calls it.

"Sometimes, it's due to changes at home or difficulties at home which causes them to struggle with how to make good choices," she says. "Helping them navigate that while still fulfilling my number one responsibility can sometimes prove to be challenging. However, keeping the mission in mind helps me to remember why I'm here, but I hope they know that I see and hear them. I hope it helps, even if just a little bit."





The **Freer Auto Body's** 'Christmas in July' raffle is now over. This year, they raised more than \$76K! It's a new record total for the raffle, now in its 16th year.

The raffle was created to help raise money for the United Way's Community Christmas, which benefits local nonprofits, including Riverbend Head Start.

For just a small \$10 investment, ticket buyers were entered into a drawing to win cash prizes, food, or a getaway. The raffle began in mid-May and concluded on Friday, July 18th with a sloppy joe lunch and prize drawing at **Freer Auto Body** in Godfrey.

Last year's campaign directly supported our efforts to ensure that every Head Start child and family felt our community's love in the form of \$10K shopping spree at Target.

In the past, our agency has benefitted from the campaign for both family sponsorships and items - such as baby cribs and car seats.

Once again, we thank you for your generosity in purchasing raffle tickets. It's the gift that keeps on giving!

Christmas in July FREER Raffle FREER \$10.00 Each

\$3500 Cash

donated by Axalta Coatings and PRS

7 nights 2BR, 2 bath condo, sleeps 5, Ft. Morgan, AL
donor anonymous*

5 Nights in the heart of Pigeon Forge TN 3 BR Cabin
donated by Monica, Melvin & Nick Bristow*

7 nights Balltown, CO cabin sleeps 6-8
donated by Annette Griebel*

4 Cardinal Green Seats 8/11/25, Cards vs Rockies
donated by Jayne and John Simmons

One side of beef
donated by Shane and Tiffany Seiler

\$1000 Cash
donated by Freer Auto Body

* Mutually agreed date

Name: _____

Phone # _____

Winners to be Announced at July 18th event
Make checks payable to: Community Christmas

"We are more than overjoyed with the success this year and we attribute it to a kind, caring and giving community. All of the items – printing, food and advertising is donated, so 100% stays right in our area, helping our agencies and families. So many small businesses stepped up and donated this year! It is always nice for the agencies to participate, and Head Start has always helped. We love watching/assisting the agencies shop. On Christmas morning, our hearts are full knowing many are experiencing the magic of Christmas because of a huge joint community effort. Thank you for all you do, keep taking care of those babies."

-Margaret Freer, Freer Auto Body



Sharon Figge Bus Driver

Sharon Figge joined the agency in late March of 2024 as a Bus Driver. Her responsibilities include: inspecting her school bus in order to maintain a safe transportation experience for our students. She is also charged with making sure the bus ride is comfortable and an overall pleasant experience for the children we serve.

"I always listen and observe our students when they're in our care," says Figge. "I try and recognize when a child needs extra attention during difficult situations/circumstances and to provide comfort and direction as needed."

Other employees have witnessed firsthand how Figge goes the extra mile for her students.

"Sharon gets off the bus and walks with her kids into the school," says Vehicles & Facilities Director, **Matt East**. "She is a TRUE asset to the agency."

Figge doesn't mind going above and beyond for the little ones, who bring so much joy to her job.

"I just love seeing their bright, cheerful smiles, and interacting with them and their families," says Figge. "I hope I make it a great experience for everyone."



"Sharon is an example of someone who really cares about the children she transports daily. I have repeatedly witnessed her going above and beyond with the kids. She greets them with a smile, and drops them off with a smile. She truly cares, and it shows daily."

— Matt East
Vehicles & Facilities Director



Samantha Becerra

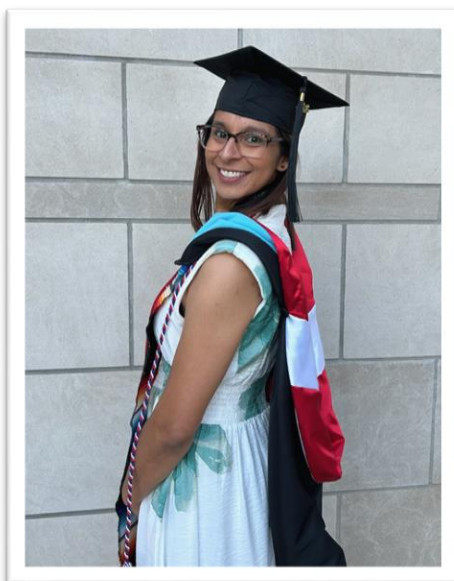


You could say the past few months have been quite the whirlwind for **Samantha Becerra**. In May, the Bethalto Teacher graduated with her Master's Degree.

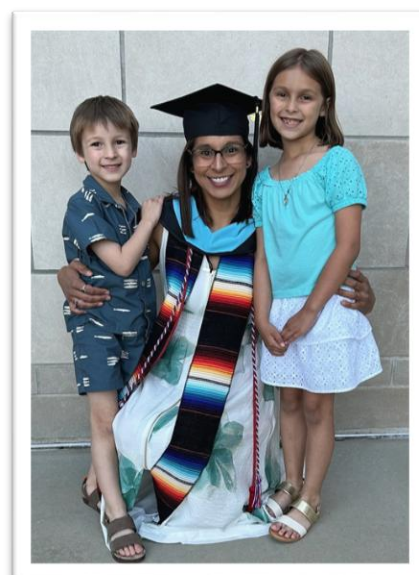
Becerra graduated from SIUE – Southern Illinois University at Edwardsville. The ceremony was held on Friday, May 9th. She earned a Master's Degree in Science and Education, with a major in Diversity and Equity in Education.

"It's always been my passion to make sure every child feels seen and heard in their school/classroom environment, and I wanted to make sure I had the resources and knowledge to do that," she says. "My secondary goal was to make sure I had the knowledge to continue to teach social-emotional and conflict resolution skills to our youngest learners. These are important life skills that I think get overlooked all too often at the early childhood level. I am grateful for the opportunity to continue to work with our youngest population to help set the building blocks for a healthy and productive life ahead."

Then in June, Becerra was promoted to Center Supervisor of Bethalto. The promotion went into effect on Monday, June 30th. Congratulations on your recent achievements!



Samantha Becerra on graduation day



Becerra's kids attend her May 9th graduation



Tasha Meeks

PROFESSIONALS Under 40

The Professionals Under 40 will honor up to 20 local and exceptional business and community leaders under 40 years of age. These are people on the fast track to great accomplishments!



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Our own **Tasha Meeks** was recently recognized as a one of the Top 20 Professionals Under 40. Meeks is a Mental Health Specialist at Central Office in Alton.

Nominations for the Top Professionals Under 40 recognition were accepted through The Telegraph and the RiverBend Growth Association. The purpose is to spotlight outstanding individuals making a difference within their communities. To be eligible, nominees must be younger than 40 as of May 1, 2025, and live within The Telegraph's coverage area.

The special section honored rising leaders who are making their mark in business, education, healthcare, the arts, nonprofit work, or civic life. Each of those being honored had their bio and photo featured in the publication.

Meeks was nominated and selected based on her work in early childhood mental health, her commitment to community service, and her leadership and dedication within the community.

"As a former Head Start student who now leads the mental health services for our agency, this recognition is deeply personal," she says. "It symbolizes the power of investing in families early, and how support and opportunity can change the entire trajectory of someone's life. I love what I do and I am living out my **why** of being the person, and supporting the people that I once needed as a child."

The article was featured in the June 28th edition of the Edwardsville Intelligencer and the Alton Telegraph. The full list can also be viewed here: <https://tinyurl.com/2025-Professionals-Under-40>

A Letter from the Editor



Dear Riverbend Friends and Supporters,

There's no doubt about it, summer is here! It's a time to catch up with friends and family, or to relax and have some fun – while trying to beat the heat. As always, we appreciate your ongoing support of this newsletter, the agency, and our mission of helping local kids and their families.

As you make your summer plans, we hope you'll keep Head Start in mind. We're in the final planning stages of our Back-to-School and Donor Appreciation celebration, now in its third year.

The event will be held on **Tuesday, August 5th**. Once again, the theme is Taco Tuesday. An invitation is enclosed inside this newsletter.

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

Corporate sponsorship opportunities are still available. If your company is interested in sponsoring our fundraiser, please reach out to me directly at (618) 463-8913, or by email at msteen@riverbendfamilies.org.

Once again, we thank you for caring about Head Start and Early Head Start - and showing your ongoing support for the families we proudly serve!

Melanie Steen
Public Relations & Development Director

Riverbend Head Start & Family Services

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