



# NEWSLETTER

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



Greetings Friends!

Now that 2026 has arrived, we find ourselves in both exciting and anxious times. Soon, our administrative offices and transportation hub will relocate to a newly renovated space at the Alton Plaza. It's a very exciting and wonderful opportunity for the agency to realize some fiscal efficiencies that will be leveraged back into program services and staff compensation.

At the same time as we close the project in Alton, we enter some uncharted territory for us in Granite City where we serve 232 children and their families. We have operated out of two facilities in Granite City for over 25 years. This year will present an opportunity for us to consolidate both locations into one space that provides plenty of room for current operations and space for growth. An exciting element of this new project is that our children will have an indoor play space during inclement weather days, as well as ample outdoor space for us to build state of the art outdoor classrooms which may also be considered playgrounds.

These changes will keep us very busy but will be well worth it as we continue to strengthen the mission and find efficiencies — ensuring our community that we are always seeking to improve services for the children and honor the commitment, trust, and confidence that you place with us when you support our work and mission. We feel blessed and thankful for this support.

In service to children and families,

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

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

## Driving Our Mission Forward



Since joining Riverbend Head Start & Family Services in January 2024, Beth Brewer has played a vital role in overseeing the daily operations of our Bus Depot—ensuring children travel safely to and from our centers each day. Her work touches every part of our transportation system, from fleet readiness to staff training, and reflects a deep commitment to the families we serve.

Brewer leads a coordinated team effort that keeps our transportation services running smoothly. She works closely with staff on routing, dispatching, vehicle maintenance, and compliance with state and federal regulations. She also supports new driver training, safety meetings, and the required emergency evacuation drills conducted with children and site staff. Together, these efforts help ensure that hundreds of young learners begin and end their school day with comfort, safety, and consistency.



**Beth Brewer**  
Bus Transportation Coordinator

While the work is rewarding, Beth acknowledges the emotional challenge of not always being able to serve every child who requests transportation—a limitation driven by bus capacity and route boundaries. “I really wish we could bus everyone who needs our service,” she says. “That part is always the hardest.”

Her dedication has not gone unnoticed.

“Beth is the most caring and understanding boss I have ever had,” shared Bus Driver Dody Vonderheidt. “Her no-nonsense approach, combined with her genuine care for her team, makes all the difference. She’s the best! Thank you, Riverbend, for finding her.”

For Brewer, the best part of her role is clear. “The children,” she says with a smile. “Seeing their faces at the centers makes everything worthwhile. I’m so grateful for my team, for the support from leadership, and for the kindness shown throughout the agency. This truly is the best place I’ve ever worked.”

## A Gift of Kindness: Kiwanis Club Supports Our Youngest Learners



*Pictured from left to right: Ashley Washington, Collinsville Center Supervisor, Donna Betta and Dr. Jan Patrick Hayden (Priority one committee members), Gene Howell, RHSFS President & CEO, Wally Streuter, Collinsville Sunrise Kiwanis Club President.*

On October 21st, representatives with the **Collinsville Sunrise Kiwanis Club** met with President/CEO Gene Howell and Collinsville Center Supervisor, Ashley Washington for a tour of the site. The Kiwanis Club is an ongoing supporter of the center, and hand-delivered a donation check for \$1,000.

"The Collinsville Sunrise Kiwanis Club sees Riverbend Head Start as the perfect way for us to fulfill the Kiwanis mission of improving the world one child and one community at a time," according to Dr. Jan Patrick Hayden. "We have chosen to have Riverbend Head Start as the recipient of our annual Priority One Initiative donation. Priority One focuses on children aged Kindergarten and younger and focuses on health, nutrition and school readiness."

The ongoing support from the Collinsville Sunrise Kiwanis Club reflects the strength and compassion of our community. Their commitment to children and early education uplifts the families we serve every day. We extend our sincere thanks for their generosity and for standing alongside us in helping Collinsville children learn, grow, and thrive.





## October is Safe Sleep and SIDS Awareness Month

By Julie Mouser, RHSFS Health Advocate

Every October, we recognize Safe Sleep and Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS) Awareness Month. It's a month-long initiative that encourages parents to focus on their child's sleep safety.

The goal is to reduce the risk of SIDS and other sleep-related causes of infant death such as suffocation, entrapment and strangulation.

Safe Sleep Basics = the ABC's of sleep

A= ALONE nothing but baby in the safe sleep area. No toys, blankets, bumpers, positioners, Boppy's or anything else.

B= BACK place infant on their back in the safe sleep area.

C= CRIB or other separate/non-sharing safe sleep area. Pack-n-Plays and bassinets can share the room but not serve as their bed.

Every sleep time matters, even short naps.

Infants need a very firm sleep surface; they are at risk on soft surfaces. This includes placing a blanket or a quilt over the firm surface. A fitted sheet is the only thing that should be between the infant, and the firm sleep surface.

Dress your baby for the temperature – do not use loose blankets. Keep infants face and head uncovered during sleep/no hats, we want to avoid overheating the infant.



*Baby Maelynn demonstrates safe sleep.*

*Photo credit: Maelynn's mom, Amy*

Other things you can do to reduce the risk of SIDS are....

- Regular health checkups and vaccines, following guidance from a health care provider.
- Not smoking while pregnant or around the baby.
- Breastfeeding; and
- Use of a pacifier.

Avoiding products that go against safe sleep recommendations, nothing but baby should be in the crib.

You can find more information at:  
**[safetosleep.nichd.nih.gov](https://safetosleep.nichd.nih.gov)**

## Argosy Casino Alton Delivers Warmth for Local Families



Pictured from left to right: Argosy Alton Casino employees - April Reynolds, Becky Johnson, Liquita Boyd, Amber Wertz and David Moffett. They are pictured alongside Gene Howell, RHSFS President & CEO.



Riverbend Head Start & Family Services received a heartwarming delivery this season as employees from **Argosy Casino Alton** hand-delivered 25 brand-new coats for our annual *Coats for Kids* drive. Their generosity arrives at the perfect time, ensuring children across our programs stay warm, comfortable, and ready to learn throughout the winter months.

Argosy Casino has been a valued mission partner for many years, consistently stepping up to support the needs of local families. Their gift is more than just outerwear—it's a reminder of how strong communities rally together to care for their youngest members.



## Staff Spotlight: Teacher Assistant Kelsey Messick



Kelsey Messick began working at the agency in November 2021. She's currently a Teacher Assistant (TA) for classroom three in Bethalto. She has a long history with RHSFS, having held other jobs including food service worker and substitute teacher.

"Kelsey started off as a parent and eventually worked her way into a permanent TA position at Bethalto," says Instructional Support Specialist Hannah Asbeck. "She demonstrates a strong understanding of helping children regulate their emotions by providing verbal cues, visual cues, and positivity. Kelsey uses her training and classroom tools to support children to interact with one another. She remains calm in tough situations and talks through big feelings with the children."

"Some of the challenges that come with my position as a Teacher Assistant is managing behaviors," says Messick. "I believe children aren't giving us a hard time—they're having a hard time. When I see a child is struggling, I focus on helping them work through their emotions by meeting them at their level, acknowledging how they feel and giving them the time they need to process what's going on within their own body and how they are feeling in that moment."

Kelsey's colleagues call her a "positive team player" that's willing to not only support her classroom, but other teachers too.

"The most rewarding part of my job is when I see a child realize they can manage their emotions using the tools we have been practicing together," she says. "Watching them grow confidence within themselves reminds me of why being a Head Start Teacher is so important to me."





## PNC Bank Donates Over 800 School Supplies to Support Early Learning



*Pictured from left to right: Gene Howell/RHSFS President & CEO, Alisha Abbott/PNC Bank Client & Community Relations Assistant Director, and Sandra Randolph/PNC Bank Regional Manager & RHSFS Board member.*





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*Members of the PNC Grow Up Great team collected approximately 809 school supplies in recent months. They chose Riverbend Head Start to donate these items to during the week leading up to the Thanksgiving holiday.*

Riverbend Head Start & Family Services received an incredible boost this fall thanks to a generous donation from **PNC Bank**, whose employees delivered more than 800 school supply items for children across our programs. Crayons, markers, glue sticks, notebooks, and other essential materials will be used daily in our classrooms—helping young learners grow, explore, and discover.

Representatives from PNC, including one of our own board members, Sandra Randolph, joined President/CEO Gene Howell for the delivery and shared their enthusiasm for supporting early childhood education in our region. Their gift reflects PNC's longstanding commitment to strengthening communities and investing in the next generation.

These supplies have made a meaningful difference for our teachers and students, ensuring classrooms are well-equipped and families have one less barrier to learning. We are deeply grateful for PNC's partnership and continued generosity.





## Back-to-Back Win for Bus Driver Elizabeth Hill!



Riverbend Head Start & Family Services is proud to celebrate Elizabeth Hill, one of our exceptional bus drivers, who has once again been named Best Bus Driver in the **Alton Telegraph** Readers' Choice Awards. This is her second consecutive year receiving this honor. It's a testament to her professionalism, dependability, and the care she shows to every child she transports.

Every day, Hill plays a vital role in advancing our mission. She sets the tone for a child's entire school experience — greeting families with warmth, ensuring each student feels safe and supported, and helping them arrive at school ready to learn. Her calm presence and genuine connection with children and parents make a meaningful difference in their daily routines.

"I love my job and representing Riverbend Head Start," Hill shared. "These children are our future, and they all deserve our very best."

In the photo featured with this story (top left), Elizabeth and her relatives represent four generations of family — her mother, daughter, and granddaughter — proudly celebrate her accomplishment. Their presence is a beautiful reminder of the strong, healthy families we strive to support every day. Just as Elizabeth uplifts the children she drives, her family's support uplifts her, illustrating the powerful impact of stability, encouragement and love across generations.

We are grateful for Elizabeth Hill's outstanding service and proud to recognize her well-earned achievement. Her dedication reflects the values that guide our work and the lasting impact that caring, committed adults have on young learners and their families.

## From the Editor's Desk

Dear Riverbend Friends and Supporters,

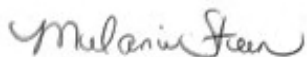
Winter has arrived, and with it comes that familiar mix of reflection, excitement, and anticipation for the year ahead. As our classrooms prepare for the second half of the school year, I'm reminded just how much your generosity shapes the experience of every child who walks through our doors.

Your winter donations including coats, toys, school supplies, and everyday essentials—have already brightened so many families' holidays and eased the burdens that cold weather can bring. Each contribution, no matter the size, helps create warm classrooms, confident learners, and grateful parents. Thank you for helping us meet these needs with dignity and care.

This issue of our newsletter highlights just a few of the many moments of kindness and partnership we've experienced recently. I hope you enjoy reading these stories as much as we've enjoyed sharing them.

As we move into the new year, please know how grateful we are for your continued involvement. If you have a story tip, question, or would like to coordinate a winter donation, feel free to reach out to me at [msteen@riverbendfamilies.org](mailto:msteen@riverbendfamilies.org).

Warm wishes for a wonderful winter season!



Melanie Steen

Public Relations & Development Director



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