

Greetings,

The past few weeks have provided evidence of how much love has surrounded the children and families we serve by a community who cares. We are blessed to be in partnership with so many caring individuals and groups.

In November, we were blessed by community members who provided families with full turkey dinners for their holiday - ensuring that while they were giving thanks, those less fortunate neighbors were empowered to have a similar experience in their homes.

In early December, we were surprised by a delivery of nearly 200 coats and a cash donation from the **Alton/Godfrey Rotary Club**. Additionally, the **Rotary Club of the Riverbend Alton/Godfrey** hosted their regular meeting at Essic Robinson (pictured right). The Club provided a donation that purchased 20 safe sleep kits which can prevent infant sleep-related deaths by educating parents on the importance of safe sleep along with providing a crib for those who do not have them.

This reminds me of an African proverb *"the child who does not feel the warm embrace of the village will burn it down to feel its warmth"*. Our young children and families need the connection, love and embrace of community and we are so proud to be among community who so willingly wraps our families in love and care as they grow and mature.

Thank you,



Gene Howell/President & CEO

Rotary Club Donates Safe Sleep Kits to Early Head Start

The **Rotary Club of the Riverbend Alton & Godfrey** recently donated \$2,500+ to Riverbend Head Start for the purchase of safe sleep kits.

Members of the Rotary Club held their monthly meeting at the Essic Robinson Head Start site on Thursday, December 7th. While there, they were given a presentation by Health Specialist **Casey Cope** on the importance of these safe sleep kits. They also toured the facility and were able to get an up close look at the mission in motion.

Through their donation, 20 safe sleep kits (12 English, 8 Spanish) were purchased for our Early Head Start families. The kits include: a Cribs for Kids® Cribette®, Snoozzzette™ Sleep Sack, Cribette® Sheet with Safe Sleep Message, ABCs of Safe Sleep Photo Magnet, Philips Soothie Pacifier, Cribs for Kids Step-Down Booklet, and Sleep Baby Safe and Snug Children's Book.



Members of the Rotary Club of Riverbend Alton/Godfrey pictured with Health Specialist Casey Cope (far left) and President/CEO Gene Howell.

Delta Dental Donates \$20,000 to the RHSFS Dental Program



Pictured from left: Gene Howell, Michelle Baalman, Casey Cope, Lora Vitek



Pictured from left: Mayor David Goins, Gene Howell, Lora Vitek and Abe Jones

On Wednesday, November 15th a check presentation was held at central office with the Delta Dental of Illinois Foundation. Executive Director **Lora Vitek** traveled from Naperville, IL to deliver a \$20K donation and take part in a meet and greet with employees and local dignitaries.

Delta Dental has been a longtime supporter of the agency and our dental program. This year's donation exceeded last year's gift of \$10,000. Vitek spoke about their commitment to helping the dental program in any way possible, and indicated they could also provide toothbrushes for children to use in the classrooms.

Others in attendance for the check presentation included **Alton Mayor David Goins** and **Abe Jones**, a representative of **Congresswoman Nikki Budzinski's** office. Local reporters with the Telegraph and Riverbender.com provided media coverage for their respective outlets. A link(s) to these articles are currently posted on our website.

Danielle Jackson is a newer member of the Family Advocate team at Granite City South, and according to her colleagues she's been working hard ever since she started.

"Danielle has done a tremendous job stepping up and being a listening ear for her families," says Lead Family Advocate Paige Simmons. "She is consistently going above and beyond to meet the needs of her children and families on her caseload, all with a smile on her face."

In addition to her positive, can-do attitude, Jackson's colleagues call her a **Learning Genie Rockstar!**

"I will have to admit that at first I did not like Learning Genie and thought that it was difficult and a waste of time," says Danielle Jackson. "After a few days of exploring all the many features and receiving assistance from my team I started to see Learning Genie as a tool. It helped me navigate my week as well as my daily visits with my families."



Danielle Jackson
Family Advocate, Granite City South

A description of her duties includes: working independently with assigned families and cohesively as a member of their assigned center. She also conducts home visits with children and their families, collaborates with teaching teams to bridge communication between home and school, learn & play groups and parent meetings. She provides resource information and incorporates goal-setting with families. In addition, she engages families as full partners in their child's development and works to strengthen the child-parent relationship.

"The best part about my job is that I get to be of assistance to many families in the Granite City community," says Jackson. "I get to have the opportunity to make a positive difference in the life and future of a child and their family."

But, Jackson admits the job is not without its share of challenges.

"Knowing that I am only one person and I can only do so much," says Jackson. "There's a saying *it takes a village to raise a child* and I just hope that with my efforts and support that the village sees the importance of that child and shows up."

Riverbend Head Start & Family Services: The RBGA's Spotlight Agency for November 2023



Front row: Janice Hoene, Connie Paruch, Melanie Steen, Shannon Ickler-Wolfe
Back row: Karla Hurley, Gene Howell, Tobbi Tyson, Amica McIntee, Sydney Fowler, Chuck Hancock

On Friday, November 17th, a handful of employees at central office were available to receive an award from the **Riverbend Growth Association (RBGA)**. Our agency was selected as the RBGA's Nonprofit Member Mission Spotlight agency for November.

As a part of this honor, we were featured in the RBGA's weekly email blasts. We were also featured on the homepage of their website: <https://growthassociation.com/>. In addition, we received social media exposure through the RBGA's Facebook and LinkedIn channels. And lastly, our President & CEO Gene Howell took part in a radio interview with WBGZ radio on November 21st discussing the award (see next page).

The award is proudly displayed in the reception area at central office on the 3rd floor.



Riverbend Head Start & Family Services

RBGA Nonprofit Member Mission Spotlight

November 2023

Riverbend Head Start & Family Services:
The RBGA's Spotlight Agency for November 2023



Riverbend Head Start & Family Services

Established 1916

Whom do you serve?

Families with children (birth through 5 yrs.) qualify for the program if they live below the federal poverty line, if the child has a disability, or if they're involved with the Dept. of Children and Family Services

Mission

To empower children and families to develop positive skills to meet life's challenges. The agency provides Head Start and Early Head Start programs for families in Madison County, IL.

Currently, we operate six centers:

- Essic Robinson Head Start at 1802 E. Broadway in Alton
- Bethalto Head Start at 225 James St.
- Collinsville Head Start Center at 5 Crestmont Dr.
- Edwardsville Head Start Center at 710 N. Main
- Granite City North Head Start Ctr. at 2413 Corporate Center Dr.
- Granite City South Head Start Ctr. at 1249 20th St.

Our story

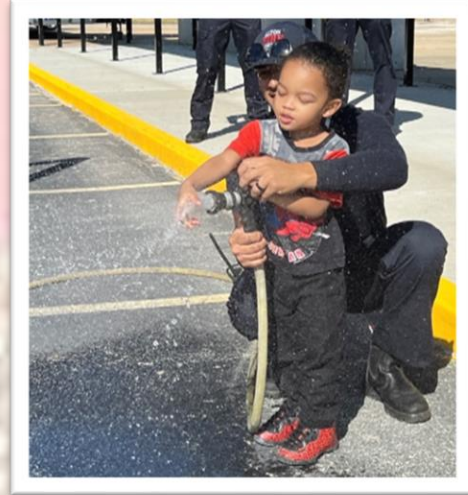
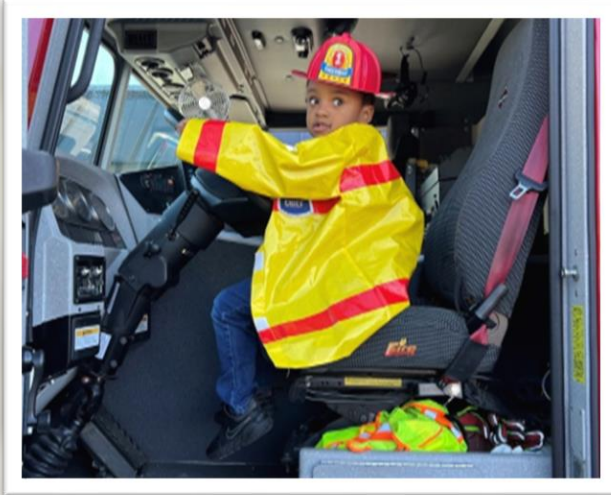
For more than 105 years, Riverbend Head Start & Family Services (RHSFS) has embodied itself in a mission of serving families in Madison County, IL. We have a proud history of caring for our local children and their families. RHSFS offers support in these four core areas: Child Development, Family Support, Health and Nutrition, and Parental Involvement. Head Start and Early Head Start are locally-operated and federally-funded programs that provide high-quality early childhood education for income-eligible families. Families voluntarily enroll their children in our programs because they want to improve their lives. Our qualified teachers create a safe, healthy environment where kids can learn the skills necessary to be successful in kindergarten and beyond. RHSFS prides itself in teaching children, strengthening families and enhancing our communities.

www.RiverbendFamilies.org | 618-463-5946
550 Landmarks Blvd. 3rd Fl. | Alton, IL 62002



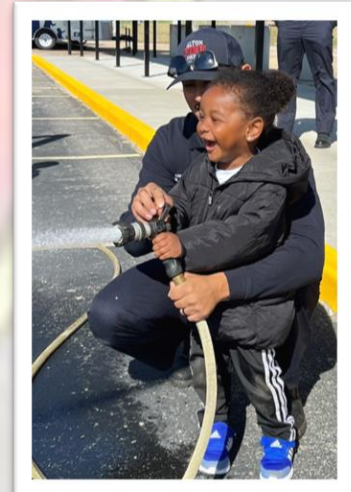
On Tuesday, November 21st, **Gene Howell** joined RBGA President **John Keller** and radio host **Mark Ellebracht** to discuss the RBGA's award and to provide the latest news on Head Start

The Alton Fire Department Visits RHSFS to Discuss Fire Prevention Week



Some members of the **Alton Fire Department** visited with staff and students at our Essic Robinson Head Start location on Tuesday, October 17th. Their visit was a to discuss fire safety and prevention. It was also a way to connect with the community.

Two groups of firefighters visited with the site. The first was at 9:00 am, the second group arrived at 1:30 pm. The children were allowed to get inside the fire truck and look around. They also got to play and splash around in the water, which they really enjoyed!



RHSFS Team Goes Shopping at Target Thanks to Community Partners

Each year, **Freer Auto Body** in Godfrey, IL, hosts their 'Christmas in July' fundraiser for the **United Way of Greater St. Louis** Christmas program. The money raised helps to fund a shopping trip for some local non-profits, including Riverbend Head Start and Family Services.

Just as we did last year, our staff made the early morning trek to Target in Alton to pick out gifts. This year, they went to Target on Monday, December 4th. They were able to purchase even more presents for our Head Start families! This included toys, clothing and some much-needed personal care items.

We are thankful to our community partners, **Freer Auto Body** and the **United Way of Greater St. Louis**. Because of your generosity, our families are having a very Merry Christmas!



Riverbend East Rotary Extends Invitation to RHSFS

In October, **The Riverbend East Rotary Club** extended an invitation to the agency to attend their weekly meeting and give a presentation/introduction.

The luncheon was held at Julia's Banquet Center in East Alton on Thursday, October 19th.

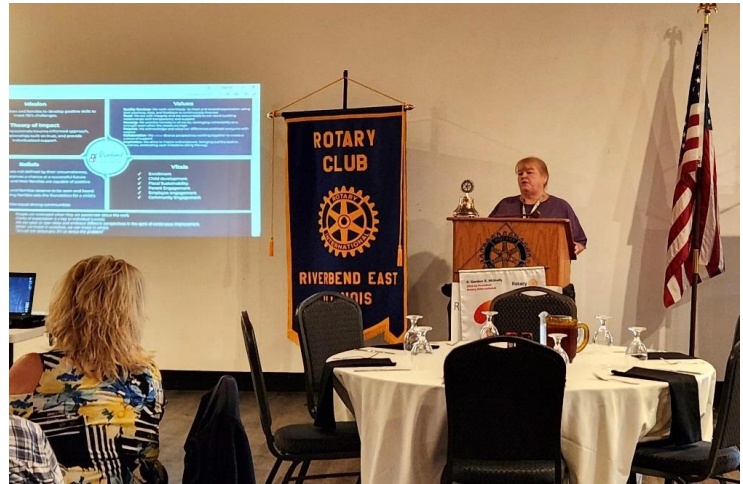
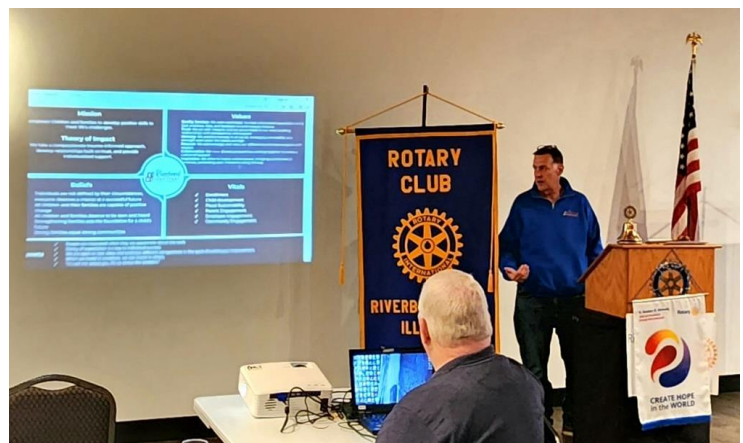
The Riverbend East Rotary Club includes members from the greater East Alton/Wood River/Roxana area(s).

President & CEO **Gene Howell** and Teacher **Lisa Nolan** attended the luncheon and gave the group a very informative, yet moving introduction to the agency and all the ways we're helping our families.

Gene discussed the agency's Compass (Mission, Values, Beliefs and Vitals) and how important it is to approach each and every day with these tenets in mind.

Lisa told the story of the expectant Mom who needed beds for her children, and food to eat. She recalled the story she shared during our August in-service of how employees sprang into action and worked tirelessly to make sure the family had everything they needed, including dishes and eating utensils.

Needless to say, the audience was very moved as Lisa recounted the story, and the positive outcome for the family.



Riverbend Head Start & Family Services is Committed to DEI (Diversity, Equity & Inclusion)



Pictured from left to right, back row: Zakiya Hill, Jennifer Blankenship, Hannah Hook, Ruthie Davis, Tasha Meeks and Seth Filtz. Pictured on the front row from left to right: Melanie Steen and Precious Frazier.

This fall, Riverbend Head Start created a DEI Committee that's comprised of employees representing all six of our Head Start sites, plus central office.

The committee is proactively working to promote equity with an inclusive, anti-biased and non-discriminatory atmosphere where everyone finds a place of belonging, feels welcome and valued, and is seen for their unique contributions and qualities. Previously, the agency contracted an external DEI consulting firm, which collaborated with the agency over the past couple of years.

The consulting firm was able to provide us with a better understanding of the needs of the agency and helped to lay the groundwork for the new committee. On Monday, October 30th, our internal committee held its very first meeting. A second meeting was held on Friday, December 8th. To date, the committee has come together to bring forth a wide scope of initiatives to fit the agency's culture. There are a total of 13 employees on the committee, including the organizer, **Precious Frazier**, Human Resources Coordinator.

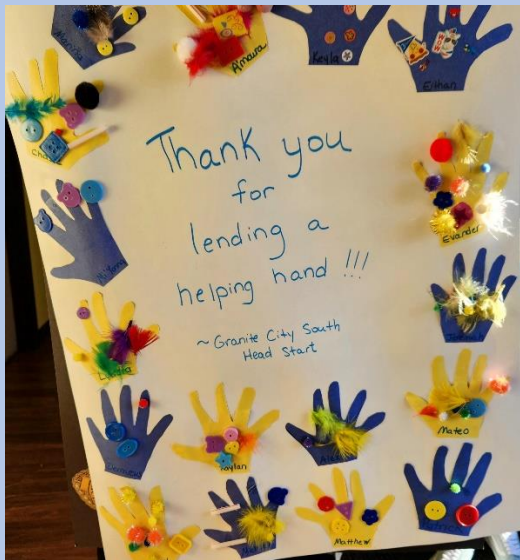
"Bringing DEI into our agency will allow us to get ahead of some initiatives, trends, and even concerns," says Frazier. "We will also be able to assure that we are working from the inside out to best meet our needs."

Implementing DEI initiatives internally has had a positive outlook on the agency so far. It provides direction on how we can boost and maintain a positive work environment, a desirable culture, raise awareness, maximize empowerment for all employees, and continue to improve morale. DEI also leads to better retention and recruitment, as it creates a workplace that is more welcoming to employees and potential employees.

"We are excited to have a group of committed staff working to build an inclusive atmosphere where everyone feels welcome and appreciated," said Riverbend Head Start President/CEO Gene Howell. "With this effort, we hope to celebrate our diversity more than look back at missed opportunities."

There is no finish line when it comes to addressing and advancing Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion. Its ongoing purpose will be to help promote a culture of inclusion for everyone.

Granite City Police Chief Visits Granite City South



Granite City Police Chief Visits Granite City South

The newly appointed Police Chief in Granite City, Col. Nick Novacich visited with the staff and students at GCS on Monday, October 23rd. He joined the Department in June 2000 and was promoted to Police Chief in September 2023. In his brand-new role, he wanted to visit RHSFS to reintroduce himself to the community.

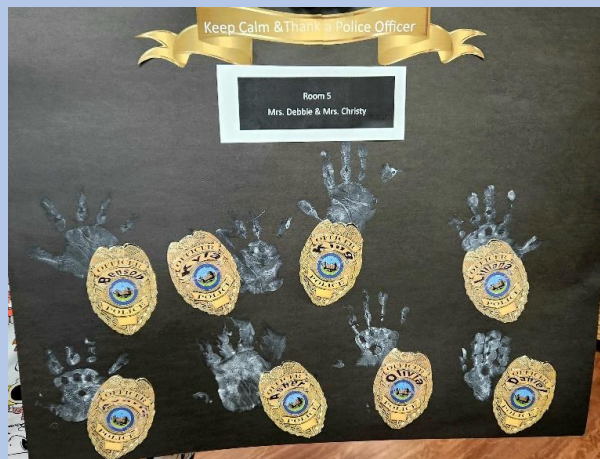
“I like any chance I can get to talk to kids - reach out to the community and just be involved in the community,” says Chief Novacich. “It’s a big thing for me.”

Chief Novacich grew up in Granite City, so he’s invested in the area and its residents.

“As a police officer more times than not I get to see all the negative things,” says Chief Novacich. “But when I get to do something like this, it reminds me of why I get out of bed every morning.”

After chatting with the students, he gave them all a police badge sticker to wear. In turn, the kids surprised Novacich with a pair of posters they made to welcome him to Head Start. During their visit, the kids were led outside to see the patrol car with its flashing lights – which they really enjoyed!

Chief Novacich also spoke separately with President/CEO **Gene Howell** and Facilities Director **Matt East** about safety enhancements both in and outside of the building. Since Novacich’s visit in October, we’re pleased to report that those safety recommendations have since been implemented.



Charles Parr Empowerment Essay Award winner – 2023

Margaret Cline



Pictured from left: Margaret Cline, Charles Parr Empowerment Essay Winner. Tonya Holmes, Lead Family Advocate (Collinsville)

Margaret Cline writes in her essay,

I could say time flies by, but in reality, it's my daughters who are flying. More like soaring! When I think back to when they were newborns (then crawlers, sitters and cruisers) they gave me an abundance of confidence in my parenting. If I offered a new food, they loved it! If I played a new game, I was fascinating! If I gave them a new toy, I was a hero! Life before preschool was a breeze.

It was then I noticed my daughter's might be having challenges and possible delays in some areas. I quickly realized I am not an expert in many things. I thought it was a good idea to seek out options and resources. That's where Head Start came in. I was instantly impressed! The center was clean and well-organized. They offered a variety of learning in everything from art, to reading, to pretend play.

Two of my daughters attend the center-based program and one daughter is enrolled in the home-based program. Right from the beginning, I saw how the center helped my shy, unsure daughter become confident in her abilities. Her "can-do" attitude came from teachers that really cared about her success and allowed her to strengthen her skills. Because Head Start encourages learning through play in the many centers, offers choice based on the child's interest, my daughter has built self-esteem, and even set goals.

Head Start is a tremendous support for my daughter's social and emotional development. Currently, she makes friends everywhere we go and enjoys the responsibility of caring for herself and her belongings. The home-based program taught me how to turn everyday routines and common household objects into learning and relationship building. Head Start has not only been a benefit to my children, but also to us as a family.

Head Start encourages family relationships and individual strengths. Head Start even encourages relationships between school and community. Head Start is more than education, it's the village all families need!

Story Smart is Helping to Tell Our Story...Again!



On Monday, November 13th, the local video production company, Story Smart, visited our Bethalto Head Start location to record interviews and video for another series of agency videos. The company previously recorded a series of videos at Essic Robinson and Central Office in early April. The video series has been recognized by the **Illinois Head Start Association** and the **National Head Start Association**.

The new series will focus on entirely different topics. They will include: Early Head Start, Nutrition, Dental/Eye Exams, Transportation (bus plan), a Donor Thank you, and how Head Start is Transformative. Those interviewed in November include: President/CEO **Gene Howell**, Vehicle/Facilities Director **Matt East**, Center Operations Coordinator **Veneta Wadlow**, and Family Advocate **Lindsey Arico**.

The videos are finalized and we will begin releasing them on social media in January 2024.

Donna Harbaugh

Lead Family Advocate, Bethalto



Donna Harbaugh has worn a lot of hats since starting at Head Start 36 ½ years ago. Her first day was May 15, 1987 to be exact. Since joining the team, she's been a Teacher, Child Care Supervisor, Acting Center Supervisor, and a Case Manager. Harbaugh was also the Center Supervisor at the now defunct East Alton Head Start.



In her role as Family Advocate her duties include: planning for weekly home visits with families, collaborating with teaching teams to bridge the communication between home and school, learn & play groups, and parent meetings. In addition, she supports families by providing resource information and incorporating goal setting with them.

Harbaugh takes great pride in engaging families as full partners in their child's development, and working to strengthen the child-parent relationship. She also helps out at the center as needed.

"We describe her as like the owl of our center, she's so wise," says Sarah Hettinger, Bethalto Center Supervisor. "She knows everything, she's seen everything. She's got the best advice for working with parents and kids alike, the parents relate to her well. The activities she comes up with are great."

So, what does Harbaugh enjoy most about being a Family Advocate?

"Being with the children," she says. "And working on being a role model with their parents."

Harbaugh has a unique way with the kids, some of them even call her grandma! But she doesn't mind, she welcomes it. In fact, she wants to help them all, which can sometimes lead to frustration.

"Not being able to get some of the resources to help parents," says Harbaugh. "Since COVID, it does not seem that there's enough money to fund a lot of the resources. Housing is also big issue as we try to get help for the families."

On Monday, December 4th Harbaugh was promoted from Family Advocate to Lead Family Advocate at our Bethalto location.



RHSFS invited to Family Night for Phillips 66 Wood River Refinery

The United Way of Greater St. Louis, on behalf of the Phillips 66 Wood River Refinery, reached out in September to invite United Way agencies to participate in its annual Employee Night. Riverbend Head Start and Family Services gladly accepted and took part in the event on Thursday, October 19th. The event was held at the Robert E. Glazebrook Park, in front of the Great Godfrey Maze.

President/CEO **Gene Howell** and Family Advocate (Essic Robinson) **Hannah Hook** volunteered to host a table on behalf of the agency. Since the event was held in late October, anything fall-related and Halloween were the unofficial theme of the event. Gene and Hannah gave away squishy school buses, coloring books, crayons, candy, and toothbrushes for the kids that stopped by. In spite of the chilly temperatures and drizzle, hundreds of people were in attendance.

A big hit at the event were the free bags of flavored popcorn. To add to the fall festive atmosphere, small children were happily pulled around by a tractor, with multiple cars in tow, and there were some folks that dared to enter into the Great Godfrey Maze during the evening event!

Approximately 530 people attended Family Night this year according to organizer **Kate Bennett**, Community Affairs Coordinator with Phillips 66 Wood River Refinery.

A Note from the Editor



Dear Riverbend Friends and Supporters,

It's hard to believe that 2023 is coming to a close! We hope you've enjoyed our final newsletter of the year.

It has certainly been a year of transitions. We went entirely digital with our newsletter in an effort to be more environmentally friendly and to be cost-conscious as postage, printing and associated costs continue to rise.

In spite of the rising cost of the essentials, you never wavered in your support of Head Start, Early Head Start and our mission of empowering children and families to develop positive skills to meet life's challenges.

Whether you supported the agency with an in-person donation of kids coats or clothing, we say **thank you**. If you made an individual monetary donation, we say **thank you**. If you spent hours as a volunteer at one of our Head Start sites, we say **thank you**. Or if you pledged your support as a corporate sponsor, we say **thank you**.

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.

If you would like to see the mission in action, feel free to email me at: msteen@riverbendfamilies.org. And once again, thank you for your involvement in Head Start, and showing your support in 2023!

Melanie Steen
Public Relations & Development Director

Annual Thanksgiving Turkey Dinner Donation to RHSFS Continues in November



Team Turkey Day includes founders Mike & Michaela Klassner along with members of Alton Pride

On Monday, November 20th, members of Team Turkey Day, otherwise known as **Mike and Michaela Klassner**, along with members of **Alton Pride** and other volunteers donated 55 turkey dinners to our Head Start families in need.

The Klassners have been providing turkey dinners to Head Start for the past several years, and the donation just keeps growing each year! The effort initially started with eight turkey dinners.

In addition to Head Start, the group donated turkey dinners and food items to the **Crisis Center** and to the **Boys & Girls Club**.

This is another great example of community partners coming together to help others!

Riverbend Head Start & Family Services

550 Landmarks Blvd., 3rd Floor
Alton, IL 62002
(618) 463-5946
www.riverbendfamilies.org

