

Belonging



Southern Minnesota
Initiative Foundation

Collaborating for Regional Vitality



A message for Our Partners

What does it mean to belong to a place? Does it mean feeling understood and valued? Does it mean having opportunities to build relationships with others? Does it mean having access to different spaces? Perhaps for some, it is all of the above.

At Southern Minnesota Initiative Foundation (SMIF), we know that having a sense of belonging is not merely a sentiment; it is a foundational element that drives economic growth, enhances social cohesion and nurtures a resilient and vibrant region. We believe that when people feel they belong, they are more likely to engage, innovate and support one another, creating a ripple effect of positive change.

The stories from this year's impact report celebrate how having access to resources can transform lives and strengthen the bonds that unite our communities, fostering a sense of belonging that transcends cultural, economic and social differences.

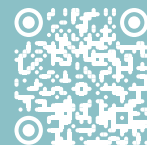
We are grateful for the unwavering support of our partners, donors and community members, who share our vision of a more inclusive and thriving region. Together, we will continue to build a future where everyone in southern Minnesota feels they belong, and where the foundation of our collective success is rooted in the strength of our diverse and connected communities.



Tim Penny
President & CEO



Shawn Vogt Sween
Board Chair



Read the full
versions of
these stories

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Help make a
difference in
southern Minnesota!

Becoming Rooted

A journey from land access to entrepreneurship

By Valerie Djuissi, Land Access Coordinator and grower at The Village Agricultural Cooperative

The main goal at The Village Agricultural Cooperative is to provide a space where you can grow your cultural food because most of us are immigrants. When in the garden you might meet someone who speaks the same language as you or someone of the same color. At The Village, we aim to build the economic power of historically marginalized communities. We welcome everybody.

Every year, more immigrants come who want space to garden. With the first Inclusive and Equitable Entrepreneurial Communities (IEEC) Grant from SMIF, we were able to double the acreage of our land from five acres to 10 acres. Some people with multi-generational homes were able to get two plots to garden because one plot was not enough to feed the family.

Originally, the goal of The Village was to provide gardens for families. However, some of our farmers are looking at ways to improve their livelihoods to make a living out of the farm. We have two greenhouses now with help from another IEEC Grant. The first one is used for education. In the second greenhouse, we did research with Hmong farmers who were looking at different types of Asian greens, and what they could do to have early vegetables for the market which can be sold at a higher price.

“We are so happy and filled with joy to have a plot of land to grow our own food. It provided income for our family. We just purchased a home because we had access to land in Rochester. We are so happy and feel more at home now than before.

- Mi Moua and Pha Lee



Our third IEEC Grant has helped us hire a Distribution Manager for The Village. They are finding markets for the farmers because it's very difficult for new farmers to sell directly. Now, the Distribution Manager can do that work on their behalf. We have a name out there, and people are aware of what we're doing. It's up to the Distribution Manager now to make sure that all of the produce finds a destination.

These grants have helped the farmers feel welcome because they can access supplies and infrastructures that were otherwise out of reach.



ROCHESTER, MN
OLMSTED COUNTY

\$4.4 million

INVESTED IN ENTREPRENEURSHIP





How to Leave a Legacy for Small Towns

Start with belonging

By Scott Johnson, son of Paul Johnson

My sisters, Amy and Paula, and I were born and raised in Le Sueur. We have very deep roots in southern Minnesota small towns. My dad, Paul, had a genuine interest in the continued success of the small-town lifestyle. That's why my dad gravitated to SMIF and its mission.

When he called to tell me he had been meeting with SMIF about financially supporting the Small Town Grant program, it felt like a match made in heaven. This grant program perfectly encapsulates many of his core values and he was so excited with its promise. He only did one cycle of the grants before he passed away, but he was very, very excited about it. He liked that he was able to make a connection with not just one small town, but with many others. My sisters and I, in continuing to support the grant program, have felt the same way.

“We felt it was important to support communities that are willing to tackle initiatives that make their town more welcoming.”

Our dad spent a lot of time thinking about how he could give back, so when our dad passed, our number one priority was to continue that commitment through monies he had set aside for charitable contributions. We were knocking on SMIF's door pretty quickly because we wanted to make sure we continued his commitment to fund this grant program. He would most



certainly say this was one of his most successful giving endeavors.

As we have continued with the program, we have tried to grow his vision by encouraging SMIF to cultivate opportunities that speak to the topic of “belonging”. We believe that in order for communities to thrive, you have to address the issue of disparity and differences. All three of us are excited about the possibility of the program focusing on how to maintain a sense of belonging for people as the world evolves and grows with different cultural influences within a small-town environment.

Participating in this program, which we know was near and dear to our dad's heart, connects us to him. Representing his values and priorities is how we are continuing his legacy.

Welcome Home

How Blue Earth is building a community for all

By Briseyda Salazar (Blue Earth resident) and Amy Schaefer (Blue Earth EDA Specialist)

The mission of BE Welcoming is to make everyone who lives in or visits or passes through Blue Earth feel welcome and happy to be here. Being welcoming is having that awareness that not everyone is coming from the same place.

The first Small Town Grant that we received from SMIF was for welcome baskets. Anyone who purchases a home that they will live in gets a nice basket that contains products from area businesses. The second Small Town Grant helped support a program that allows certain businesses to have official documents translated. The grant also supported a Welcoming Week bonfire, which hundreds of people attended, and it helped support our Day of the Dead festival. It also helped pay for things like an authentic Latin American band at Blue Earth's Giant Days celebration which made the event more inviting and culturally inclusive.

The overarching goal is to make Blue Earth welcoming to everyone: single parents, elderly people, etc. We're trying to make people feel comfortable, happy and welcome.

-Amy Schaefer

I decided to join the BE Welcoming group as a sophomore in high school because I wanted to share about my culture to people who were open to it, to be able to explain the reasons behind our traditions. One of my favorite projects that I got to help with was the Day of the Dead festival. People who don't know about the Hispanic community got to learn about our culture, and those who do know got to remember all of our traditions, so they are not getting lost.

“Any funding allows you to make things more welcoming and more accessible. It has allowed us to do things that we never could have done.”

Having school documents translated into Spanish helped me a lot personally because my mom doesn't speak English, so then I didn't have to do the work of translation. That was the most remarkable thing – it was one less thing for me to do.

I think there are a lot of people who are interested in learning more about different cultures so giving them the opportunity to do so is important.

-Briseyda Salazar



BLUE EARTH, MN
FARIBAULT COUNTY

119

COMMUNITIES IMPACTED
THROUGH COMMUNITY
VITALITY EFFORTS

Feeling Valued

Creating an environment for children,
and providers, to thrive

By Brenda Novack, owner of Little Wonders Child Care

I have been in the child care field for 27 years, and I take a lot of trainings from SMIF to enhance my program. I took the S.M.A.R.T. Steps class, which supports body movements for healthy brain development and can help with challenging behaviors. I now incorporate S.M.A.R.T. every day into what I do with my kids. Using the tools from that class has really helped me manage behaviors.



I have taken the Conscious Discipline class twice, which addresses behavioral challenges in compassionate ways. The first time I took it, I had a little girl whose mom was deployed. I was really struggling with how to meet her needs. Conscious Discipline gave me some tools to help her. I had her bring a favorite stuffed animal from home and also used the "emotion dolls" that the program recommends.

I also took a training about working with children with ADHD which was part of SMIF's Dine and Learn series. I learned that girls can be a little quieter and tend to daydream more when they have ADHD, so they tend to be overlooked because teachers and parents don't recognize it.

It means a lot that we have this option in our region for providers to take trainings. I feel valued and get to connect with other providers in this area. It's really nice to be able to sit down at a table with a group of other professionals in the



field, and if I've had a rough day, I can look at someone next to me and we can bounce ideas off each other on how to handle things. I would just like to thank SMIF for offering these classes.

“Having SMIF offer these trainings to us shows that our profession is being valued, which is huge.”



WATERVILLE, MN
LE SUEUR COUNTY

46,462

CHILDREN SUPPORTED



Fiscal Year 2024

Expenses

- 34% - Entrepreneurship
- 20% - Early Childhood
- 20% - Loans
- 18% - Affiliate Funds
- 8% - Admin & Fundraising



Total: \$8,273,223

Revenue

- 20% - Loan Proceeds/Repay
- 19% - Spending Policy
- 18% - Affiliate Funds
- 16% - Federal and State Grants
- 8% - The McKnight Foundation
- 8% - Other
- 5% - Local Donations
- 5% - In-Kind



Total: \$8,273,223

Community Investment Map

July 1, 2023 - June 30, 2024

Early Childhood: 🌟

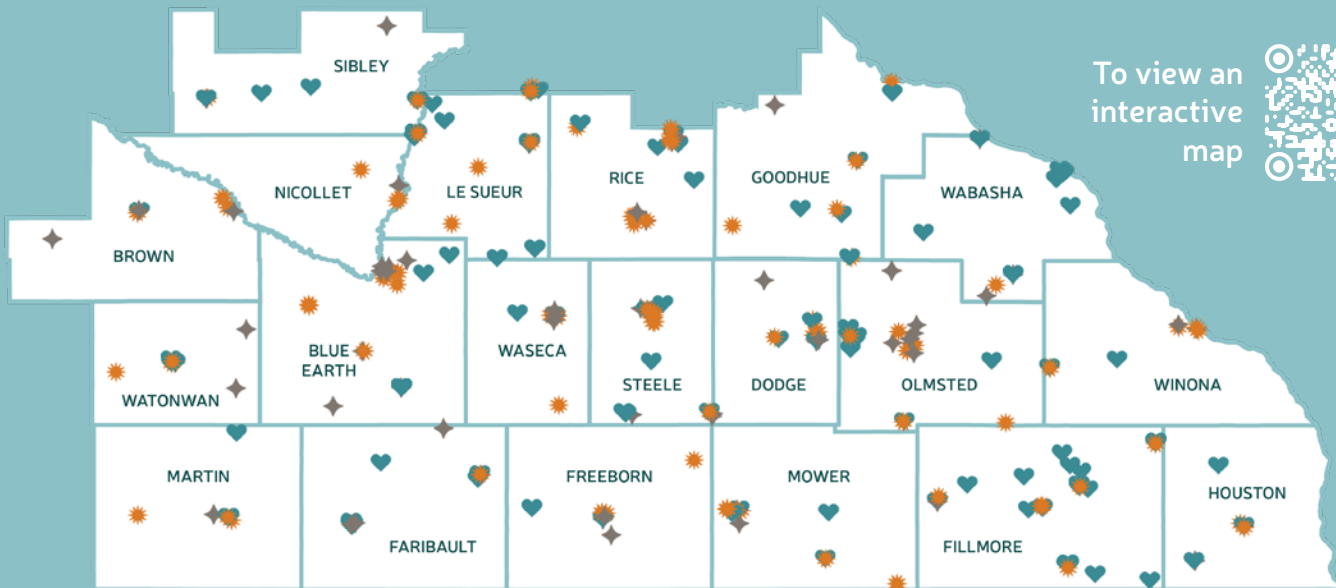
- Early Care and Education Grant
- Early Childhood Initiative communities
- Early Childhood Trainings
- Early Literacy Grant
- Technical Assistance clients

Entrepreneurship: ✦

- Inclusive and Equitable Communities Grant
- Loan clients
- Peer Network members
- Prosperity Initiative members
- Rural Entrepreneurial Venture communities
- Technical Assistance clients

Community Vitality: ❤️

- Community Foundations
- Designated Funds
- Matching Grants to Community Foundations
- Paint the Town Grant
- Small Town Grant



To view an interactive map



