



Navigating Pandemic Challenges

When the world shut down, KOOTASCA quickly pivoted to continue to offer services.

2020 ANNUAL REPORT

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RESILIENCE



As we reflect on the past year the word Resilience comes to mind. “ Resilience is overcoming adversity, whilst also potentially changing, or even dramatically transforming, (aspects of) that adversity.” — Angie Hart

KOOTASCA Community Action, like the rest of the world, experienced a very different 2020 than we had imagined. Through the midst of a global pandemic we strove to keep our mission, clients, and staff at the forefront of all that we did. As an agency we kept on top of the everchanging environment by staying nimble, adjusting our operations, and evolving our services to keep people safe while providing much needed services and relief to those in need and in crisis.

Even amongst all the chaos some really great things happened! KOOTASCA was able to work with a variety of funders and partners to rise to the challenge to tackle issues exacerbated by the pandemic, like the digital divide, hunger, and homelessness in real ways. We provided internet services and computer equipment to more than 500 clients, distributed thousands of food bundles, provided by AEOA and the State of Minnesota, to hungry families through drive-through food distribution events, and our COVID Housing Assistance Program provided nearly half a million dollars to help 302 clients stay in their homes.

So much has been done to address the real challenges and needs that have arisen. As an agency, we continue to navigate through the many twists and turns this pandemic continues to provide and are dedicated to doing our best to support those we serve.

I am very proud to be a part of such a resilient organization and truly appreciate our staff and Board who continue to innovate and find ways to support our clients and the communities we serve.

Thank you,

Maureen Rosato
Executive Director



2020 BOARD OF DIRECTORS

- Joe Chandler, *Board Chair*
- Rick Blake, *Vice Board Chair*
- Ben DeNucci, *Board Treasurer*
- Dee Bretti, *Board Secretary*
- Kevin Adee
- Mike Fort
- Molly French
- Carla Green
- Mona Johnson
- Judy Leolich
- Gina Maki
- Wayne Skoe
- Melissa Weidendorf
- Kair Wilburn

OUTGOING BOARD MEMBERS

- Kathy Johnson
- Bridgett Wertz
- Matthew Broadrick
- Amanda Gordon

Thank you for your service!

Congratulations to the following staff for your service!

5 YEARS

- Rozanne Casey
- Haley Litchke
- Kelsey Gill
- Emily Luksik
- Mike Nelson
- BettyJo Morgan

25 YEARS

- Denise Trudel

20 YEARS

- Alice Moren
- Dale Jokinen
- Kim Ruder
- Sandy O’Fallon

WELCOME NEW HIRES

- Shannon Meyer
- Tessa Solo
- Mike Hager
- Whitney Taplin
- Amy Blomquist
- Heather Roos
- Paula Christofferson

15 YEARS

- Gail Beckman

10 YEARS

- Amy Disserud

Get to know

Our Programs

Get involved at kootasca.org
or call 800-559-9491

HOUSING IMPACT

- ▶ **First-Time Homebuyer Program**
Provides tools to move forward in achieving successful home-ownership
- ▶ **Rental & Deposit Assistance**
Offers short to medium term rental assistance to prevent homelessness
- ▶ **Transitional Housing**
Provides supportive housing for homeless single adults or families
- ▶ **Energy Assistance**
Provides financial assistance to pay a portion of an income-qualified household's energy and heating bills
- ▶ **Furnace Repair and Replacement**
Emergency heating system repair or replacement for eligible homeowners on Energy Assistance
- ▶ **Weatherization**
Provides free home energy upgrades to income eligible homeowners and renters
- ▶ **Home Rehabilitation**
Assists low-income homeowners to make basic home improvements that directly affect the safety, habitability, energy efficiency or accessibility of their homes

CHILDREN IMPACT

- ▶ **Early Head Start**
State-funded early childhood program that serves pregnant women and children ages birth through three
- ▶ **Head Start**
Head Start is a federally funded early childhood program that serves children ages 3-5
- ▶ **Teenage Parent Program**
Supporting pregnant or parenting teens to earn high school credits towards graduation

COMMUNITY IMPACT

- ▶ **Circles of Support**
Social support through human connections to help the effects of stress, depression, anxiety and more
- ▶ **PCs for People**
Provides affordable personal computers to low-income individuals and families
- ▶ **Big View**
Provides a platform to engage the community around issues that impact people in poverty.

HEALTH IMPACT

- ▶ **MNsure Navigator Services**
Our trained and certified MNsure navigators in Itasca and Koochiching Counties help applicants through MNsure
- ▶ **SOAR**
Our certified advocates help people who have a disability apply for and receive Social Security Disability benefits



Big View Community Engagement Program

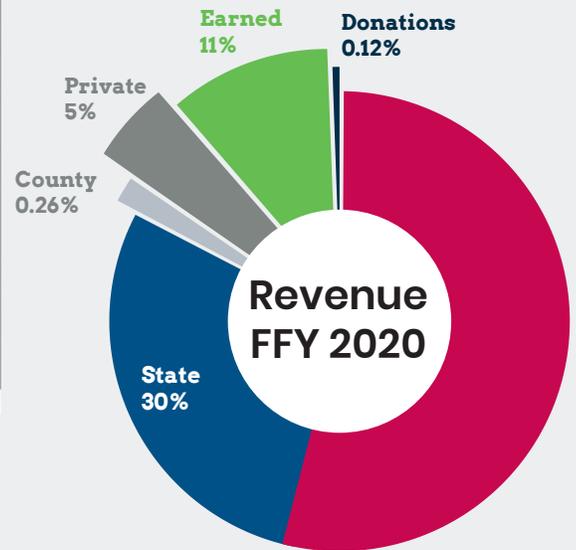
2020 began with a wave of successful programming designed to generate community dialogue around racism, privilege, and criminal justice. Amidst the forced pivot to virtual programming by late spring, a heightened level of racial tension and civil unrest gained national attention which influenced the direction of Big View work for the remainder of 2020.

The Big View Ripple Effects Mapping Report was released in April; outlining the history, results, and impacts of KOOTASCA's Big View work since its inception in 2007.

Big View programming hosted 18 events with cumulative attendance of approximately 353 in 2020.



FINANCIAL SUMMARY



Revenue Sources

Federal Grants	\$3,848,670
State Grants	2,109,901
County	18,127
Private Grants	345,112
Earned Revenue	760,892
Donations	8,380

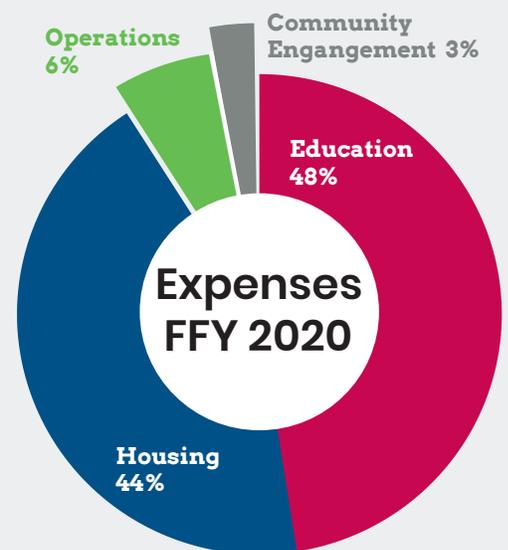
COVID Impact

KOOTASCA staff reflected on how the pandemic affected their work:

- KOOTASCA was supportive in helping staff find meaningful work to accomplish from home and were flexible with work hours as we juggled this new reality.
- COVID brought us together by sharing resources on the financial side and with idea generating.
- We were responsive, flexible to updates and changes, and kept our programs open during the pandemic.
- Being able to launch a new remote program in just two weeks was an incredible opportunity to show our funders how efficiently and effectively we can work without the traditional burdens placed on human service providers.

“Not a single program offering was canceled, and all services remained accessible.”

- One of the first things we did was launch our Digital Divide Program to get internet service and computer devices into the hands of those in need.
- When 17% of residents don't have internet at home, not even on a smartphone, that's a big problem. Especially since 90% of those families without internet are low-income. Thanks to our hardware and internet service partners, we were able to provide hundreds of hotspots and computers to those in need to keep them connected.
- Many of our members weren't familiar with computer technology or Zoom, so we created Zoom tutorials to help them learn.
- We hosted tech help sessions, regular phone check-ins, email, and mail communications. We increased our social media presence even more and tried different interactive posts and activities to see what got engagement. We began offering meal and food pantry pick-ups for our members later in the pandemic to replace our previous in-person food resources.
- Staff researched and created different ways to be able to teach, visit, and communicate with our students and Head Start families.
- We met Head Start families at a local grocery store and load their cars with teacher created lesson folders, gallons of milk, boxes of cereal, buddy backpacks, and lunches.
- Families are always welcome in the classroom during a regular year but not typically in the role of teaching students. In 2020, we relied on the families to teach, and we provided the lessons and tools they needed.



Expenses by Program Area

Education	\$3,376,196
Housing	3,108,352
Operations Support	403,691
Community Engagement	202,844

All facts and figures throughout this report are from the 2020 reporting year.



Photos by Miranda LaPointe

A Different Way of Learning

In the Spring of 2020, COVID-19 forced our classrooms to close. Head Start staff were sent home to work with little direction and uncertainty of how to respond to the immediate mandate. It was unclear how we would continue providing quality services to our children and families.

Staff began exploring different techniques to teach, visit, and communicate with our Head Start students and families virtually. We delivered at home learning activity kits, meals for households, and worked with community resources to help support the needs of our families. We purchased 50 iPads for children to utilize for classroom activities, teachers provided virtual learning experiences when classrooms were closed due to pandemic mandates, or when families chose the hybrid models for their children.

The KOOTASCA Education Team came back strong for the 2020-2021 school year after months of planning. We began Fall 2020 with 159 Head Start students and 14 Early Head Start and Home-Based children. Our teams were trained on how to teach children and support families as we began our new formatting

for the school year. Every team member stayed focused on our educational goals with the ever-changing requirements including outdoor and paperless home visits, in-person learning, virtual learning, and hybrid learning. We developed many policies and procedures to ensure classrooms could remain open and students and staff remained healthy: small classroom cohorts, masking, updated cleaning and sanitizing protocols, virtual training and coaching for staff, changes to our check-in process, and more. We held virtual Policy Council meetings and parent trainings. Attendance and participation was higher than ever!

Even when our whole world changed, our mission remained the same. The innovative solutions we created allowed us to approach education in a new ways. Though COVID-19 has been challenging, it has also been a great opportunity to improve our strategies to provide the best possible outcomes for every family enrolled in our program.

Social Assets during Social Distancing

Circles of Support Social Asset programming is designed to assist low-income individuals in growing and creating supportive social networks through group meetings and activities. With the full stop of in-person services for most of 2020, the need to provide training and reassurance online or by phone to those desperate for a WI-FI or human connection became a central focus.

After service redesign, safety protocols implementation, and weeks of equipment distribution and training by phone, Social Asset meetings resumed over Zoom. Members navigated technological frustrations to show up for one another, to lift each other up, to laugh, and provide virtual applause for sobriety achievements and other life milestones. Members expressed that during these chaotic and uncertain times, they missed the togetherness of sharing a meal and a high five with people who care most.

In late December, Circles of Support food services resumed with prepared meals and pantry items available for pick-up through a socially distanced process.

In March, just prior to the onset of the pandemic, a Complete Count Committee comprised of Circles of Support representatives was formed to raise awareness and encourage participation among historically undercounted communities in KOOTASCA's service area. Guided by partnerships with the Minnesota Census Mobilization Partnership, Our Minnesota Census Campaign, and the U.S. Census Bureau, KOOTASCA's Complete Count Committee made 4,207 contacts to ensure a more equitable distribution of the financial resources that provide funding for the needs of low-income people.

Working Together in a Crisis

Our clients faced a variety of barriers and challenges because of the pandemic: many suffered job loss, children were home from school, there was no daycare available, housing was hard to find, people were in and out of quarantine, and many fell sick.

or email, case managers performed client visits and check-ins with clients outside in parks, front yards, and other outdoor spaces where they could safely social distance.

Crisis Housing was able to serve additional clients thanks to additional COVID-related grants such as the EFSP through United Way, COVID19 Housing Assistance Program through Minnesota Housing, and the ESG-CV Prevention and Rapid Rehousing grant through the Office of Economic Opportunity. With the eviction moratorium in place, our team adapted the process for rental assistance so there would be no interruption in services. Similar process changes, as well as additional advocacy and navigation with landlords, allowed our clients to remain safely housed. The Crisis Services Team grew stronger, working and supporting one another throughout the pandemic-forced remote work. Weekly check-ins and team meetings over Zoom and Microsoft Teams allowed us to work safely and effectively.

The big success story for Crisis Services during COVID was successfully working together to process 420 applicants in only five months with the COVID19 Housing Assistance Program through Minnesota Housing. The team came together during this process. In the end we provided 302 clients with financial assistance for rent, utilities, and mortgage arrearages in the amount of \$451,452. This could not have happened without teamwork and the dedication we had to serving our clients during that difficult time.

Crisis Services Team: Rozanne Casey, Program Director; Michelle Caauwe, Accounting Tech; Kim Wirtanen, S.O.A.R. Navigator; Haley Berkeland, Crisis Housing Case Manager; Linda Reed, MN Sure Lead Navigator; Gail Beckman, Crisis Housing Lead Case Manager



When the Crisis Services Team was sent home due to COVID in March 2020, the team continued to serve clients using new tactics. Our MNSure and Soar Navigators served clients electronically and over the phone. Crisis Housing Case Managers worked remotely with clients for rent assistance applications, apartment inspections, and case management. Cell phones were used for voice calls and texting, forms were dropped off in mailboxes, income verification and other vital documents were sent via text

PROGRAM HIGHLIGHT Removing the Digital Divide

As the pandemic unfolded, the demand for internet service, computer equipment, web cameras, speakers and equipment, and communication software training increased at a non-stop pace in KOOTASCA's service area. The need for connectivity frequently outpaced available resources as nationwide equipment shortages and waiting lists became the norm.

Fortunately, KOOTASCA was positioned with a framework to initially address this need through existing PCs for People programming. However, obtaining and distributing equipment safely during a global health crisis provided new challenges and opportunities to partner with local organizations and school districts to connect people to the internet and each other.

Digital Divide/PCs for People services served 508 individuals in 230 households with various connectivity needs including refurbished desktop computers, laptops, tablets, hotspots, webcams, WI-FI adapters, and speakers.

I would like to extend a hand of gratitude and appreciation to you and your organization. I am sure it might seem like a small gesture to you but being in [rehabilitation] and only allowed to do several things, this tablet provides an escape from day to day frustrations, stresses, and boredom, so once again thank you for your help in the process of receiving this tablet."

-Digital Divide Client and Former Hope House Resident



508

individuals received
hardware or internet services

OUR MISSION: Building Community to End Poverty

VISION

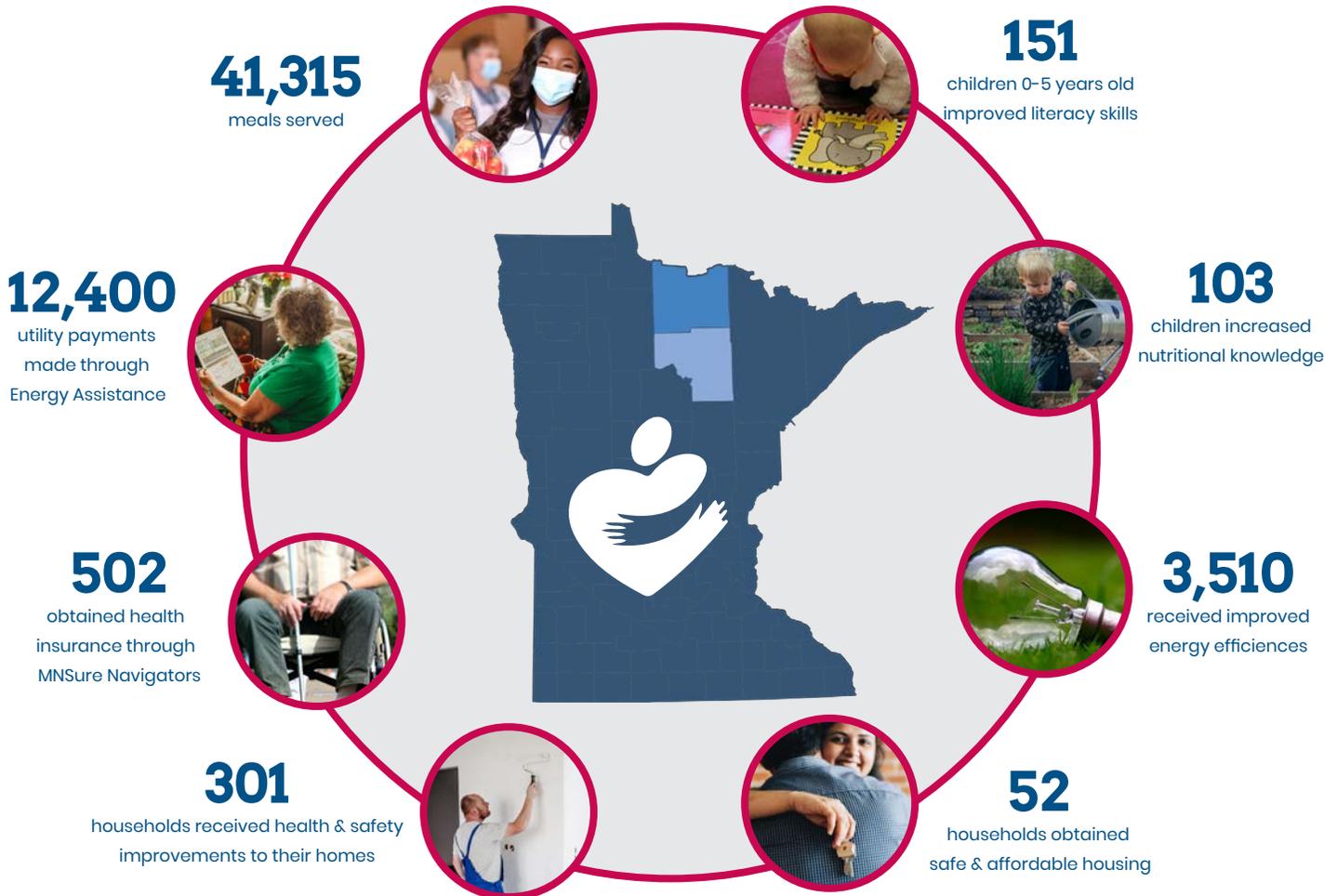
- All people are valued regardless of race or socio-economic status
- Systems are just, non-discriminatory, and fair to all community members
- All people are trained, supported and lead the on-going development of their community
- Education prepares all children to fulfill their potential and secure their future
- All people live in safe, decent, affordable housing
- All people have access to the resources they need for good health
- Poverty does not exist in Koochiching and Itasca counties

VALUES

- Poverty is eliminated through community engagement and leadership;
- Creating a strong, healthy economy where everyone has opportunities to prosper requires responsible planning and public/private partnerships;
- Our communities have the resources to eliminate poverty;
- The individual and the community are interdependent and thrive together;
- All people have value and deserve just treatment, respect, and courtesy.

Local Impact

By working to address the multiple causes and conditions of poverty, we work to improve our communities for the more than 23,000 low-income residents in Itasca and Koochiching Counties.



We know poverty can strike at any time.

That is why we lend a helping hand to others as they help themselves make meaningful change in their lives and journey out of poverty through comprehensive crisis support, anti-poverty services, and more.

GET INVOLVED AT
KOOTASCA.ORG
808-559-9491



At KOOTASCA, we envision a world where:

- All people are **VALUED**
- All systems are **JUST**
- All people are **SUPPORTED**
- All people are treated with **DIGNITY** and **RESPECT**
- People are able to access the resources they need to **THRIVE**

