



2015 Really?!!!

One of the very small things I have always liked about working at Lakes and Pines is the fact that, as a matter of practice, we begin writing and using the new year long before it ever arrives. I suspect this is true of most who work with various grants and multiple funding years. It is nice to have started using 2015 some eight months ago on various documents and grants. It saves the inevitable crossing out the date the entire month of January until you get used to the current year.

I'm not sure if it is the mounting years or the fact that I have stopped writing 2014 altogether, but I can't help each time I write 2015 thinking..... "Really??" I can't believe it is 2015. This date seemed pretty far out there in the 70's when I started to seriously plot out my adult life. As it turned out, I had no concept of what my life would be in those days. Believe it or not, I didn't grow up wanting to be a Community Action Executive Director.

Most often I sit in amazement as to where we were then and where we are now, but all too often I ride in my car on my way to work listening to the radio with the realization that I am going to work in an organization whose mission it is to end poverty and think: Really?? Here we are in 2015 and we are still dealing with this? Why is it that the richest country in the history of the world hasn't taken care of our poor? Why is it that each news report I hear on the radio has a class, race or some other divisive characteristic undertone? Why is it that the personal lives of celebrities and sports figures are big news, while the plight of our neighbors dealing with discrimination and poverty is unheard?

It is about then that I arrive at the office and reality hits (nothing like stepping out of a warm car in 13 below temps to slap you with reality). Despite all the questions, the reality is that it is 2015 and all this still does exist, and I am happy and proud to be spending another day serving alongside those arriving with me to build a path for some to move past the past and one step closer to self-reliance.

Bob Benes
Executive Director

Lakes & Pines CAC, Inc.

Mission Statement

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

Partnering to End Poverty

Head Start Receives Multiple Donations to Help Families

Over the past couple of months, Head Start has been the recipient of a number of wonderful donations which have been, and will be, passed on to families. During this time of year when the weather is cold and sometimes unbearable, donations of hats, mittens, scarves, and other winter wear are much appreciated. The Program received donations of winter wear from Long Lake Lutheran Women's Group in Isanti, Neighborhood National Bank in Mora, and Vern Heineman from Braham. The donations were a combination of new, gently used, and handmade hats, headbands, mittens, gloves, and scarves for adults and children. In total, 166 hats/headbands, 65 mittens/gloves, and 3 scarves were donated to the Program for enrolled families to receive. These donations will help keep families in need just a little bit warmer during the very cold, frigid winter months.

In addition to the winter wear, the Program received a donation of 194 new stuffed animals and 17 books, all related to the children's books written by Mercer Mayer. This wonderful donation was given by the Cambridge Kohl's store from the Kohl's Cares for Kids Program and will be used in various ways with Head Start children.

Head Start is very grateful for all of the donations received. Thank you to all of the donors for the wonderful winter wear, stuffed animals, and books!



Becky Hanson, Early Childhood & Family Development Department Director, receives generous donation from James Aumer from the Cambridge Kohl's Store, Kohl's Cares for Kids, which will be used by the Head Start Program.

Energy Assistance Program (EAP) 2014-2015

The Energy Assistance Program (EAP) opened October 1st and runs through June 1st, 2015. EAP Certifiers have been working hard to get applications processed in a timely and accurate manner. As of December 27th, 2014, we have processed 4,226 applications. Out of that number, 3,744 have been approved, 283 have been denied, 11 have been closed, and 188 are incomplete. As of December 27th, 2014, 2,532 applications are logged and waiting to be Certified with more applications coming in daily. So far, we have awarded \$2,887,136 in Primary Heat Benefit for an average benefit amount of \$773 per household this season.

Thanks to a generous donation from the 3rd Grade Brownie Troop of Rush City, blankets are now available free of charge to households in need. Blankets are limited to one per household and must be picked up at the Energy Assistance front desk. Sizes, colors, and thicknesses vary. Supplies are limited to quantity on hand.



Thank you!!!

Christmas Families

Energy Assistance staff members continued a tradition of “adopting Christmas families” again this season. Staff worked together to identify four families in need within our seven-county service area. Families chosen had recently endured undue hardship, ranging from cancer treatments, traumatic brain injuries, and even the recent loss of a child.

Energy Assistance staff took great pride in offering a hand up to these families by providing each of them with gifts of a Christmas meal, gift cards to merchants local to them, blankets, towels, scarves, gloves, dishes, personal items and more. The gifts were all purchased by staff members and the presents were delivered on December 23rd. The affected families were very grateful. In all, Energy Assistance staff had an overwhelmingly positive impact on twelve people plus two newborn babies this Christmas, and they look forward to doing it all over again next season.



A Car for Christmas!!

Lakes and Pines CAC, Inc. Provides Donated Vehicle to a Mom in Mora!

"It is our mission to assist people in obtaining reliable transportation so they can get to work."

Lakes and Pines CAC, Inc. received a donated vehicle through our Vehicle Donation Program, which helped to make a dream come true for a local woman in Mora: to have her own transportation.

Until now, the vehicle recipient had to walk her children to and from school. She had to walk to and from work. She has appointments in Cambridge twice weekly and had to beg for rides each time. This vehicle not only offers her independence but also safety from the cold weather and possible enrollment at a local community college!



This program can only continue to be a success if additional vehicles are donated. Vehicles that need repairs are welcome. These vehicles are repaired by the Sandstone Federal Prison's Vocational Automotive Trainees. These men learn a skill that they will be able to use to make a living upon their release. They also have a great sense of accomplishment to be able to contribute something back into society.

By donating a vehicle, you can claim the value of the donation on your taxes, help your neighbors continue to move forward with their goals to become self-reliant, and help inmates learn a skill. Where else can one donation provide so many rewards?

Contact Lakes and Pines, 1-800-832-6082, extension 115 or visit our website www.lakesandpines.org for more information or if you have a vehicle to donate.

A Family in Need at Christmas

In early December, a Community Services Department (CSD) Advocate received a call from a client wondering who could help her family with Christmas. She, her husband and two young children had just moved into an apartment. They were previously homeless, living in their car. The Department of Housing and Urban Development's (HUD) Emergency Housing Program helped this family into housing and will help them ongoing until they are stable.

The Advocate then sent an email to coworkers asking if anyone knew of any resources other than the Salvation Army that could help this family with a Christmas tree, decorations and presents for the children. Almost immediately, a reply came from another Community Services Advocate, who personally offered to help. The outpouring of the Christmas season continued shortly thereafter when another Advocate offered to assist as well.

They went Christmas shopping for the family, including buying the kids toys and the parents gas certificates and food gift certificates. They bought a Christmas tree complete with decorations, went grocery shopping and bought all the food for a terrific Christmas Dinner and then personally delivered everything to the family.

The family felt very blessed this holiday season, and the CSD Advocates that made this possible simply said, "it truly is better to give than to receive."

"Thank You" Received by the Community Services Department on December 4, 2014

To Lakes and Pines and Megan,

I just wanted to thank you for everything you do. It isn't easy to make it in this world today. Having you guys here for me has been a blessing, a REAL BLESSING! I have a baby on the way and lost my job. I have nobody close to me in the family and was about to lose my apartment. If I had not had your help, I don't even want to think about where I would be today. Everybody needs help at some point in life. A lot of people would have mom or dad there to help out, or some other family, but some people don't. I will say it again, you guys are a blessing for what you do for people and I thank you so much. Every Thanksgiving dinner, I always ask myself "What am I thankful for?" This year, it was to have such a helping hand. Lakes and Pines kept me from hitting rock bottom! Sometimes people don't try to hit rock bottom, but bad things do happen to good people. I now have a job again, I got to keep my apartment and I have a healthy, strong baby girl on the way. I can definitely say happiness is in the air for me! I truly do appreciate everything you have done for me. I could NOT ever thank you enough!

You are a BLESSING!

Miranda

Lakes and Pines Receives Mini-Grant Through SHIP

Partners in Health Living, PiHL, serving Chisago, Isanti, Kanabec, Mille Lacs, and Pine Counties, announced the availability for mini-grant funding through the Statewide Health Improvement Program (SHIP). As a partner of PiHL, the Lakes and Pines Health and Wellness Committee decided to take this opportunity and submit a grant.

The Health and Wellness Committee's focus is *"to establish and maintain a workplace that encourages environmental and social support for a healthy lifestyle."* The Committee encourages a variety of fitness programs, healthy eating and living, among other strategies to promote healthy lifestyles.

The Committee submitted a mini-grant which supported the October 1st Agency-wide policy of Smoke Free Workplace and Environment. The purpose of the Agency-wide policy is to provide a safe and healthy work environment and promote the health and well-being of employees, clients and visitors of the Agency and its operations. The policy prohibits smoking, including "vaping" with e-cigarettes on Agency property, facilities, including satellite offices, Agency vehicles and other environments. Lakes and Pines has made available smoking cessation resources to staff, as well as clientele and visitors of the Agency.

Lakes and Pines was awarded the grant due to this policy and system change; the grant received will assist in the purchase of signage for the central office and satellite offices.



Megan Bohlman, H&W Committee Co-Chair, and Bob Benes, Executive Director, accepted the grant award from Lori Swanson, Kanabec Co. Health Educator/SHIP Coordinator (center).



Dining Room Table



What does a dining room table mean to you? Other than the obvious place of gathering for a meal; we (my family) play games, do school work, pay bills, and more importantly, socialize at the dining room table. It is where we gather to talk about how our day was, both good and bad. It is a place that we connect and come together with friends and family.

Lately, I have noticed in my role as a Community Services Advocate that many of our clients do not have that special “gathering” place (that means so much to me) because they cannot afford to purchase one.

As a Community Services Advocate, we meet in the homes of emergency housing applicants who have been homeless or who are at risk of homelessness to assess the client’s needs, barriers, and strengths in order to assist them in their pursuit of self-reliance. Often times when I meet with a client, we are perched on the couch or on the floor to complete our paperwork.

If you have a dining room table that you would be interested in donating to a family (but willing to store until the need arises), please contact the Lakes and Pines Community Services Department at 1-800-832-6082, ext. 115 and we would gladly make sure it gets to someone in need.

Reach Out for Warmth

The Reach Out For Warmth Program continues to be an important resource for households experiencing an energy-related crisis. Up to \$400 in Reach Out For Warmth funds are available once per lifetime to qualifying households when other programs are not available.

The Reach Out For Warmth Program is funded solely through donations. During the Energy Assistance Program (EAP) ’13-’14 Program Year, \$2,579.30 in Reach Out For Warmth funds were used to help households in need.

Thanks to a generous donation from Hope Lutheran Church of Moose Lake, we have been able to help three households this season with \$800 in Reach Out For Warmth Funds when we would have otherwise been unable to offer help. As of December 27th, 2014, we have \$4,244.32 in Reach Out For Warmth Funds remaining. We encourage anyone or any organization who is interested in donating to the Reach Out For Warmth fund to contact the Energy/Housing Department for more details.



Mental Health Partnerships with Head Start are Making Positive Differences for Families and Children

Over the last several years, many negative changes have affected families in our service area. Higher energy costs, lower job availability, and higher stress in general have taken their toll. This becomes painfully obvious when we look at the rising mental illness statistics in both adults and children. Children, while resilient, are dually affected by the mental health issues of a parent or caregiver, which makes children susceptible to higher stress levels (the combination of caregiver stress, as well as child stress) which can have a direct effect on behavior, physical health, and school readiness.

Thankfully, Head Start has several partnerships with mental health professionals in our service area. The staff at the partnering mental health agencies are helping Head Start staff to not only understand the stressors and mental health issues that they see in home visits and in the classroom but are also available to provide direct services to families. Through observations on home visits or in the classroom, mental health professionals give advice and recommendations that greatly help staff to improve services and give parents techniques to teach appropriate behavior and healthy self-management techniques to their children.

Also, there is an Early Childhood Mental Health Grant currently funding mental health assessments at no charge to families for children birth to five that are experiencing behavioral or mental health issues. This service is invaluable in connecting families to mental health services and providing resources to parents for further classes, information, and general mental health support.

Head Start Early Childhood and Family Services staff also have the opportunity, through Mental Health Mondays scheduled twice a year at each satellite office, to speak with a mental health partner in their area about topics of interest to the satellite office staff. This educational opportunity really helps to improve services to families.

All in all, the partnerships that Lakes and Pines' Head Start has with mental health professionals in the service area, including Lighthouse Child and Family Services LCC, Therapeutic Services Agency Inc., Nystrom and Associates LDT, and Human Development Center, are helping both staff and families to be more aware of resources and, in general, to have more hope for their families and children.



Operation Community Connect Needs You!



Do you want to get involved in one of the best events in your county?

Operation Community Connect (OCC) is a one day or half day grassroots event coordinated primarily by volunteers, in which providers of services gather in one place to share their information and services with community members looking for ideas on how to survive and thrive.

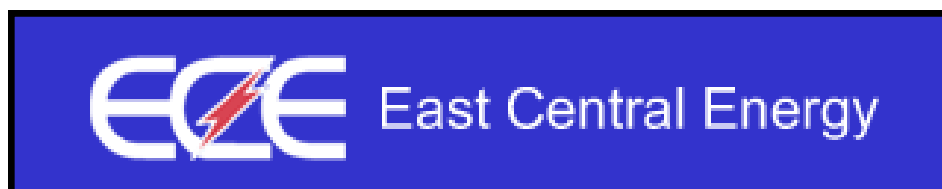
In early December, Community Services staff met with area OCC coordinators from Isanti, Kanabec and Mille Lacs Counties and interested community members. Carlton County OCC coordinators were not able to attend the meeting, and Aitkin, Chisago and Pine Counties need new OCC coordinators in 2015.

Some of the highlights of the 2014 OCCs were having enough donated coats that children could choose one that was just right for them. At one event, a young woman who was hesitant about the process had a cup of coffee with a volunteer and then the volunteer walked with her and they talked with the service providers together. The young woman and the volunteer both learned a lot about what was available in their community. Another event had a free dental clinic while another provided free haircuts. It is amazing what a haircut does to someone's self-worth. One man said, "Now I'll look good for that job interview."

OCCs are usually held in the fall. If you want more information about your community's OCC or are ready to get involved to help coordinate the 2015 events, please contact the Community Services Department, 1.800.832.6082 ext. 115.

ECE Caring Members

Caring Members is a program started by East Central Energy (ECE) in 1993 and administered by Lakes and Pines on their behalf. Caring Members funds are provided through donations by ECE customers. ECE matches funds donated, doubling the amount available to help families in need. The Caring Members Program allows us to help households with up to \$200 to resolve an energy crisis on their ECE account once every three years. Households are responsible for a co-pay amount. Caring Members funds cannot be used until the co-pay has been made. During the Energy Assistance Program (EAP) '13-'14 Program Year, \$14,973.08 of Caring Members funds were used to help 77 households avoid disconnection or get re-connected. We are currently out of funds for the Caring Members Program. Anyone interested in donating funds to the Caring Members Program should contact ECE at 1-800-245-7944.



E-Filing Taxes to Begin on January 20th!



The Volunteer Income Tax Assistance (VITA) Free Tax Clinic is gearing up. This year we have a few new volunteers to welcome into our program, plus a few of our volunteers from previous years have returned to continue their journey into “Tax Season.”

We have a few new things happening this year! We are trying out an on-line appointment scheduler that will enable our clients to set up their own appointments at the tax site location and time of their choice. We have a link button on our website at www.lakesandpines.org, and you can also find us on Facebook. Look for the **Red Button**, click it and you will be taken to the site to book your appointment.

With the new health care laws requiring all household members to have health care insurance coverage, there are significant new challenges to preparing your taxes. All taxpayers now need to bring proof of their insurance coverage, as it has to be included in your tax preparation. If you did not have insurance at any time during 2014, it *could* lower your refund amount. If any of our tax clients are in need of health insurance, Lakes and Pines can help! We have navigators to answer questions and assist you in your application process, so please call our office 800-832-6082 and choose Option #4 to inquire or set up an appointment.

This year our **Pine City Tax Site location will be moving** from the Pine City Library to the **Our Redeemer Lutheran Church, 825 Golf Avenue SW**. Here, we will have additional space to assist our clients.

ATTENTION: On **Saturdays in Mora** the Tax Site location will be moving from Lakes and Pines over to the **Kanabec County Family Services Building, 905 Forest Avenue E**. This will **only** be on Saturdays. Thursday evenings will still be at Lakes and Pines main office building.

We hope to see all of our previous year tax clients (our “Regulars”!) again this year and meet some new ones! Cheers – to Tax Season!

Energy Related Repair Program (ERR) 2014-2015



The Energy Related Repair (ERR) benefit is a crisis benefit that addresses hazardous and life threatening situations or cases where a home has no heat due to a malfunctioning or nonfunctioning heating system. If a homeowner has qualified for Energy Assistance and is having furnace problems, we may be able to help. We work closely with Weatherization staff and local furnace technicians to repair or replace furnaces. As of December 27th, 2014, we have helped 248 eligible households with furnace related repairs or replacements for a total cost of \$321,329.

I'll Admit, I Was Nervous!

Last year I heard about this “Free” Tax Program that Lakes and Pines offers. Naturally, the “Free” part grabbed my attention, however, when I learned “Volunteers” actually prepared the taxes, I told myself, “No way, that’s nuts! This is the IRS and my TAXES we’re talking about. No way are “volunteers” going to process them and I end up paying more than needed, or worse yet, I end up in a striped jumpsuit making license plates, because I didn’t report something accurately, etc.!” I decided I was just going to have to pay a ridiculous dollar amount, like I had previously to have the professionals do them right! Turns out, wow was I wrong!

Fortunately for me, a coworker had used the free tax services in previous years and praised the whole process from the initial paperwork, to the volunteers that process them, to the trained staff that go over them and approve them prior to submittal. She couldn’t say enough wonderful things about the program. I have to admit though, I was still skeptical. But when I looked at the checkbook and came to the realization that I didn’t have the “big bucks” to get them done elsewhere, I crossed my fingers and hoped the IRS would forgive me for a first-time offense . . . I went ahead and had the “volunteers” do my taxes.

I quickly learned my negative judgment of the volunteers and the program itself was completely wrong. My coworker was right, they were as professional and confidential as any place I’ve ever paid to have them done at. The tax returns were explained entirely before I could sign them for submittal and best yet, they were done correctly!

Thank you Lakes and Pines for offering this service and THANK YOU VOLUNTEERS for the great job you do! Your time and efforts are very much appreciated!



After-Hours Crisis Situations

Throughout the coldest months of the year, Energy Assistance Program (EAP) staff members are available after regular business hours, including weekends, to address emergency fuel deliveries and/or heating system repairs. We work closely with energy vendors, local furnace technicians, and each County's Emergency Dispatch to address emergency fuel deliveries and/or heating system repairs after regular business hours. As of December 27th, 2014, Energy Assistance staff members have responded to 23 after-hours calls.



Tax Time!



Don't pay big
\$\$\$\$ to get your
taxes prepared!



TAX TIME

This year make your own appointment online! Go to www.lakesandpines.org or find us on FaceBook. Just click the "SCHEDULE APPOINTMENT" button and you choose the time and location from one of our four Tax Sites! Or call us: 800-832-6082 option 4.

NEW LOCATION IN PINE CITY AT:

Our Redeemer Lutheran Church
825 Golf Ave SW

NEW LOCATION SATURDAYS IN MORA AT:

Kanabec Co. Family Services Bldg.,
905 Forest Ave E

We'll do them for **FREE**

Don't forget to bring your Social Security Card & ID for everyone on the tax form (or bring a copy of last year's taxes). Make sure you bring all income sources and tax-related forms or we won't be able to complete your taxes. **NEW THIS YEAR**—You should bring your proof of health insurance. If you or any other member of your household needs insurance, **Lakes and Pines can help!** Call us to set up an appointment with one of our MINSure Navigators at 800-832-6082 option 4.

Reminder



*Direct Deposit your
refund and receive it
FASTER!*

Frozen . . . no really, frozen to the ground!

Lakes and Pines Community Services Department (CSD) receives Emergency Services Program (ESP) funding through the MN Department of Human Services, Office of Economic Opportunity. These funds allow Lakes and Pines to place individuals experiencing homelessness into motels/hotels in order for them to have a safe place to sleep, time to locate housing, employment and other resources, while also working with a Community Services Advocate on budgeting and other goals. This past quarter (October-December 2014), 22 households of 34 individuals have received help utilizing ESP emergency funds. Below is a story that shows the importance of this funding and how it can change a life!

Scott, not his real name, is a single, unemployed man in his fifties with disabilities who has been surviving on general assistance of \$203 a month and has been homeless for ten years. Scott has held jobs in the past, but partly because of his homelessness, he was not able to keep them. He is also dyslexic, which makes it more difficult for Scott to find employment. Scott would stay on friends' couches most of the time, but most recently he had been staying in a tent in the woods. Thanksgiving morning, Scott awoke frozen to the ground. Scott was informed by his county worker about Lakes and Pines services, which resulted in Scott hitchhiking from Milaca to Mora to seek assistance.

A Community Services Advocate helped Scott fill out the Emergency Housing Assistance Application. After going over his application and talking with Scott, Lakes and Pines immediately put Scott in a hotel and provided him with employment and housing logs. Scott searched daily for employment but found it difficult without a permanent address. After five weeks of searching and working with his CSD Advocate, Scott was finally accepted into housing of his own. Scott is very excited about obtaining housing and will continue to seek gainful employment in his new community! Lakes and Pines will continue to help Scott with his goals and assist him with on-going rental assistance until he is completely on his feet!

Imagine how the ending of this story would have went had Scott not been informed of the services that Lakes and Pines, CAC. Inc. has to offer and had he not possessed the desperation and determination to get here and to do what he had to do to get off the frozen ground!





stands for "FOR YOUR INFORMATION." It is a quarterly newsletter provided to the area's seven county officials 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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lap@lakesandpines.org

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.

CORRECTION IN MAILING ADDRESS

PLEASE PRINT: NAME:
 ORGANIZATION:
 ADDRESS:
 CITY, STATE, ZIP+4 DIGITS

Mail to: Agency Administration, Lakes and Pines CAC Inc., 1700 Maple Ave E., Mora MN 55051

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