

ANNUAL REPORT

AEOA strengthens communities by providing opportunities to people experiencing social and economic challenges.

20
24



■ About AEOA

Arrowhead Economic Opportunity Agency (AEOA) is a private, 501(c)3 nonprofit established as a Community Action Agency for the Northeast Minnesota counties of Cook, Lake, and St. Louis in response to the 1964 Economic Opportunity Act. The Agency provides services through six service departments including Employment and Training, Head Start, Housing Recourses, Housing Services, Senior and Nutrition Services, and Transit. AEOA has over 59 years as a major provider of self-sufficiency services to low-income and disadvantaged persons in the Agency's service area.



■ Mission

To strengthen communities by providing opportunities for people experiencing social and economic challenges.

■ Vision

All people served will make measurable progress toward self-reliance or independence.

■ Values

- **Respect**
 - We value and respect the people we serve. When they succeed, we succeed.
- **Stronger Together**
 - We believe in local wisdom and build coalitions with partners that move our mission forward.
- **Believe**
 - We believe in our mission and support each other in our work

■ 60 Years of Community Action

In 1964, President Lyndon B. Johnson declared a War on Poverty and signed the Economic Opportunity Act, establishing Community Action Agencies (CAAs) across the nation. Arrowhead Economic Opportunity Agency (AEOA) is one of the 1,000 CAAs working tirelessly to address the root causes of poverty. For 60 years, Community Action has inspired hope, helped millions of Americans transform their lives, and strengthened communities. From building housing and offering job training to providing essential services to seniors and youth, AEOA and the national network remain committed to creating opportunities for all.



Community Action changes peoples live, embodies the spirit of hope, improves communities, and makes America a better place to live. We care about the entire community, and we are dedicated to helping people help themselves and each other.

A WORD FROM THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

As we reflect on the past year, we are reminded of AEOA's continued growth and impact. Over the past year alone, we helped more than 38,000 individuals—a strong reminder of our commitment to our mission and community.

Next year will mark 60 years of community action for AEOA. It's incredible to think about the thousands of lives we've touched over these six decades. This milestone is more than just a celebration of longevity; it is a reflection of the strength of our community and the power of collaboration.

This past year brought new programs, exciting partnerships, and talented staff, furthering our capacity to serve and uplift those who need us most. Through it all, we hold committed to the Community Action Promise and we remember that we are stronger together.

None of this would be possible without the tireless efforts and support of our staff, partners, and community members. Together, we continue to build a brighter future for all.

Thank you for being part of this incredible journey.



NEW LEADERSHIP: DIRECTOR OF INFORMATION SYSTEMS

Jesse Tweten was selected as the new Director of Information Systems. Jesse holds an Associates of Applied Science degree in Professional Computer Networking from Lake Superior College.

Before his employment at AEOA, Jesse was an IT Specialist III in Tower, MN for 5 years. Jesse is looking forward to the opportunity to help bring the technology at AEOA up to current industry standards and lead innovative efforts to better support AEOA clients.

Outside of work, Jesse enjoys family time, ATV trails, and winter sports. In three words, Jesse would describe himself as committed, motivated, and energetic.



THANK YOU BOARD MEMBERS

A special thank you to our dedicated board members for their unwavering support, leadership, and commitment to advancing AEOA's mission and making a lasting impact in our communities this past year.

**Paul McDonald - Gary Peterson - Keith Nelson - Ricky Roche - Casey Venema
Michael Kearney - Michael Jugovich - Debra White - Derrick 'Rick' Goutermont
Laura Perry - Dana Waldron - Robert Hietala - Ben DeNucci
Cherri Averill Manner - Tina Koecher - Michelle Miller - Gayle Goff - Jeff Kletscher
Kevin Adee - Romit 'Jerry' Jha - Cathy Zelinski - Les Northrup - Victoria Thorsen**

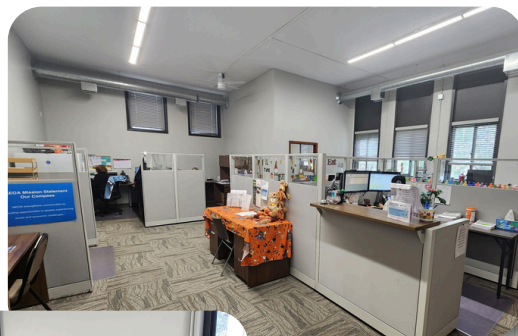
ENHANCING SPACES FOR STAFF AND CLIENTS

AEOA's main office in Virginia, located in a repurposed elementary school, has been undergoing a series of important updates to ensure it continues to serve as a safe, functional space for our staff and clients. Recent improvements reflect our commitment to accessibility, safety, and creating an efficient work environment.

Key updates include the renovation of the women's bathroom and the addition of a family bathroom on the second floor—both of which are now fully handicap accessible. These spaces offer a clean and safe environment for employees and clients alike. The building's elevator has also been upgraded to ensure reliable, safe operation, so no one has to worry about getting stuck during their visit.

In addition, several offices, including the Planning Office, Fiscal Office, Human Resources, Energy Assistance, and Senior and Nutrition Services, have received significant facelifts. These improvements include adding walls and soundproofing to create private offices for staff who require confidentiality in their work, as well as installing new desks that promote efficient and ergonomic workspaces.

Conference rooms have also been renovated to provide comfortable, updated spaces for employee meetings, partner collaboration, and client consultations, ensuring our building remains a welcoming, functional hub for the community we serve.



RECONNECTING THROUGH ALL STAFF TRAINING

After a hiatus due to the COVID-19 pandemic, AEOA proudly brought back its All Staff Training in September 2024. This event has always been a vital opportunity for staff across the Agency to come together, learn, and grow, both individually and as a team. The energy this year was unmistakable, with employees excited to reconnect and engage with one another.

The training featured several dynamic sessions, starting with Tyrai Bronson's insightful presentation on Intercultural Capacity Building. Tyrai's presentation empowered our staff to recognize and leverage differences to create change in themselves, their workplaces and their communities, specifically through the lens of race and gender justice. Vicki Sanders provided a crucial presentation on workplace violence, highlighting strategies for maintaining a safe and supportive work environment. Steven Lichtenberg provided valuable information on worker's compensation.

In addition to these expert-led sessions, AEOA's Executive Director shared what has been happening across the Agency. This allowed staff to learn the Agency's current initiatives and the organization's direction moving forward. AEOA's All Staff Training is a great reminder of how impactful it can be when we come together to learn and support each other in our critical work of helping people and changing lives.

"I really liked Tyrai. I felt that she presented the topic in a very diplomatic and fair way, and utilized a lot of examples, in a way that was unbiased and non-accusatory. Her level of humor brought to a serious topic was refreshing. I would love to hear her speak again."



"Getting together with everyone, in my department but also agency wide is a great way to get to know other departments, see what they offer and just have a good time with people that I work with. Its a great way to learn things but also have a day to just relax and enjoy each other."



ARROWHEAD TRANSIT EXPANDS TO HIBBING

As of August, Arrowhead Transit is excited to announce the expansion of its services into Hibbing, marking a significant step towards creating a more unified public transportation system across Northeastern Minnesota. Prior to this expansion, Arrowhead Transit was only able to pick up or drop off passengers in Hibbing, but not provide transportation solely within the city. Hibbing's local public transportation system had previously filled this need.

With this expansion, residents of Hibbing now have access to the full range of Arrowhead Transit's services, allowing more convenient and seamless travel both within the city and throughout the 10-county region that Arrowhead Transit serves. This change makes the transit system more cohesive, ensuring that residents across the area have reliable transportation options for work, appointments, and daily life.

Last year, Arrowhead Transit provided 494,965 rides, and with this new service area, we expect to continue expanding our impact on communities throughout the region. This expansion represents a new chapter in Arrowhead Transit's mission to provide accessible, affordable, and dependable transportation for all.



"We are thankful to those who have helped us offer uninterrupted services and look forward to passing the baton to Arrowhead Transit come August 1. We are confident they will take good care of our community members and their transportation needs." - Mayor Pete Hyde

GETTING TO WORK



The Employment and Training Department was awarded a State of Minnesota grant to address a growing issue in our rural communities: vehicle access and reliability. This funding allows us to offer financial assistance to individuals who are employed or job-seeking, live within a five-county area, and meet specific income requirements.

Financial assistance can be used for vehicle repairs or, in some cases, a down payment on a new vehicle. Participants receive valuable education through required classes focused on budgeting and basic car repair and maintenance skills, ensuring they are better equipped to maintain their vehicles long-term.

In our largely rural region, public transportation options are not always a practical solution, particularly for those who need to travel long distances for work or essential services. Having a reliable vehicle is vital for reaching jobs, grocery stores, and medical appointments. Over the last few years, AEOA has seen an increasing need for this type of support, and we are excited to now provide this assistance to help keep eligible community members on the road and moving forward.

"This vehicle and this program has made my life 90% better. It has been four years since I lost custody of my kids and I finally have sobriety under my belt. I've had a steady job for two years and I am attending school. With this car I was able to show the courts that I could be relied on to take my kids to school and get them back to their grandmas on time and get to school and get to work. Thank you for all you've done."



"Thank you, I really appreciate your support these past few months. Because of your help with a down payment, I've been able to purchase a vehicle, attend interviews, and received an employment offer at Vestis. I was hired full time as a Relief CSR Driver, making \$22.00 an hour."



HOME ON THE RANGE GRAND OPENING

In August, AEOA celebrated opening "Home on the Range," its new emergency shelter in Hibbing. Featuring 54 rooms spread across two buildings, Home on the Range is now the largest 30-day emergency shelter north of the Twin Cities, and the only domestic violence shelter on the Iron Range.

One building offers singles a quiet and secure space. The other supports individuals leaving domestic violence and families with children, providing accommodations necessary to ensure that families can stay together during their time of need. Alarming, 20% of unhoused individuals are children. For many individuals and their families, domestic violence is the primary cause of becoming unhoused.

Angela Neal, AEOA's Director of Housing Resources, said "Last year, 277 individuals came through our homeless shelter. And over 800 individuals accessed some type of AEOA homeless assistance program."

AEOA shelters are staffed 24/7 and offer a safe, dignified space for our unhoused neighbors. On-site supportive services provide guidance and resources to help residents successfully transition into permanent housing.

Call 211 if you are:

- Homeless right now
- Living somewhere without working utilities.
- Living with family and do not have space of your own.
- Going to be homeless within 2 weeks.



PREPARED FROZEN MEALS

This year, AEOA's Senior and Nutrition Services proudly received over \$400,000 grant from the State of Minnesota, recognizing our commitment to addressing food insecurity among vulnerable populations. This vital funding will enable us to significantly expand our reach. Over two years, we expect to provide 48,408 nourishing, frozen prepared meals to four homeless shelters and 12 food shelves across eight counties who will distribute to individuals aged 18-60 and their dependents.

At the heart of this initiative is AEOA's Senior Nutrition Program's existing infrastructure for meal preparation and distribution. Our dedicated ServSafe certified team prepares the high-quality, frozen meals at four of our kitchens, while program delivery drivers utilize two refrigerated vans to deliver the meals to sites each month.

As we continue to work towards a healthier, more food-secure community, we are grateful for this partnership with the State of Minnesota and the opportunity to make a meaningful impact in the lives of so many underserved individuals and families who often face barriers to accessing nutritious food.



"We have heard overwhelming gratitude from our shelter guests and Drop in Center Visitors for these meals. We have heard both great feedback on the quality, convenience and the reduction in anxiety over their food insecurity."



HEAD START FINDS NEW HOME WITH HRAS

AEOA's Head Start program has faced ongoing challenges in finding consistent, reliable spaces for classrooms across the communities we serve. Our goal has always been to situate our classrooms within local schools, providing a smooth transition into kindergarten and giving children a familiar, stable learning environment. However, limited space and competing priorities in school districts have left our program searching for a more permanent solution.

This year, we are excited to announce a new partnership with the Housing and Redevelopment Authority (HRA) in Virginia and Eveleth. Through this collaboration, Head Start will serve children directly at Clay Court and Pine Mill Court, two key HRA housing complexes, providing free Pre-K services in these communities. Each site will host classrooms for up to 20 children between the ages of 3-5. Busing will be available for families who need transportation, ensuring that every child can access these critical services.

We are also thrilled to share that construction has been approved for a brand-new playground at the Eveleth HRA complex, which will serve not only Head Start children but also the residents of Clay Court. This playground will provide a safe, engaging outdoor space for children to play, learn, and grow. Construction is set to begin in the Spring of 2025, and we look forward to seeing the positive impact this project will have on both our program and the surrounding community.

This partnership marks a significant step forward for our Head Start program. It provides much-needed stability and brings services directly into the communities that need them most. By joining forces with the HRA, we can offer comprehensive early childhood education while also helping to meet the broader needs of families, such as housing and community support. Together, we are creating a brighter future for our children and families, one that promotes stability, growth, and opportunity.



ENERGY ASSISTANCE: A CRUCIAL LIFELINE FOR COMMUNITY MEMBERS

AEOA's Energy Assistance Program (EAP) serves households in St. Louis, Lake, and Cook Counties, including the Grand Portage Reservation, offering critical support to help families manage their heating costs.

Thanks to federal LIHEAP funding, our dedicated team assists thousands of households each year. Last year they processed over 9,000 applications and provided crisis funds to over 3,000 households. This support is crucial for community members, especially during harsh winter months, as temperatures can drop below zero.

The program runs from October 1, 2024 through May 31, 2025, with multiple types of grants available: primary heat, crisis, and energy-related repairs. Crisis funds prevent disconnection, help with fuel shortages, and assist seniors in paying current or past-due energy bills. Homeowners can also receive energy-related repair assistance for malfunctioning or hazardous heating systems.

Energy Assistance remains a cornerstone of community support, helping countless individuals and families navigate the challenges of rising energy costs and economic uncertainty.

"Thank God for AEOA ..the people and programs...they are ALL WONDERFUL and have RESCUED ME ...bcuz several times my furnace has broke down in 50 below 0 weather since I signed up 20+ years ago!! God bless you all !!!"



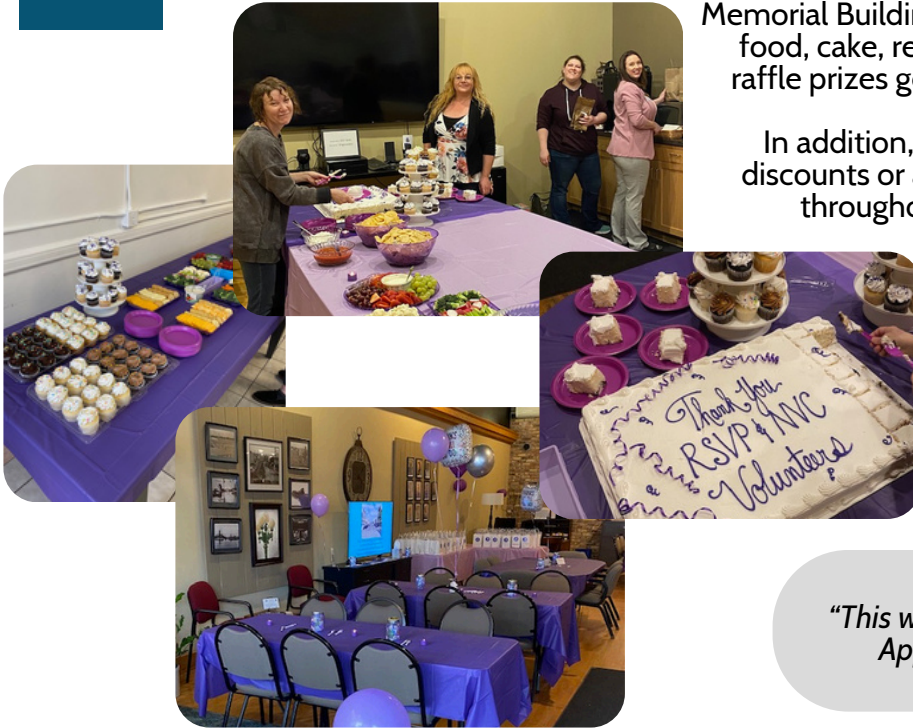
VOLUNTEER SERVICES: PURPLE RIBBON RETURNS

AEOA's Volunteer Services staff honored National Volunteer Week (April 14th-20th) with two incredible social events. Our volunteers are the heartbeat of our community, and these events were a way to show our gratitude for their unwavering dedication.

Over 225 volunteers attended the events at the Hibbing Memorial Building and Virginia Community Foundation for food, cake, refreshments, and the chance to win various raffle prizes generously donated by our local businesses.

In addition, 50 local businesses committed to provide discounts or a small token of appreciation to volunteers throughout the week when they present a passport designed by our staff.

The events received positive feedback and appreciation from many volunteers who were eager to see Purple Ribbon return. Our Volunteer Services staff look forward to continuing the tradition of celebrating our amazing volunteers.



*"This was perfect. Great job, thank you!
Appreciate being appreciated."*



50 YEARS OF TRANSPORTATION

AEOA's Arrowhead Transit began its journey in 1974, initially focusing on providing transportation to seniors in St. Louis, Cook, Itasca, and Koochiching counties. Initially funded under the Older Americans Act, this endeavor quickly adapted to address general public transportation needs with support from the Minnesota Department of Transportation. In 1975, services expanded to Lake County and AEOA effectively adopted the Arrowhead Transit name.

Over the years, Arrowhead Transit broadened its services to the general public and slowly expanded to now be Minnesota's largest rural public transit provider, covering 20,000 square miles across 10 counties in Northeastern and Central Minnesota. Services expanded to Aitkin County in 1979, Carlton in 1986, Pine in 2011, and Chisago and Isanti in 2021. Over this time, the program also played a significant role in establishing the National Association for Transportation Alternatives.

The Agency's commitment to adaptability is reflected in projects like the 2008 Rural Rides initiative and the 2012 rebrand that introduced the maroon and gray colors. With 120 vehicles and 13 maintenance facilities, Arrowhead Transit continues to serve over 600,000 riders annually, staying true to its mission of providing affordable, safe, and accessible transportation that fosters independence and self-reliance.



ACHIEVEMENTS & AWARDS

AEOA Person of the Year - Jill Carlson

This year marks the first time AEOA has introduced the Person of the Year Award, with all staff invited to submit nominations. At our all-staff training, we proudly announced the award, which saw an overwhelming 98 nominations across 49 different candidates. Jill Carlson, a standout employee, was honored with the award for her exceptional commitment to her students.

Known for her dedication beyond official work hours, Jill goes the extra mile to support students, from helping them navigate paperwork and applications to offering personal assistance during holidays. Her work on the Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion committee, as well as her involvement in the community, further exemplifies her passion for making a difference. Jill's ability to make learning fun, interactive, and accessible to all students has left a lasting impact, making her a truly deserving recipient of the Person of the Year Award. Congratulations Jill!



Transit Professional of the Year - Brandon Nurmi

Brandon Nurmi, our Director of Arrowhead Transit, has been awarded the Transit Professional of the Year by the Minnesota Public Transit Association. This award is presented to individuals who have designed and implemented innovative programs or demonstrated effective problem-solving techniques that provide proven value to their community.

Brandon's dedication to improving public transit and expanding services, including the recent successful expansion into Hibbing, highlights his commitment to making transportation more accessible for everyone. We are incredibly proud of Brandon for this well-deserved recognition. Congratulations, Brandon!



Minnesota Bus Operator of the Year - Morgan Lee

Morgan Lee, one of our dedicated bus drivers at Arrowhead Transit, has been honored as the Minnesota Bus Operator of the Year by the Minnesota Public Transit Association. This award recognizes an individual who consistently excels in all areas of performance, including safety, attendance, customer service, leadership, and overall commitment to the organization.

Morgan has not only set a high standard for safety and service but has also made meaningful contributions that have improved the lives of the public transit customers we serve. We couldn't be more proud of this achievement. Congratulations, Morgan!



ACHIEVEMENTS & AWARDS

Excellence in Service Award

AEOA received the prestigious Excellence in Service Award during this year's Minnesota Homeownership Center Advisors Conference. The Excellence in Service Award is a testament to the exceptional work of our advisors who go above and beyond to guide individuals and families on the path to homeownership.

Over the years, our Advisors have shown exceptional dedication to ensuring that all those they serve have the tools, knowledge, and support necessary to achieve the dream of owning a home. This recognition comes as we celebrate 30 years of hard work and dedication from our amazing advisors and the communities they serve. Here's to three decades of empowering homeowners and building strong and resilient communities.



Steve Chadwick Advocacy Award

Marilyn Ocepek, our Director of Senior and Nutrition Services, received the Steve Chadwick Advocacy Award, in honor and memory of Steve Chadwick, former Executive Director of Duluth Community Action.

Nominees of this award must demonstrate a persistent commitment to reducing poverty, effective advocacy in addressing the root causes of poverty, being a leader in the local or larger community, and connection to a Community Action Agency as a member of the Board, staff or program participant.

Marilyn has dedicated over 50 years of her life working towards AEOA's mission and is a true leader, advocating for seniors not only locally, but across the region. She could not be more deserving of this award.



Certified Community Action Professional

Emily Simonson has earned the Certified Community Action Professional (CCAP) credential, a testament to her exceptional knowledge, leadership, and dedication to Community Action.

As the only person in our Agency to hold this certification, Emily's achievement is especially significant. Her CCAP credential solidifies her role as a leader in the fight against poverty, reflecting her deep commitment to our mission and fostering a culture of leadership and excellence within our Agency. We are excited for the continued impact of her work.



PROGRAMS & SERVICES

Central Services

Guides, supports, and unifies AEOA services to maximize resources and ensure progress and accountability in carrying out the mission of the Agency.

- Administration
- AEOA Foundation Fund
- Fiscal Services
- Human Resources
- Information Technology
- Planning

Arrowhead Transit

To provide affordable, safe, accessible, public transportation and supports independent living and self-reliance.

- Arrowhead Transit
- Dial-a-Ride
- Medical Rides Program

Arrowhead Head Start

To work with young children and families on healthy prenatal and early childhood development, school readiness, and supporting their success in life.

- Early Head Start
- Preschool Center-Based
- Preschool Home-Based

Housing Services

To build communities by helping people meet their basic living needs; have affordable, quality housing, and to improve their quality of living.

- Business Energy Retrofit
- Downtown Building Rehab
- Energy Assistance
- Single-family Rehab
- Weatherization

Employment and Training

To enhance the employability and skills of individuals so that they may achieve their life goals.

- Adult Education
- Career Pathways
- Diversionary Work Program
- Dislocated Worker Program
- English Language Learning
- Minnesota Family Investment Program
- Minnesota Family Resiliency Program
- Senior Employment Programs
- SNAP Outreach
- Vehicle Assistance for Getting to Work
- YouthBuild
- Youth Independent Living Skills

Housing Resources

To build communities by helping people meet their basic living needs; have affordable, quality housing, and to improve their quality of living.

- Emergency Housing
- Transitional Housing
- Healthcare Access
- Homeless Youth Housing
- Homeownership Education and Financial Assistance
- Homeless Prevention & Rehousing
- Permanent Supportive & Rental Housing

Senior and Nutrition Services

To help seniors live healthy, independent lives with nutritious meals and services.

- Bone Builders Classes
- Food Access
 - Food Shelves
 - Farmers Markets
- Grocery Delivery Service
- Medical Loan Closet
- Nutrition Services
- Bundled Services
- Meals on Wheels
- Senior Dining
- Volunteer Services
- SNAP Outreach and Application Assistance
- Tax Preparation Assistance

*Aitkin - Carlton - Cass - Chisago - Cook - Crow Wing
Isanti - Itasca - Koochiching - Lake - Pine - St. Louis*

OUR IMPACT

For **59** years, AEOA has proudly served communities across **12** counties, dedicated to empowering individuals and strengthening families.

Last year alone, we made an impact in the lives of **38,405** people, providing essential services and support to help them achieve greater self-sufficiency.



429

Households were assisted in maintaining safe and affordable housing



10,360

Seniors maintained an independent living situation



494,965

Transportation services were provided



361

Children were provided school readiness skills



122

Unemployed youth & adults obtained employment



"AEOA has been very helpful over the past few years when I needed help and has always treated me respectfully and courteously. I am very grateful for them."



"I am extremely grateful to AEOA and everyone I've had the opportunity to work with. The genuine care and effort the staff puts in is amazing and deserves recognition on every level. Please keep up the amazing work. You all make a difference."



"I don't know what I would have done without assistance. Thank you always."



"Every person I have ever talked to at AEOA have always been so kind and helpful.. I'm very thankful for this program.. thank you."



Helping People - Changing Lives

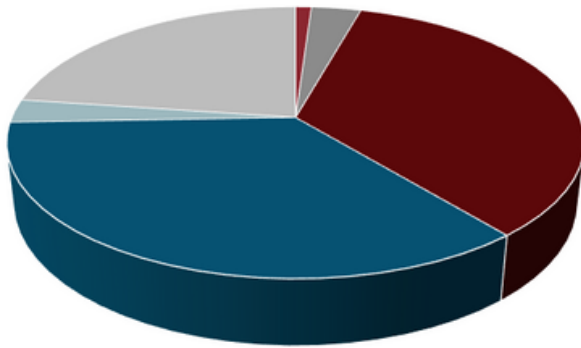
FINANCIAL SUMMARY

Listed below is a breakdown of unaudited sources of revenue and annual expenditures by department.



Sources of Revenue

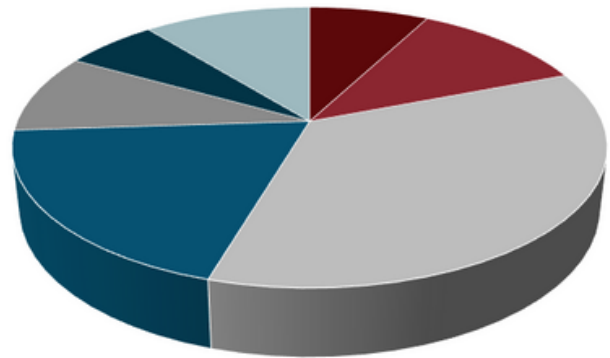
July 1, 2023-June 30, 2024



Federal	\$19,421,810.62
State	\$18,980,054.62
County	\$1,515,115.76
Private	\$1,819,398.56
Donations	\$578,953.02
Program Income	\$12,505,876.04

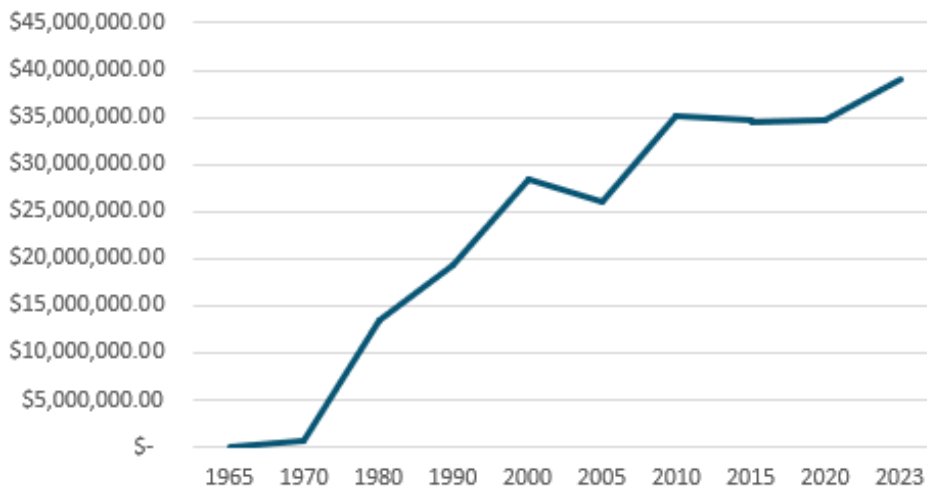
Expenditures by Department

July 1, 2023-June 30, 2024



Central	\$3,124,797.04
Employment & Training	\$4,037,425.23
Head Start	\$5,916,650.51
Housing Resources	\$5,664,715.76
Housing Services	\$10,090,132.09
Senior & Nutrition	\$4,766,565.83
Arrowhead Transit	\$18,483,499.17

Historical Levels of Funding



Stronger Together



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