



Transportation Getting Traction

The issue of transportation isn't a new one for East Central Minnesota. There have been studies, plans, commissions, and work groups. The issue continues to rise to the top of the community needs list that Lakes and Pines compiles on a biennial basis for families and individuals experiencing poverty. It has once again become a hot topic both at the legislature as well as with private funding sources. The issue is easy to see but is proving a bit more difficult to address.

Efforts have in the past at times resulted in some very large leaps forward in meeting the rural transportation needs. At other times, lack of funding or interest in rural services (by those obviously not impacted by the issue) have left past efforts with limited results.

To say that there is a lack of resources would not be completely accurate. To say those resources are limited, inadequate, and disjointed I think would be a fair statement.

The East Central Regional Development Commission (ERDC) has recently received a grant to try to work on the organizational issues and, where it can, the resource issues to improve access to transportation for lower income, senior and individuals with disabilities.

Having attended the first couple of organizational meetings, I can't help but feel that the energy in the room and the attention to the issue from those with the purse strings will lead to another one of those large leaps toward addressing the issue. If the leap will take us to the finish line, only time will tell. But, as my daddy used to say, "Let's strike while the iron's hot" and try to move the needle in a positive direction.

There is no single barrier to escaping poverty for rural families and individuals that has been as persistent and predominate as the lack of transportation. Any small step forward, is a leap forward for Lakes and Pines in fulfilling its mission.

In the upcoming weeks the ECRDC will be seeking public input throughout the region to assess the need and ferret out any solutions. Public meetings will be held in North Branch, Mora, Milaca and Sandstone. Please make your voices heard.

Mission Statement

To build prosperous communities by serving local families and individuals in their pursuit of self-reliance.

Partnering to End Poverty

Bob Benes
Executive Director

SPREADING HOLIDAY CHEER!



For the past two years Fish Lake Lutheran Church located in Harris, MN has contacted Lakes and Pines requesting a list of families for whom their congregation could purchase Christmas gifts. This year Fish Lake Lutheran Church donated to two families served by Lakes and Pines. Both families consisted of single mothers with three or more children. The families that received the donated gifts were beyond grateful, and it was wonderful to see the faces of the children light up as they received their gifts. Thank you, Fish Lake Lutheran Church, for spreading some holiday cheer to our families!

FREE TAX PREPARATION AND E-FILE

Tax time is one of the most critical moments in the financial lives of low-to-moderate income households. Tax refunds, boosted by vitally important tax credits can account for 30% or more of a family's annual income. For many, their tax refund is the largest amount of money they will receive at one time throughout the year. Money received from tax returns is often money spent in the community. Lakes and Pines offers two free tax assistance programs with availability in fifteen locations in 2019!

The Volunteer Income Tax Assistance (VITA) program offers free tax help to people who generally make up to \$55,000 annually, senior citizens, persons with disabilities and limited English speaking taxpayers. IRS-certified volunteers provide free basic income tax return preparation with free electronic filing to qualified individuals.

The program is not able to prepare taxes which include farm income, income from driving a cab, rental income or current bankruptcy. There are also other less common situations that are out of our scope. If you are unsure whether the program can do your taxes please give us a call.

Volunteer Income Tax Assistance (VITA) tax clinics will run January 28, 2019 through April 15, 2019 in Milaca, Moose Lake, Mora, North Branch, and Pine City. Volunteer positions are still available!

Do It Yourself (DIY) classes are designed to provide increased taxpayer access to free tax preparation services. By providing a certified volunteer to answer questions and help guide them, DIY gives taxpayers the confidence they need to prepare their own return and enables them to file future returns on their own. The DIY income limit is \$66,000. If participants know how to use a computer they can prepare their own taxes!

DIY classes will run January 28, 2019-April 15, 2019 in Aitkin, Cambridge, Cloquet, Milaca, Moose Lake, Mora, North Branch, Onamia, and Pine City.

Call 320-679-1800 option #4 to schedule an appointment.



CHRISTMAS TREE DONATION



Community member Don Holznagel made a generous donation to help spread some Christmas cheer this season. Lakes and Pines was gifted eight beautiful Christmas trees to give to clients and members of the community who were without a tree this holiday season. With the donation of the trees and the help of some community members volunteering their time, Lakes and Pines was able to pick up and bring the trees to the Lakes and Pines Central office to pass out. Acts of kindness like this helps spread that magical holiday spirit. Pictured is community volunteer Jed Lilienthal who helped load up the trees and bring them to Lakes and Pines.

HOUSING SUPPORT



In the spring of 2018, Lakes and Pines was contacted by a social worker who was trying every avenue possible to locate shelter for a woman who was struggling with more than being homeless. The individual's child was placed into foster care as she just could not care for him or herself with no income. She had a long history of mental health issues that prevented her from staying sober, stably housed and caring for her and her child's needs.

The first priority was to get her connected to the homeless shelter "A Place for You" in Pine City. The woman had a long conversation with a Lakes and Pines staff member about her situation which was much more complex than she initially reported. She had a long history of homelessness due to mental health and chemical dependency issues, which impacted her ability to maintain employment. The Lakes and Pines advocate assured her that she had support and would help connect her with the services available to get her back on her feet. Helping to bridge the gap, break down barriers and connect people with the appropriate resources they need to reach their goals is why Lakes and Pines exists.

The woman is now stably housed in affordable housing. She has been certified as long term homeless, due to the length of time she has experienced homelessness and her health concerns, which resulted in an approval from the county for the Housing Support Program. She continues to receive on-going housing financial assistance and case management support including obtaining health insurance and Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), accessing the food shelf, connecting with support groups to help her stay sober and connecting her with mental health services at Therapeutic Services Agency (TSA). She is currently working on her goals to reconnect with her son and appealing for Social Security benefits, as well as learning other life skills.

A GOOD NEIGHBOR



Lakes and Pines received a generous donation of scarves, hats, mittens and slippers from Neighborhood National Bank. The items were distributed to families being served through the Early Head Start Program; the families appreciated the donation. In the photo, Early Childhood Development Department Director Kraig Gratke accepts the donation from Doyle Jelsing of Neighborhood National Bank.

CELL PHONE DONATION

Due to some restructuring, Lakes and Pines was able to gather our old cell phones that were broken or no longer working and donate them to the Cell Phones for Soldiers program at the Kanabec County Veterans Services Office. Cell Phones for Soldiers will take the broken phones and recycle them. The money from the recycled phones will be used to buy prepaid international calling cards for our troops and provide emergency funding to veterans. Lakes and Pines donated 42 cell phones and 13 chargers to the program.

OUTREACH

While doing outreach at a county jail an advocate was able to discuss career options with a resident. He was interested in getting a job with a future. He was excited by the prospect of working with Lakes and Pines Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Employment and Training (SNAP E & T), where he will get assistance in choosing and enrolling in a training program. To help facilitate his training, he will also receive services, such as gas cards, and other supports. Once he is released from jail and receiving SNAP benefits, he will be assessed and begin exploring different career opportunities.



GROCERIES TO GO

Thanks to a recent feature article in the *Kanabec County Times* and its sister publications in neighboring communities, Lakes and Pines home delivery program is newly infused with a surge of volunteers. The Groceries to Go program was suffering from a lack of volunteers to deliver groceries to seniors and Individuals with disabilities, and Lakes and Pines appealed to the local newspaper to help get the word out. The publisher ran the article in early January, and Lakes and Pines is so grateful for the overwhelming response from those wishing to volunteer in their communities. Volunteer applications are in various stages of processing, and the first group of new Groceries to Go volunteers are making their delivery rounds the first week in February. It is heartwarming to experience our communities coming together to answer a call for help in providing services to those in need. With the ability to now provide delivery services to so many more who find it difficult to do their own grocery shopping, Lakes and Pines has been quite busy enrolling new program participants. Thank you!

CHRISTMAS FAMILIES



Lakes and Pines adopts families for Christmas who are facing a hardship such as, cancer in the family or loss of a loved one. For the 2018-2019 season there were four families selected as recipients of gifts. The energy housing staff had fun buying, wrapping, and delivering gifts, as well as a turkey dinner with all the fixings to the families.

SNAP EMPLOYMENT AND TRAINING

Henry Ford once said, "If you think you can do a thing or think you can't do a thing, you're right."

If you aren't working at the job you want, is it because you believe that a "good" job isn't possible for you? Perhaps you don't have the right experience to get that job, or you don't have time or resources to get the training you need to get that job. Maybe you're not even sure what job appeals to you?

If you are on Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and not on Minnesota Family Investment Program, (MFIP) providing cash assistance for families with children you are likely eligible for SNAP Employment and Training (SNAP E & T).

The first step is planning on getting the job you want. If you don't know where to start, one of the Agency Wide Advocates (AWAs) will work with you to find a starting point, help you set reasonable goals, and coach you through steps to reach those goals.

The next step is finding the path, which the AWA can help plot out, with your preferences in mind. Maybe it's determining what training or education is needed and if assistance is available to get the education you need prior to getting your ideal job. The AWA can assist with describing the skills you already have and submitting a job application that will stand out to show the new potential employer that you are the person they should hire. The AWA will be there as much or as little as you choose to offer ideas, encouragement and help eliminate or get past any obstacles that are in your way.



If you think this is your time to get that good job, contact Lakes and Pines. SNAP E & T is a voluntary, no-cost service. Lakes and Pines has staff ready and able to coach you to your next job.



RESOURCE BAGS ASSEMBLED AND DELIVERED



Lakes and Pines put together canvas bags for delivery to area food shelves in an attempt to spread awareness of Lakes and Pines and the Energy Assistance Program. The bags included an application for Energy Assistance, a resource sheet for all seven counties, a sheet that lists ways to save energy in a home, and some items that households can use in their day to day lives.

PURSUIT OF PROFESSIONAL ENHANCEMENT

Lakes and Pines' Mission Statement is very clear about the Agency's commitment to supporting individuals and families in their pursuit of self-reliance. What is also remarkable is the commitment to support staff in their pursuit of professional enhancement. There is no doubt that the Head Start Home Visitors have amazing skill sets that enable them to do this intense and powerful work. However, when the new Head Start Program Performance Standards were implemented in 2016, the Agency was challenged to partner experience with the corresponding education. The standards made it very clear that Home Visitors must have at a minimum a Home Visiting CDA (Child Development Associate).



Bring it on! Since that time, six Home Visitors have gone through and completed the Home Visiting CDA process. Two additional Home Visitors and two classroom assistant teachers are currently working through this National Credentialing Program.

Lakes and Pines is so fully committed to supporting staff in their pursuit of professional enhancement that one of our Education Coordinators has completed the process for becoming a CDA Professional Development Specialist. This certification allows her to oversee and monitor the progress of those who are completing the CDA process. Upon completion of the CDA coursework, observations, parent surveys and portfolio development, the CDA Professional Development Specialist submits the candidate's materials to the Council for Professional Development. After the Council reviews and approves this work, the Home Visitor or assistant teacher is awarded their respective Child Development Associate.

To those Home Visitors who have completed the process, congratulations! To those who are currently going through the process; enjoy the journey! To the developers of the Head Start Program Performance Standards, thank you for being the platform from which Lakes and Pines continue to support staff on their pursuit of professional enhancement.

LEARNING IS FUN AT THE ISANTI COMBO

This year the Children at Isanti Head Start Combo has gained knowledge in three important studies of their curriculum. At the beginning of the year they learned about their school, classroom, friends and families. In the study of clothing, they learned where clothes are made, how they get to us and unique styles of clothing. Before winter break, the children studied buildings by looking at several pictures of architectural designs around the world and used building blocks and other materials to recreate what they saw. Their next adventure is to study tubes and tunnels with an added study of balls, followed by a study of recycle, reduce and reuse along with trees. Other study areas of interest will be simple machines, insects and sand dwellers.

The class loves to explore the many aspects of art and science. The children say the best part of the day is “outside play”. A few favorite books that we have read include: Little Red Riding Hood, The Mitten, and Goldilocks and the Three Bears. The students can't wait to see what fun awaits them the rest of the year!



TOYS FOR TOTS



During the 2018 holiday season, Lakes and Pines had the opportunity to collaborate with the Pine County Marine Toys for Tots campaign. Any family who was receiving services from Lakes and Pines was able to complete an application. The agency received approximately 180 applications, resulting in about 403 Lakes and Pines children receiving toys! There were so many bags of toys that ECFD Department Director, Kraig Gratke, had to bring one of the Head Start buses over to pick up the remaining bags that wouldn't fit in any of the other vehicles.



Lakes and Pines wouldn't have been able to make all of these wishes come true for these families without the help of the Pine County Marine Toys for Tots, your donations, and your dedication to volunteering to help sort, inventory, bag, load, unload and deliver the toys. A special thank you to Pastor Julie Samuelson, who is the Pine County Marine Toys for Tots Coordinator.

POINT-IN TIME SURVEY OF AREA HOMELESSNESS

Can you imagine being homeless in Minnesota in January? Unfortunately, it's all too real for some people. Being homeless in Minnesota in January may equal living on the street or sleeping in a car, but it can also mean staying in a fish house, a camper or someone's shed. Some of the individuals living in this type of environment may not think of themselves as homeless.

The Point-In-Time (PIT) Count is one of the main ways homelessness is measured in Minnesota. It provides a snapshot of what homelessness looks like across Minnesota at one point in time. The federal government requires that each state attempt to count all people experiencing homelessness on one night in the last ten days in January. This year, Minnesota's PIT Count was on the night of Wednesday January 23, 2019.

Results of the 2019 Point-In-Time Homeless Count will provide data to serve as the basis for developing strategies to help people get into permanent housing. This count is also used to measure the success of programs currently available to fight homelessness. It is also vital in securing the greatest level of funding the federal government will allot area homeless service providers.

Area schools, hospitals, county offices and other service providers were asked to complete a brief survey about individuals they knew of who were experiencing homelessness. But there are people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness that are not connected to any services or agencies. Those are the individuals that need your help to be connected to services.

What To Bring To Tax Appointments

Lakes and Pines wants to do your taxes right and get you the maximum refund. In order to do that, please bring all of the necessary documents to your appointment. Read through the list below for what paperwork to bring for complete preparation!

1. Personal Information

- *Picture ID
- *Birthdate for all persons listed on the tax return
- *Social Security card or Individual Tax Identification Number (ITIN) card or letter for all persons listed on the tax return
- *Routing and account numbers for your savings account, checking account, and/or prepaid card

2. Year-end Income Statements

- *W-2s for each job
- *1099 forms for retirement, Social Security, unemployment, interest, dividends, stock sales, and miscellaneous income
- *Year end amounts for MFIP, SSI, MSA, GA, veterans' benefits, workers' compensation

3. Education and Child Care Credits

- *Record of educational expenses you paid for your children in grades K-12
- *Tuition expenses paid for you or your child to attend a college or university (Form 1098-T)
- *Student loan interest statement (Form 1098-E)
- *Child care expenses: Provider name, address, tax ID, or Social Security number

4. Property Tax Refunds and Deductions

- Note: Property Tax and Renter Rebate will not be completed until March
- *Homeowners: Mortgage interest and real estate taxes paid in 2017 and 2018 Property Tax statement mailed by the county in March
 - *Renters: Certificate of Rent Paid (CRP)

5. Additional Documents

- *Previous year's tax return
- *Verification of health insurance (Form 1095-A, 1095-B, 1095-C)
- *Record of charitable donations

BLANKETS, AFGHANS AND QUILTS, OH MY!



Many generous people and organizations have donated blankets, quilts and afghans recently. Some are new and some are gently used. These donations are greatly appreciated and go out of the office almost as quickly as they come in.

People who are homeless or living on little are surprised and grateful to be offered a blanket when they come in for other services.

Sometimes they use the blanket to keep warm in their car and sometimes it's a new furnishing for their home. In either case the donated blankets, quilts and afghans are a welcome gift. All provide warmth. Physical warmth as a covering and heartwarming knowing that someone took the time, made the effort and thought of a way to make a stranger's life just a bit more comfortable.

Pictured are Bob Benes with Jody Anderson and one of her recent donations.

DELIVERING CHRISTMAS CHEER

Pastor Kate Mensing and the congregation of Faith Lutheran Church in Isle reached out to the Early Childhood and Family Development department Lakes and Pines because they wanted to adopt families for Christmas.

Families within the community who are served by Lakes and Pines' Early Head Start/Head Start Program had the opportunity to complete an "ornament" for the church Christmas tree.

The families were very grateful for this opportunity as they were able to have gifts under the Christmas tree for their children.



A special thank you to Pastor Kate Mensing and Faith Lutheran Church!



Poverty is unpredictable. At a moment's notice, anyone may find themselves in a life-changing situation such as: job loss, a cut in hours and pay, receiving a long-term disability diagnosis for an adult or a child in a household, experiencing an injury that makes it impossible to work for months, a relationship break-up or a natural disaster. Any one of these can be traumatic economic events for a household with little or no savings.

The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, (SNAP), formerly food stamps, can help a household in these situations. However, many people won't apply for SNAP because they're worried what others will think of them.

A few myths and facts that may help reduce the stigma of using SNAP:

MYTH: People who receive SNAP benefits do not work.

FACT: About 50% of people receiving SNAP are working families whose income still qualifies them for benefits. About 80% were working or will be working within a year of receiving SNAP.

MYTH: SNAP is welfare.

FACT: SNAP is part of the USDA Farm Bill. It is designed to help individuals and families buy nutritious food when money's tight.

MYTH: If I get SNAP someone else won't get it.

FACT: SNAP is a federal entitlement program. Anyone who's eligible will receive SNAP. You will not be taking away benefits from anyone

MYTH: People are on SNAP forever.

FACT: Most people are on SNAP six to nine months.

MYTH: SNAP costs too much to run and is bad for my community.

FACT: SNAP is run efficiently. It is estimated about 93% of SNAP costs go to beneficiaries. And \$1 in SNAP benefits generates over \$1.70 in local economic activity.

MYTH: People who use SNAP benefits make less healthy food choices than people who do not use SNAP.

FACT: The Food and Nutrition Service finds that people who receive SNAP benefits spend about the same amount of money on unhealthy foods as people who do not receive SNAP benefits.

MYTH: There is widespread abuse and fraud in SNAP by beneficiaries.

FACT: In 2016 for every \$10,000 in SNAP benefits issued about \$11 were determined to have been due to recipient fraud, one of the lowest fraud rates of all federal programs.

People are eager to compare what their tax refund is or how much they receive in Energy Assistance. SNAP is a similar program. If you are eligible, you are eligible.

Lakes and Pines staff are available to assist with SNAP applications and to build awareness of the facts about SNAP.

Source: <https://www.snapttohealth.org/debunking-myths-about-food-stamps/> and https://www.2harvest.org/content_types/advocacy-blog-posts/dispelling-snap-myths.html



stands for "FOR YOUR INFORMATION." It is a quarterly newsletter provided to the area's officials, partners, Board Members and personnel of Lakes and Pines CAC, Inc.

We hope our Newsletter will present you with timely, interesting, and sometimes lighthearted information. In turn, we hope that you will present us with your thoughts and suggestions.

For further information, please contact:

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For the Agency to continue savings in postage, it is important to maintain current addresses on file.

Please take a moment to review your address label and notify Lakes and Pines of any appropriate corrections.

If you are interested in receiving the FYI electronically in the future, please email: lap@lakesandpines.org.

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