

THE CURRENT

WEST CENTRAL INITIATIVE

2024 ANNUAL REVIEW



**Local Action:
Global Goals**
PAGE 6

Rural Democracy
PAGE 8

Rural Belonging
PAGE 10

THE LONGEST TABLE: GENEROSITY UNITES

PAGE 12



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Our organization plays a vital role in enhancing the quality of life across west central Minnesota.

We're committed to ensuring that every individual in the region can reach their fullest potential. By fostering a sense of connection and mutual support among the 82 towns, nine counties, and White Earth Nation, we strengthen the bonds that unite us. As dedicated stewards of this region, we take pride in nurturing its people and communities.

Ripples of Progress, Waves of Change

Dear Friends and Partners,

As I reflect on 2024, I'm filled with gratitude and optimism for all we've achieved together at West Central Initiative. This year has been a powerful reminder of what's possible when we work boldly to strengthen our communities and shape a brighter future for our region.

Our Rural Democracy program has continued to inspire and empower neighbors across the region to step into leadership roles in their communities. By equipping individuals—especially those from historically underrepresented groups—to engage in local government, nonprofits, and civic life, we're nurturing a new generation of leaders who reflect the diverse voices and needs of our towns, counties, and White Earth Nation.

This year, we also doubled down on our Climate Resilience efforts, recognizing that the health of our environment is intricately tied to the well-being of our communities. From advancing regional planning strategies that prioritize sustainability to supporting local food systems and regenerative agriculture, we're actively working to prepare our region for the challenges of tomorrow while helping to ensure a thriving future for generations to come.

Our Live Wide Open campaign, relaunched in March, continues to inspire a sense of belonging by celebrating the fascinating individuals who make our region unique. This storytelling movement has reached almost 130,000 people each month, fostering connections that make our region a place where everyone feels they belong.

In June, our 17 Rooms event brought 175 community leaders together to explore actionable steps toward the Sustainable Development Goals. This dynamic gathering—the largest of its kind hosted by a community foundation—focused on tangible outcomes in areas such as climate action, early childhood education, and equitable economic development.

Last year, we launched the Start a Ripple campaign, inspiring action through giving, volunteering, and advocacy. In 2024, the campaign came to life with events such as The Longest Table, where neighbors from across the region gathered to share a meal and meaningful conversations about building stronger, more connected communities. Together, these ripples of connection are growing into waves of lasting change.

Thank you for standing with us as we build a stronger, more inclusive, and resilient region. Together, we can continue turning bold ideas into transformative action.

With gratitude and hope,



Anna Wasescha | President





West Central Minnesota

PEACE, JUSTICE
AND STRONG
INSTITUTIONS

INDUSTRY, INNOVATION
INFRASTRUCTURE

West Central Initiative unites resources and ideas for

PEOPLE, PLANET, AND PROSPERITY

Guided by the Sustainable Development Goals, we serve as a visionary, convener, and catalyst for building stronger communities and a more vibrant region. By uniting the efforts of nonprofits, businesses, community groups, governments, and individuals, we unleash the power of collective action—empowering bold ideas and transformative actions to create lasting prosperity for our people, communities, region, and planet.



LOCAL ACTION: GLOBAL GOALS

Uniting to drive progress toward the Sustainable Development Goals, forge partnerships, and build communities of practice



7 AFFORDABLE AND CLEAN ENERGY



11 SUSTAINABLE CITIES AND COMMUNITIES



13 CLIMATE ACTION



EXPERIENCE THE EVENT AS IT UNFOLDED

Scan for a video of the recordings, including the 17 Rooms in 17 minutes report out.

Our recent 17 Rooms event, held in June at the University of Minnesota Morris, brought together passionate individuals from across the region, all united by a shared vision of creating meaningful change.

The energy in the room was palpable as participants collaborated on bold ideas to address challenges and opportunities connected to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Together, we proved that when people come together with purpose, great things can happen.

With 175 participants, it was the largest stand-alone 17 Rooms gathering globally to date.

In 17 breakout rooms, each dedicated to a specific SDG, we engaged in meaningful discussions about the challenges and opportunities in our communities. From climate resilience and sustainable agriculture to creating more inclusive spaces, the conversations were dynamic and inspiring.

"Perhaps the most exciting part was seeing actionable ideas emerge from each group," said Sarah Casey, Director of Strategic Communications. "These weren't just lofty concepts—they were real, tangible steps we can take to move the needle on critical issues. From strategies to support local initiatives to plans for stronger community engagement, the impact of this work will be felt far beyond the event itself."

We're so grateful to everyone who participated and contributed their energy, creativity, and hope. Their commitment to building a brighter future is what makes events like 17 Rooms so impactful. "As we move forward, we're excited to turn these ideas into action and can't wait to see the ripple effects of this incredible gathering," said Sarah.

49

Action items emerged from the 17 Rooms event, paving the way for a more vibrant and sustainable west central Minnesota.

By 2050, average annual temperatures in our region will be

4 to 5 degrees warmer.

Since Minnesota started recording temperatures in 1895, eight of the twelve warmest years have occurred after 1990.

We created the region's first Climate Action Plan to predict how this change will affect the region and outline actions to reduce climate impacts and prepare for future changes.



Scan to view the region's Climate Action Plan.

Sustainable Communities Network



The Sustainable Communities Network, launched in 2024, unites regional stakeholders, community leaders, sustainability enthusiasts, and West Central Initiative team members to advance climate action. Meeting monthly, the group champions success stories, shares ideas, and tracks progress. "This group is about building relationships and empowering communities and individuals to take action on climate solutions that matter locally," said Cedar Walters, Director of Climate and Sustainability Programs. Covering topics such as electric-vehicle charging, organics recycling, and climate projections, the network drives meaningful progress across sectors.



Rural Democracy

Increasing civic participation & supporting leadership development

In Minnesota, on average 1 in 21 individuals need to serve in positional leadership (local government or nonprofit) in their lifetime. In west central Minnesota, demand is higher, reaching 1 in 9 individuals in Wilkin and Stevens Counties, 1 in 8 in Traverse County, and 1 in 7 in Grant County—classifying almost half of our region as “leadership distressed.”

We aim to strengthen rural democracy by helping residents meet these demands through our Rural Democracy program.

“We strive to eliminate barriers to civic participation and leadership,” said Rural Initiatives Strategist Celeste Koppe. “Through technical training and relationship building, we hold nonpartisan space for individuals to better understand and employ democratic processes to create healthier communities.”



ENGAGE IN DEMOCRACY

Scan for a video spotlighting our Rural Democracy program.



The Rural Advocacy and Public Leadership Program is our free six-month leadership and advocacy program for individuals interested in strengthening democracy and promoting good governance in their rural community. Participants engage in discussions, learning from each other, and develop a local “hands-on” project to address an issue in their community.



Mayors are at the heart of local democracy. Through the Lead Local Mayors Network, we’re convening and building relationships among the 82 mayors in west central Minnesota, so they can share ideas and encourage their constituents to get involved in public service. We invite all mayors in west central Minnesota to participate in our quarterly meetings.



Run4Rural is our free 1½ day public leadership training program designed for people interested in growing and strengthening their local communities through elected office and other forms of public leadership. This nonpartisan training is useful for existing and emerging rural leaders and people active in their community whether or not they have decided to run for office.

Since the launch of our Rural Democracy program two years ago:

300+

attended events to strengthen democracy.

100+

participated in community events on election law, clean energy, civic leadership, and bridging divides.

55

attended Run4Rural trainings, and 10 participants ran for office.

12

New Americans joined the pilot Intro to Civics program.

80+

attended five Going Local Workshops across four counties.

77%

of training participants are women.

15

mayors explored collaboration, including a solar panel initiative for municipal buildings.



Going Local is our free rural democracy workshop. At the Going Local workshops, we share food and stories, learn about some of the unique challenges rural communities face, and explore what we can do together to make our communities stronger and healthier.

Empowering Rural Leaders: Building Change Through Advocacy and Action

Equipping community members with the skills and confidence to lead and advocate for rural resilience

Our Rural Advocacy and Public Leadership Program is shaping the next generation of leaders across our region. Designed to equip participants with essential skills and knowledge, the program offers a practical, hands-on approach to public leadership, focusing on advocacy, community engagement, and strategies for effective change-making in rural areas.

Professor Adrienne Falcón, Co-director of Metro State University's Master of Advocacy and Public Leadership, and local scholar and artist Kandace Creel Falcón created the program to go beyond theory to offer real-world insights. West Central Initiative's Rural Initiatives Strategist Celeste Koppe works alongside Falcón and Falcón to guide participants through the complexities of leadership and advocacy. "This program is about empowering people to lead in ways that are authentic and effective," Celeste explains. "We focus on helping participants find their voice and build the tools they need to create meaningful change."

In spring 2024, 18 rural leaders participated in the program's first cohort, engaging in interactive workshops and collaborative discussions. These sessions built their confidence to tackle the unique challenges facing rural communities. The program prioritizes inclusivity, fostering a diverse group of leaders who bring a range of perspectives and experiences to the table.

The team's expertise and passion for rural advocacy helps ensure that participants leave with a deep understanding of how to navigate public leadership while remaining true to their values. "It's inspiring to see the growth and determination of each participant," Celeste shares. "They're not just learning—they're preparing to lead by implementing action projects as part of the experience."

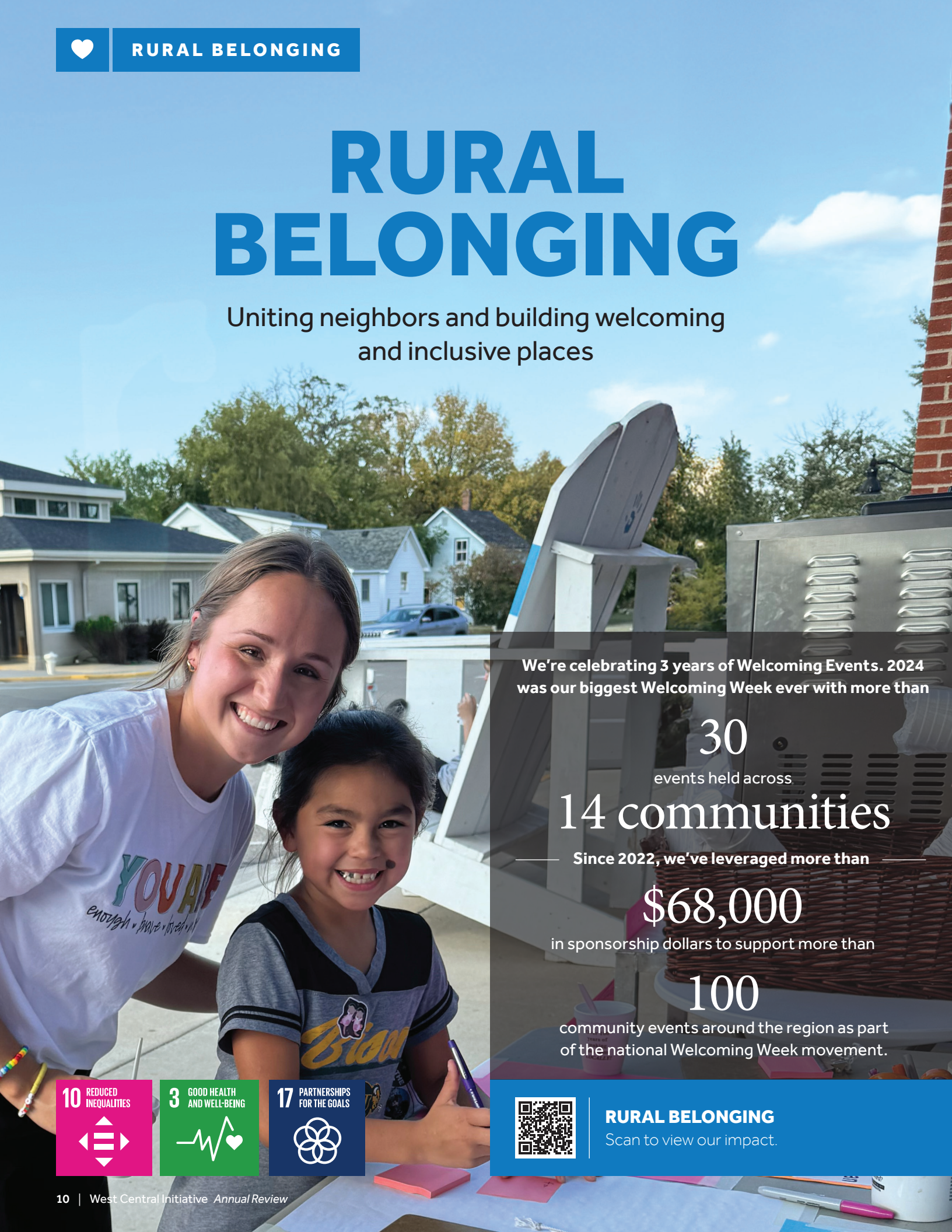
By empowering individuals to step up and take action, the Rural Advocacy and Public Leadership Program is strengthening communities and building a brighter future for our region.





RURAL BELONGING

Uniting neighbors and building welcoming and inclusive places



We're celebrating 3 years of Welcoming Events. 2024 was our biggest Welcoming Week ever with more than

30

events held across

14 communities

Since 2022, we've leveraged more than

\$68,000

in sponsorship dollars to support more than

100

community events around the region as part of the national Welcoming Week movement.

10 REDUCED INEQUALITIES



3 GOOD HEALTH AND WELL-BEING



17 PARTNERSHIPS FOR THE GOALS



RURAL BELONGING

Scan to view our impact.



In September, our region came alive with the vibrant energy of Welcoming Week 2024.

From Mexican folk dancers lighting up Greater Moorhead Days to Aztec performers sharing traditional rhythms in Elbow Lake, the region embraced a celebration of diversity and belonging. We sponsored more than 30 events across 14 communities that demonstrated the shared values that make our region feel like home for everyone.

While the numbers—part of a global movement featuring 2,006 events in eight countries—are impressive, the stories behind them are even more meaningful. “Welcoming Week is about celebrating in ways that resonate with each community,” said Rick Schara, West Central Initiative’s Live Wide Open advocate. Whether through sharing heritage dishes or connecting new residents with local emergency services, the events emphasized unity and inclusion. “Food, in particular, has been a powerful connector,” Rick added, as communities showcased their rich culinary traditions.

For West Central Initiative, the impact goes beyond the week itself. “We reflect on the stories, connections, and lessons learned to prepare for next year,” said Rick. “Welcoming Week helps communities embrace change while fostering stronger bonds.”

As part of our Rural Belonging efforts, including the Live Wide Open campaign, these celebrations continue to inspire inclusivity year-round.



— LIVE WIDE — OPEN

In an era where loneliness, disconnection, and distrust can feel overwhelming, Live Wide Open is on a mission to inspire a sense of belonging among all people in west central Minnesota and White Earth Nation through showcasing the fascinating and diverse people across our region. Join us to explore the power of human connection in our local communities.

 youtube.com/@livewideopenmn

 instagram.com/livewideopenmn

 facebook.com/livewideopenmn



THE LONGEST TABLE: GENEROSITY UNITES

A Celebration of Community

The Longest Table, held in August 2024, united regional residents for a shared meal celebrating community and generosity. It capped months of regional gatherings and highlighted the Start a Ripple campaign's message of creating impact through small acts of giving.

On a warm evening in August 2024, West Central Initiative's The Longest Table brought together people from across the region to share a meal and celebrate the power of community.

Stretching down the heart of Fergus Falls, along the Otter Tail River, this event symbolized the region's spirit of togetherness and generosity, with residents from all nine counties and White Earth Nation gathering to share stories, ideas, and a delicious locally sourced meal.

The Longest Table marked the culmination of months of connection-building through events held across the region. In counties such as Otter Tail and Grant, neighbors came together to share ideas and foster

a spirit of generosity. These gatherings created opportunities for collaboration and sparked ripples of positive change in local communities. These ripples ultimately converged at The Longest Table, uniting a diverse cross-section of the region in a shared vision for the future.

"The smaller events leading up to The Longest Table were instrumental in creating a sense of anticipation and connection," said Rebecca Lynn Petersen, Director of Development. "We saw firsthand how small acts of generosity—whether it's sharing time, ideas, or resources—can spark larger waves of impact. The Longest Table brought those ripples together into one incredible evening."

This year's The Longest Table also aligned with West Central Initiative's Start a Ripple campaign, which encourages residents to invest in their communities through philanthropy, volunteerism, and everyday acts of kindness. By emphasizing that everyone has something to give, the campaign has become a cornerstone of the organization's mission to inspire belonging and amplify impact across the region.

"The Start a Ripple campaign is all about showing people that their contributions matter," explained Camille Pearson Walz, Development Officer. "At The Longest Table, we witnessed the power of collective generosity. Every conversation, every smile, and every shared story added to the strength of our community."

From the farm-fresh produce served at the meal to the local musicians who provided the evening's soundtrack, The Longest Table showcased the best of what our region has to offer. Volunteers worked tirelessly to create a welcoming atmosphere.

One of the evening's most moving moments came during a toast honoring the countless ways generosity shapes the region. Participants raised their glasses not only to celebrate the present but to look forward to the future, where the ripples created that evening will grow into waves of lasting change.

As the evening wound down and the sun dipped below the horizon, attendees left The Longest Table inspired and connected, ready to carry the spirit of generosity back to their own neighborhoods. The event served as a powerful reminder that even the smallest acts can start ripples, and when those ripples combine, they can create waves that transform communities.

“This event wasn't just about sharing a meal—it was about strengthening the bonds that make our communities resilient,” Rebecca said. “When we come together with open hearts and generous spirits, there's no limit to what we can accomplish.”



500+
people from across the region joined us for Start a Ripple events, building connections and inspiring positive change.



DMIKE'S Resort Bar & Grill



Economic Development Expertise

Through our planning work, we partner with regional and local leaders to create vibrant, sustainable, and welcoming communities for all.

As the federally designated planning organization for the region through the U.S. Economic Development Administration (EDA), we create a Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy for the Region IV Economic Development District of Minnesota every five years. The current plan (2022-2026) primarily focuses on growing the regional population and workforce, increasing wages, improving child care capacity and availability, increasing housing affordability and availability, increasing access to broadband, and examining the sustainability of infrastructure.

With our help, local communities have received more than

\$8.23 million

in federal grants for roads, utilities, and wastewater treatment to support industrial growth since 1996.

Our Loan Program

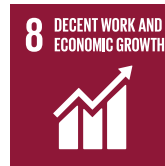
Start-ups and businesses looking to expand can tap into West Central Initiative's loan program when they have difficulty accessing bank financing. As a "gap lender," we can supplement or complement conventional or bank financing to help the financing package succeed.

Our Planning Services

- Comprehensive development planning, climate resiliency planning, pandemic response and recovery planning
- Resource and grant navigation and writing for community and economic development projects
- Small business development support
- Sustainable food and agricultural development and planning
- Community engagement and facilitation



► **Contact Greg Wagner**
AICP, Director of Business & Economic Development,
at greg@wcf.org to learn more.



D Mike's: A Family Dream Revived with Community Support

With help from West Central Initiative, the Daniels family revived D Mike's, blending legacy, family, and fresh ideas.

For Mike and Kellie Daniels, owning D Mike's in Alexandria is more than a business venture—it's the fulfillment of a long-held dream. After working extensively in the food service industry, including years at D Michael B's, the couple jumped at the chance to take over the beloved local restaurant when it went up for sale. "This restaurant has always been our calling," said Mike Daniels. "It's a dream we've nurtured since we started in the industry."

The process of buying and relaunching the restaurant was not without challenges. When the opportunity arose, the Daniels turned to West Central Initiative for support. Through our lending program, they received financial backing and guidance to bring their vision to life. "Assisting businesses like D Mike's is core to our mission of fostering economic growth and community vitality," said Greg Wagner, Director of Business and Economic Development.

The Daniels family renamed the restaurant D Mike's and embraced the principle, "Legacy Inspired, Community Infused." While honoring the legacy of D Michael B's, they added fresh touches, including a private dining space for special events and an expanded catering service. Their daughters are also part of the business, creating a welcoming, family-oriented atmosphere. "Our family time is here," said Kellie Daniels. "Involving our kids has made this experience even more special."

D Mike's reopened with a mix of old favorites and new menu offerings, including "The Brookie," a dessert inspired by their youngest daughter. "The community support has been incredible, and their feedback keeps us motivated," Mike shared.

Thanks to the Daniels' hard work and West Central Initiative's support, D Mike's is thriving. Stop by D Mike's to experience a story of perseverance, family, and community-driven success.



————— In 2024, —————

15
regional business owners have collectively secured more than

\$1 million
from our lending program to support the launch and expansion of their businesses.

————— We have approximately —————

170
active loans to small businesses.



We want children to have the best possible start toward a healthy life of learning, achieving, and succeeding.

Community organization is key.

Our Early Childhood Initiative is a network of parents, educators, businesses, community leaders, faith leaders, and policymakers joined in a long-term effort to give young children the best possible start toward a healthy life of learning, achieving, and succeeding.

We partner with communities to assess early childhood efforts, identify areas for improvement, and help make them a reality. This initiative includes the Early Childhood Dental Network and Early Childhood Mental Health Network.

With grant support, we provided training for

250 people

in Conscious Discipline, with five becoming trainers. This adult-first approach helps individuals understand and manage their own triggers, teaching them to pass this calmness on to the children in their care.

4 QUALITY EDUCATION



8 DECENT WORK AND ECONOMIC GROWTH



9 INDUSTRY, INNOVATION AND INFRASTRUCTURE



Supporting Early Childhood Care and Education Professionals

Early childhood care and education professionals play a vital role in our communities, yet their contributions often go unnoticed. "Everyone benefits from child care, even those without young children," said Marsha Erickson, our Early Childhood Specialist. "A lack of access to child care impacts parents' ability to work and local economies. Our child care professionals work long hours, earn minimal pay, and deserve our gratitude."

“
Our vision is a region where every child has access to quality care, and every educator feels valued. Investing in child care is investing in our communities' future.

– Marsha Erickson

Early Childhood Specialist, West Central Initiative

Through our Early Childhood Initiative, West Central Initiative supports child care professionals across the region. This initiative addresses workforce shortages, financial challenges, and the growing demand for high-quality, accessible care. By partnering with local organizations, county agencies, and groups such as Child Care Aware and First Children's Finance, West Central Initiative provides resources and advocates for these essential educators.

"Our Early Childhood Initiative is about strengthening families and communities," Marsha explained. "Advocating for child care professionals is key—they're not just caregivers; they're educators and an extension of our families."

West Central Initiative's annual recognition of Provider Appreciation Day highlights these efforts. Celebrated nationally before Mother's Day, it honors child care professionals with support from local collaboratives and organizations. West Central Initiative also encourages families to show appreciation year-round through gestures such as thank-you notes, small gifts, and acts of kindness.

"Thanking child care professionals doesn't have to be extravagant," Marsha said. "It's about respect and recognizing their vital contributions."

Beyond appreciation, West Central Initiative advocates for systemic changes to improve funding and training access, ensuring child care professionals can thrive.

"Our vision is a region where every child has access to quality care, and every educator feels valued," Marsha said. "Investing in child care is investing in our communities' future."

Through our Early Childhood Initiative, we call on our region to recognize and support child care professionals, ensuring a stronger future for families, educators, and the region.



Transformative Tools for Educators

We hosted a two-day Conscious Discipline training for 150 early childhood professionals, with 100 more accessing an e-course. The program provided practical tools to help educators regulate their emotions, model positive behaviors, and foster stronger connections with children. Thanks to grant funding, the training was free and accessible to all.



Mapping the Future: Transportation Planning for a Connected Region

Helping all to drive, bike, walk, and roll around our region safely and efficiently

Through a contract with the Minnesota Department of Transportation, West Central Initiative administers a transportation planning program for west central Minnesota. This partnership allows for coordinated, long-range, regional transportation planning.

As part of the regional transportation planning process, we oversee studies related to transportation, provide technical assistance to communities on transportation and active transportation issues, and work with the Minnesota Department of Transportation District 4 and the West Central Minnesota Area Transportation Partnership.

4,400+ kids
will benefit from three Safe Routes to School Plans created in 2024.



Community input sparks solutions for Safe Routes to School Plans

Safe Routes to School is a national initiative encouraging kids to walk and bike to school, promoting lifelong physical activity. Minnesota supports this effort with funding for plans, infrastructure, and school curriculum. In 2024, West Central Initiative's Transportation Planning Team completed plans for Alexandria, Osakis, and the Circle of Life Academy in White Earth. They also began plans for Browns Valley and Chokio-Alberta School Districts, hosting kick-off meetings and on-site observations. Each community's unique history and culture will shape these plans, set to be finalized by spring 2025.

In 1969, about 50% of children walked or biked to school. Today, fewer than 15% do. Returning to 1969 levels would save 3.2 billion vehicle miles, reduce carbon dioxide by

1.5 million tons,
and cut 89,000 tons of other pollutants —equivalent to taking

250,000 cars
off the road for a year.

We've secured more than \$15 million for projects that make it easier for people to walk and bike.



A thriving local food system empowers farmers, ensures fresh, nutritious food is accessible to all, and builds resilient communities.

To help create a thriving and interconnected food ecosystem, we support regenerative agriculture practices, connect farmers with consumers, facilitate educational opportunities, and advocate for policies that support local food production.

Growing Grant County: Expanding Food Access and Education

With a \$374,000 USDA grant, West Central Initiative partnered with local schools and organizations to launch the Growing Grant County project, expanding access to healthy, local food. Students from Ashby Public School and West Central Area Schools gain hands-on experience in growing, processing, and preserving fresh foods using resources such as a mobile processing trailer and freeze dryers. West Central Area Schools' new greenhouse, with plans for another in Ashby, boosts production. In 2024, the project provided more than 15,000 pounds of produce for Grant County residents.

In 2024, the Growing Grant County project provided
15,000 pounds
 of produce for Grant County residents.



West Central Initiative and Rural Voice Spotlight Conservation Agriculture in Detroit Lakes

West Central Initiative partnered with Rural Voice and MPR's Kerri Miller to host a lively community event at Bucks Mill Brewing in Detroit Lakes, focusing on conservation agriculture. The event brought together local residents, farmers, and leaders to discuss innovative practices and their impact on regional sustainability. The conversation highlighted the importance of collaboration and community-driven solutions in addressing the challenges and opportunities facing rural Minnesota.





THRIVING COMMUNITIES: POWERED BY COLLECTIVE GIVING

Through our component funds, we harness the power of collective giving to support local community improvement projects, provide funding for nonprofits, give scholarships, and build a better quality of life for years to come.

As a community foundation, one of our roles is to establish and manage dedicated funds that address specific charitable purposes as defined by the IRS as 501(c)(3) nonprofit organizations. We call these funds “component funds” because they’re part of our mission and asset valuation.

Component funds function in two ways: making grants for charitable activities within the fund’s specific purpose and providing rural economic development loans through a revolving loan fund. These funds generate interest, which can be distributed as grants or reinvested in the fund.

Component fund activities are directed by groups of community volunteers called advisory committees. Partnerships among the advisory committees, donors, and West Central Initiative play a critical role in the success of these funds and the achievement of their goals.

Through our component fund program, we provide training and help donors invest in public parks, libraries, scholarships, main street improvements, and more—building stronger, more vibrant communities for generations to come.

In 2024, giving from our component funds reached an all-time high with

\$4.68 million

supporting community-led efforts.

Q&A with the Osakis Silverstreaks Foundation

▶ **What inspired your group to start this fund, and what impact do you hope it will have on the school and community?**

We wanted to create a long-term funding mechanism that inspired more non-local donations from our alumni, in addition to offering tools that could help us fundraise more efficiently.

▶ **Can you share a standout moment from the past year that shows the impact of your fund?**

In our first round of funding requests, the foundation was able to support our staff with meals during parent-teacher conferences and refreshments at workshops. Showing appreciation for our staff helps them be at their best, allowing them to pass that appreciation forward to each other and our students. We certainly have larger ambitions, but sometimes you have to start small and build momentum.

▶ **What do you envision for the future of your fund and its role in supporting our region?**

We know the possibilities are endless, and we're beginning to make larger funding requests within our region. With our 501(c)(3) status, we can offer businesses a valuable tax deduction, making their support of our school an even greater win-win. Our goal is to expand both expectations and opportunities—leveraging our ongoing success, reconnecting with alumni, and beginning to save toward long-term goals that will benefit our school for generations to come.

▶ **How has the partnership with West Central Initiative helped your cause?**

Our school district has been talking about a foundation for more than 10 years. With West Central Initiative's help, we made this dream come true. They helped guide us through the process and allow us to focus our advisory board's time on the relationship-building, marketing, and ideation that will lead to long-term success. They've also been a partner in helping us be innovative—we've been able to pilot a peer-to-peer giving application that allows very convenient technology to be used for student fundraising. This stands to save our students and families a significant portion of their donations that would otherwise go to high transaction fees, instead of the worthy cause. We can't wait to expand this to other uses.



INSPIRING GENERATIONS OF GENEROSITY

Generosity, Community, Family Values

Nick and Katie Ganoë returned to Fergus Falls to raise their family, inspired by the town's strong sense of community and connection. Through their careers and partnership with West Central Initiative, they actively support early childhood education, equity, and local causes, instilling values of generosity and action in the next generation.

Nick and Katie Ganoë's story began in Fergus Falls, where they grew up surrounded by a close-knit community.

Though they left for college and careers, the town remained close to their hearts. When it came time to envision a life for their future family, they returned, knowing Fergus Falls was the perfect place to raise their children.

Now parents of two, Nick and Katie are dedicated community members who value generosity and giving back. Their shared commitment to philanthropy has been shaped by their experiences and desire to instill these values in their children.

The Ganoës believe in leading by example, involving their family in meaningful efforts that strengthen their community. Through their work with children and families, they've gained insight into the community's strengths and areas for growth. Katie became involved with Otter Cove in 2021, collaborating with others to help ensure Fergus Falls is a place where every child can thrive.

The Ganoës are deeply committed to local and regional giving. They donate both to and through West Central Initiative, a trusted partner that aligns with their passions for early childhood education, equity, and climate. By working with West Central Initiative, they ensure their contributions have a meaningful and lasting impact.

"We know the people doing the work," Katie shared. "We see the wide reach and the impact West Central Initiative is making."

The Ganoës are proud of the positivity in Fergus Falls and feel honored to contribute to its vibrancy. For them, the town's sense of community and connection makes it a perfect home.

Their story exemplifies how generosity and action can inspire the next generation to strengthen their communities.

“We know the people doing the work,” Katie shared. “We see the wide reach and the impact West Central Initiative is making.”



HOW WILL YOU HELP YOUR COMMUNITY?

By partnering with West Central Initiative, your charitable dollars have more impact. Our unique structure helps you gain tax advantages while giving more to the causes you care about. And with us managing the paperwork, it's a more convenient way to keep track of your giving.

SUPPORT EMERGING COMMUNITY NEEDS

RIPPLES TO WAVES GIVING PROGRAM AND ENDOWMENT FUND

When you give to West Central Initiative, you join forces in collective giving to drive community progress, fund vital regional programs, and create a lasting impact on quality of life for generations to come.

COMMUNITY COMPONENT FUNDS

When you give through West Central Initiative, you support local progress by contributing to one of the more than 200 community funds in our region. Local advisory committees oversee grants and priorities, while we manage the administration.

MAXIMIZE GIVING TO CHARITIES AND CAUSES

DONOR ADVISED FUNDS

A donor advised fund is like a flexible charitable investment account, for the sole purpose of supporting nonprofits you care about. When you contribute cash, securities, or other assets to a donor advised fund, you're generally eligible to take an immediate tax deduction. We manage those funds for tax-free growth, and you can direct grants to virtually any IRS-qualified public charity, at any time.

FIELD OF INTEREST COMPONENT FUNDS

If there is an area of interest you care about, such as arts and culture, children and family, the environment or other issues, you can designate your fund to provide grants to support efforts that address that challenge.

NONPROFIT OR CHARITABLE PROJECT COMPONENT FUNDS

Provide a permanent source of support for your preferred nonprofit or charitable cause through an endowed fund, helping them achieve long-term sustainability.

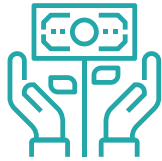


CONTRIBUTE TODAY

Scan today to make a donation at wcif.org/donate

WAYS TO GIVE

We can accept many kinds of assets, helping you maximize your giving and find tax advantages.



Cash



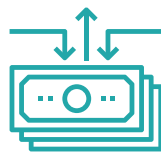
Appreciated Stock



Real Estate



Retirement Funds



IRA Required Distributions



Life Insurance



Annuities

Give beyond your lifetime

Planning an estate gift allows you to strategically accomplish both financial and charitable objectives. For many people, these include preserving the family name, honoring loved ones, providing for heirs, minimizing tax burdens, and supporting the community they call home. Bequests to West Central Initiative are exempt from estate taxes.

Establishing a fund at West Central Initiative as part of your estate allows you to:

- Support your favorite nonprofits or choose community grantmaking funds that align with your interests.
- Manage gifts to multiple entities, which you can change at any time cost-free.
- Give almost any kind of asset, from real estate, to stock, to retirement plans and life insurance proceeds.
- Avoid the setup costs and ongoing management of creating your own private foundation.



► **Contact Rebecca Lynn Petersen**, Director of Development, at **800-735-2239** or **rebecca@wcif.org** to learn more.

THANK YOU, CONTRIBUTORS

We're deeply grateful to all the individuals and organizations who have supported our mission over the past year. Along with the contributors listed below, we also thank the many others who have given through West Central Initiative by supporting one of our component funds. Your generosity creates a lasting impact on our communities. While we've made every effort to include all contributors, please know that we sincerely appreciate every gift.

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Children's Defense Fund
Funders Network for Smart Growth and Livable Communities
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Veden Trust
Welcoming America
Wells Fargo Foundation

AARP
Rick and Helga Bauerly Fund
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Koschnick Jr. Family Fund
The Middleton Koller Fund
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Minnesota Humanities Center
MN Farmers Union
Otter Tail Power Company
Park Region Telephone
Pioneer Public Television

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City of Ashby
City of Barnesville
City of Battle Lake
City of Breckenridge
City of Browns Valley
City of Carlos
City of Chokio
City of Cyrus
City of Dent
City of Detroit Lakes
City of Dilworth
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City of Parkers Prairie
City of Pelican Rapids
City of Perham
City of Richville
City of Rothsay
City of Starbuck
City of Villard
City of Vining
City of Westport
City of Wheaton

Becker County
Clay County
Douglas County
Grant County
Otter Tail County
Pope County
Stevens County
Traverse County
Wilkin County

2024 AT A GLANCE

All data represents our 2024 fiscal year

\$86.9M

Net assets



\$3.93M

Total contributions to West Central Initiative and our component funds



629

Grants awarded from West Central Initiative and our component funds



\$1.36M

Granted from West Central Initiative



\$114K

Granted from personally endowed funds



\$1.18M

Granted from West Central Initiative as passthrough grants from other organizations



In 2024, giving from our component funds reached an all-time high with

\$4.68 million

supporting community-led efforts.



GRANT RECIPIENTS

We're uniting ideas and resources to create a stronger, more vibrant region. Guided by our strategic priorities and aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals, we offer a range of resources—including grants—to support families, communities, organizations, and businesses. In 2024, we distributed a combined **\$2.54 million from West Central Initiative** and on behalf of other organizations, along with an all-time high of **\$4.68 million from our component funds** to advance community-led efforts. The grant recipients highlighted below represent just a portion of the many noteworthy initiatives we supported this year.

Early Childhood

Becker County Public Health
for the Early Childhood Dental Network

Clay County Social Services
for the Clay County Early Childhood Initiative, Early Childhood Dental Network, and a child-care project manager position

Life Connections
for the Douglas County Early Childhood Initiative and Early Childhood Dental Network

Otter Cove Children's Museum
for the Otter Tail County Early Childhood Initiative

Otter Tail County
for a child-care project manager position

Stevens County Human Services
for the Stevens County Early Childhood Initiative and Early Childhood Dental Network

Traverse County Social Services
for the Traverse County Early Childhood Initiative and Early Childhood Dental Network

United Way of Otter Tail & Wadena Counties
for the Early Childhood Dental Network

Western Prairie Human Services - Grant County
for the Grant County Early Childhood Initiative and Early Childhood Dental Network

Western Prairie Human Services - Pope County
for the Pope County Early Childhood Thrive Initiative and a child-care project manager position

White Earth Tribal Council
for the White Earth Nation Early Childhood Initiative and Early Childhood Dental Network

West Central Initiative
as fiscal host for the Becker County Early Childhood Initiative and a child-care project manager position

as fiscal host for the Southern Valley (Wilkin) Early Childhood Initiative and Early Childhood Dental Network

Emergency Preparedness (grants supporting fire departments serving some of our smallest communities)

City of Ashby

City of Audubon

City of Barret

City of Brandon

City of Browns Valley

City of Carlos

City of Chokio

City of Cyrus

City of Deer Creek

City of Donnelly

City of Garfield

City of Herman

City of Kensington

City of Lowry

City of Miliona

City of Rothsay

City of Ulen

City of Underwood

City of Vergas

City of Villard

Otto Bremer Trust Community Responsive Fund

All Nations Rise
for the Indigenous Parent Leadership Initiative, in partnership with White Earth Nation.

Central Minnesota Elder Network
for programs that provide support and connection to seniors to lessen feelings of loneliness and isolation.

Community Health Service Inc.
to improve access to oral health services for underserved populations in rural and low-income areas through a comprehensive dental-care program.

Cultural Diversity Resources
to provide ongoing training, mentorship, and capacity-building activities for leaders of small and emerging Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) nonprofits and organizations.

Empowering Kids
for The Empowering Kids Social & Recreation Program for neurodivergent individuals to provide year-round, affordable social and recreational programming that fosters accessibility and inclusion for individuals with disabilities.

Heart-n-Soul Community Cafe Inc.
to expand the Lunch Bunch program and Mobile Cafe events in Moorhead, Dilworth, and Ulen.

Immigrant Law Center of Minnesota
to support legal services, educational outreach, and advocacy for immigrants and refugees in west central Minnesota.

Safe Families for Children – West Central Minnesota to extend free, voluntary, family-like support to 100 families facing a crisis in the region.

Thank you to The Funders Network's Community Foundation Disaster Response Fund, the Otto Bremer Trust, and others for providing our region with grant funding.

West Central Initiative

A Place to Belong for mental health support in rural Minnesota.

Alexandria Technical & Community College Foundation for the Pathway to Policing Project to increase the number of historically underrepresented licensed police officers.

Art of the Lakes Association for Cabin Fever Reliever events designed to engage area residents and strengthen community bonds to combat mid-winter social isolation.

Bagosendaan to promote learning and emotional growth for at-risk youth using talking circles, counselors, guest speakers, and horseback riding.

Bam'idizowigamig Creator's Place for Living the Dream: Bam'idizowigamig Creator's Place, Pine Point, which provides employment and on-the-job training for Native American adults.

Baraza La Afrika for the Congolese Community Garden Moorhead to bring Congolese families together to grow food from their homeland.

City of Browns Valley for outdoor library furniture to allow patrons to access the internet after library hours.

Conexiones to strengthen efforts in connecting and empowering the immigrant community.

Cultural Diversity Resources for the Financial Empowerment program that provides financial education to New Americans and the Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) population to achieve financial literacy.

Detroit Lakes Community and Cultural Center for the Engage Older Adults Outdoor Recreation Program that provides social, fitness, recreation, cultural, and community-building activities for older adults.

Douglas County Car Care Program, Inc. to provide access to reliable transportation or vehicle repair services for low-income individuals and families.

Ecumen Bethel Manor and Winona Shores to create outdoor connection spaces in Alexandria through Lakeshore Restoration and Nature Trail Development.

ESHARA (Ethnic Self-Help Alliance for Refugee Assistance) to eliminate barriers and enhance equitable outcomes for New Americans.

Fergus Falls Public Library for Neighbors Together: Connecting Families with Community Resources & Each Other to help create community connections, foster community engagement, and reduce feelings of isolation for new parents.

First Congregational United Church of Christ Moorhead for Urban Multicultural Food & Ecology Changemakers to build the capacity of underserved Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) urban gardeners, farmers, and youth to access land, equipment, and side-by-side technical assistance needed to feed their families, gain marketable skills, and build culturally valued food enterprises.

Frazer Community Development Corporation for improving the well-being of Indigenous people in the Wannigan Regional Park and the surrounding community.

Grant County for Changemakers in the Community to host monthly activities to strengthen community bonds and combat social isolation while promoting mental-health initiatives in rural communities with a focus on sustainability, equity, and democracy.

Harvest Hope Farm for Farm Camp on Wheels to teach elementary age children in Moorhead about sustainable food resources and environmental stewardship while connecting with nature.

Hope Blooms for Flower Empower to enhance well-being and social connectedness by bringing people together through wellness workshops.

Inclusive Moorhead to empower culturally diverse community members by offering them a voice in leadership and fostering stronger connections and a sense of belonging in their neighborhoods.

Kondial Kel International for empowering women toward actions of mental-health advocacy.

Lakes & Prairies Community Action Partnership, Inc. for the Youth Advisory Board to provide ideas, feedback, and solutions to prevent and end homelessness.

Lakes Area Yes Network for the Lakes Area Yes Network Summer Programming to meet the needs of the children and youth on the White Earth Reservation and in under-resourced neighborhoods in rural northwestern Minnesota.

League of Women Voters, Detroit Lakes for Celebrating Women Through the Ages: Shattering the Glass Ceiling in the Lakes Area to educate the public regarding the history of women's rights over the century and lift up women leaders in the area who have been instrumental in achieving and extending the progress of these rights.

Matthew House for Building a Community of Support to help provide residents with the support they need to help fulfill their goals of long-term sobriety, self-sufficiency, and happiness.

Minnesota Flyers Gymnastics Inc. for FlyTime to provide free fitness sessions for local schools and groups with special needs individuals.

Net Zero Nations for Sustainable Community on White Earth Reservation to dismantle structural poverty for Native Americans by weaving together cultural values, eco-friendly home ownership, community solar gardens, and local food production to create sustainable communities.

New York Mills Community Senior Center to provide a space for elderly people to engage in activities and for resources for the homebound senior community.

Organization 4 Full Participation for the Welcoming Communities Action Project to explore, discover, and understand how the presence or lack of safety in all its forms contributes to a sense of belonging for people with marginalized identities living in rural communities.

Pelican Rapids High School to provide toiletries, clothing, school supplies, food, and other basic needs for students.

Perham Health – Elevate for Elevate Connections to improve the long-term wellness of older adults by addressing their social determinants of health.

PRAIRIE/New Roots Farm Incubator for building capacity for small farm incubation.

Project Optimist to host four events to create an open dialogue about isolation, connection, and belonging in college.

P's & Q's Etiquette for the BeRare BeYou social media channel to help young girls in our communities and around the world navigate their preteen and teen years and usher them into high school successfully.

Renewing the Countryside for connecting communities with farmers and the local food shed.

Resilient Indigenous Sisters Engaging Coalition for Growing Community: Cultivating Ojibwe Sovereignty to empower the next seven generations through Ojibwe food sovereignty and self-sustainable survival practices that honor the land and ancestors.

Raising Up Stevens County Kinship Mentoring for the Morris Community Garden to create a vibrant and inclusive community garden suitable for all ages and abilities within Stevens County.

Someplace Safe to conduct an assessment and create a strategic plan to identify areas of strength, weakness, and opportunity around cultural diversity, inclusiveness, and equity.

South Sudanese Foundation for building a resilient New American community in Clay County by offering programming to close the equity gap experienced by New Americans and increase social connections within and among the New American community.

Sustainable Farming Association of Minnesota for the West Central Region 2024 Seed Schools to train participants to find, test, source, grow, harvest, clean, store, and market seeds.

The Bridge Center to provide spaces for community-building and entrepreneurship for young, old, newly arrived, and lifelong residents of Pelican Rapids.

Toxic Taters Coalition for private well-owner water testing for nitrates in northern Minnesota.

Vets R Us, Inc. for the Vietnam Veterans Getaway to promote healing, self-care, and supportive and healthy relationships for Vietnam Veterans.

Welcome House (Barbara's House) to provide a recovery home for women who desire freedom from substance use regardless of the ability to pay.

West Central Minnesota Communities Action to provide a safe, secure, and neutral environment for children to visit with their parent(s) when a court order is in place or Child Protection Services are involved.

Women Initiative Network of Liberia in Cass and Clay Counties to promote mental well-being, reduce stigma, and improve support systems for individuals struggling with mental health.

BOARD OF DIRECTORS

Welcome new board members



Ryan Rooney
Douglas County



Lisa Tillotson
Clay County

Board members continuing to serve

Jackie Buboltz
Becker County

Jacob McArthur
White Earth Nation

Laura J. Busian Schmidt
Stevens County

Trina Starker
Pope County

Nancy Huot
Stevens County

Eric Newell
Clay County

David Schornack
Otter Tail County

Janice Tweet
Clay County

Corey Kratcha
Wilkin County

Elizabeth Pihlaja
Otter Tail County

Shelly Staebler
Traverse County

Tyler Wirth
Douglas County

Kari Kreft
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Becker County

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City of Browns Valley

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Grant County



GATHERING TO EDUCATE, ACTIVATE, AND CELEBRATE

We continue to hold events throughout our region, gathering with new and old friends to build connections and collaborate on meaningful projects that uplift our communities. Check out our events calendar at wcif.org/events to find out when we'll be in your area!

STAFF

Jill Amundson
Impact Evaluator

Sarah Casey
Director of Strategic Communications

Marsha Erickson
Early Childhood Specialist

Deb Hegseth
Loan Specialist

Phil Hintz
Loan Officer

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Cedar Walters
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Anna Wasescha
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Heather Weber
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Welcome new team members



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Chief Financial Officer



Greta Hentges
Marketing & Communications Specialist



Griffin Peck
Climate Resilience Officer



Typhanie Schafer
Office Administrator



Ben Schierer
Director of Civic Partnerships

TOGETHER, WE CAN DO SO MUCH.

Let's partner to create ripples that change our communities,
our region, and our world for the better—forever.



UNLOCK THE STORY

Scan for an exclusive video on
West Central Initiative's ripples of good.



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Call (800) 735-2239 to schedule a meeting to learn more.