

ANNUAL REPORT

Director's Letter

Annual Report Season is one of my favorite times of the year. It allows me to pause and look back at all that we, as a Living Earth Center (LEC) Community, have accomplished in the past year as well as to think creatively about what the future can hold.



This last year brought us to places we couldn't have imagined and gave us some great lessons to learn and grow from. We learned that our long-term vision needs to be as flexible as the changing needs of the community. It must provide access points for everyone, regardless of background, to have healthy food and participate in opportunities for connection.

There has been a lot of talk lately about the social determinants of health. The CDC defines them as the conditions in which people are born, grow, work, live, and age and the broader set of forces and systems shaping the conditions of daily life. They include economic stability, education access and quality, health care access and quality, neighborhood and built environment, and social and community context. Individuals and communities need to have a balance of all of these things to thrive.

Our work here at LEC touches on many of these social determinants of health. By providing access points to community growing spaces where people can grow healthy food, exercise, get vitamin D, and nutrients in the soil, we are bolstering both individual and community health.

Our robust Youth Education program allows students to understand the importance of the food cycle and develop essential skills in land stewardship and care for the greater Earth. Studies have shown that students are more likely to eat vegetables and try new foods if they have had a hand in growing them.

Our emerging growers program is committed to finding economic pathways for individuals and groups that don't have access to land. Our emphasis on cultivating community in addition to food provides opportunities for people to feel connected to land and to others around them.

Everything that we do at LEC ties into the social determinants of health. As the environmental and economic climate continues to shift, as social divides widen even further, as access to healthy food becomes more difficult, while we may be biased, we believe what we do is essential for a healthy, thriving greater Mankato Community.

We couldn't be more grateful for your support as we continue growing into the gaps and cultivating a stronger community.



Laura Marsala Peterson
LEC Executive Director

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2023 Staff

Laura Marsala Peterson - Executive
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Cora Uyigue - Program Manager
Melissa Martensen - Finance
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Madison Vandersee - Farm Manager
Mal Murphy - Garden Manager
Jacob Bases - Digital Content
Manager
Amy Hunt - Office Support Specialist

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FINANCIAL STATEMENT - 2023-2024 FISCAL YEAR

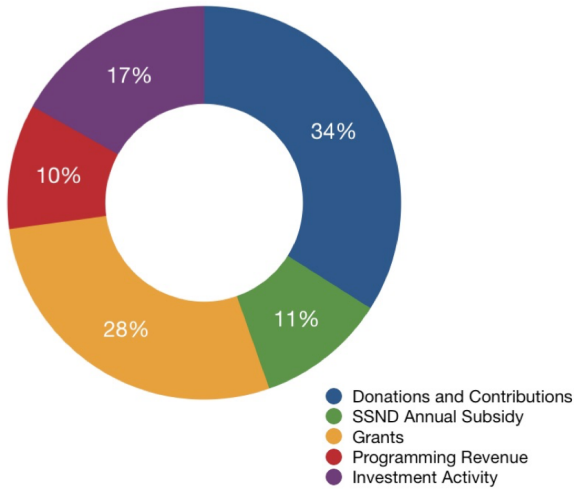
Living Earth Center (LEC) is a sponsored ministry of the School Sisters of Notre Dame (SSND), along with our annual subsidy, SSND currently pays:

- Executive Director's Salary and Benefits
- Land for the Community Garden (in-kind)

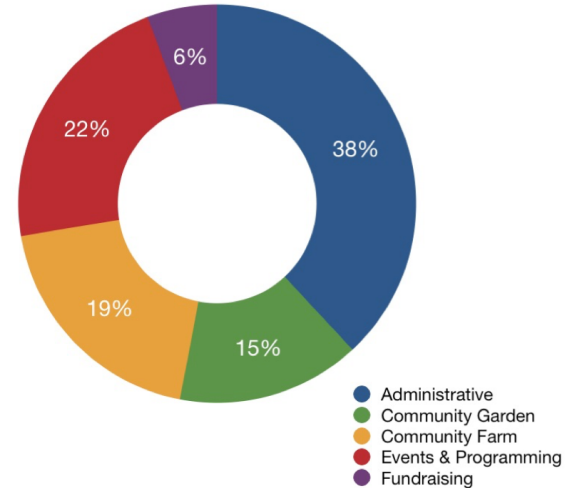
We are grateful for the continued support of SSND.

The percentages below reflect our operating expenses for fiscal year February 2023 - January 2024.

INCOME



EXPENSES



BECAUSE OF YOUR DONATIONS:

3398

pounds of **produce** were grown and harvested by LEC Staff and Volunteers and **donated** to local community partners including ECHO Food Shelf, St. Peter Food Shelf, FOCP Summer Food Program, CADA House, and Southern Minnesota Food Recovery.

18

Emerging Growers grew culturally relevant foods such as saga and managu on larger plots at the Community Farm.

105

Youth from MY Place, Loyola, and YMCA Day Camps had “hands in the dirt” **gardening experiences** at both the Gardens and Farm.

19

Garden Scholarships were awarded.

104

Community Gardeners and their families had a place to **grow healthy food** and quality **relationships**.



LIVING EARTH CENTER GROWTH



GARDEN CONSULTING COLLABORATION WITH SOUTHWEST MINNESOTA HOUSING PARTNERSHIP

In 2022, we began collaborating with Southwest Minnesota Housing Partnership (SWMNHP) to design and implement a Community Garden at Homestead Apartments, one of the largest Section 8 Housing complexes in Mankato. LEC Staff and volunteers worked in partnership with the residents to design the garden. The project was so popular that designs had to be expanded to make room for everyone. Residents grew healthy food for themselves and their families on 13 plots.

The 2023 growing season was hailed as a success by all involved. The group held numerous community gatherings and potlucks throughout the summer. SWMNHP asked that we also partner with Solace Apartments in St. Peter to assist in reviving and managing the garden residents have on site. 2024 will be our first year growing in St. Peter.

EMERGING GROWERS PROGRAM

2023 was the second year of our Emerging Growers Program at the Blue Earth County (BEC) Community Farm. It is funded, in part, by a BEC stipend and a USDA Grant in partnership with Region 9. It addresses food sovereignty and land access for community members including those who expressed concern that they are unable to access culturally significant foods.

We had 18 growers at the farm in 2023 (up from 4 in the program's inaugural year). The majority are recent immigrants from East Africa. In 2024, the program will expand. South Sudanese growers from St. Peter will be participating and our Farm Manager will work with interested growers to create paths for them to enter the local food economy, potentially starting a farm stand at the Community Farm.



COMMUNITY FARM VOLUNTEERS

The Community Farm is truly a community venture. In 2023, we had over 500 volunteer hours from both individuals and groups. From church youth groups to corporate give-back days, the farm is a place for people to come together and work to give back to their community.

Groups from The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Blethen Berens, Eide Bailly, Mankato Clinic, and Mayo Clinic came out to plant, weed, water, build berms, and move compost. Without this help, our Produce Donation Program would not have been able to donate over 3,300 lbs of fresh food to our Community Partners last year.

If you are interested in volunteering in 2024, contact SkyAnne Walker, our Farm Manager, at communityfarm@livingearthcentermn.org.

LIVING EARTH CENTER FUTURE PROJECTS

“SEED TO SAUCE” PARTNERSHIP WITH ISD77

LEC is developing a program in 2024, called "Seed to Sauce", as part of our Youth Gardening Initiative. It will provide students hands-on experience starting, planting, nurturing, harvesting, and then cooking with produce. The program was designed in collaboration with ISD77.

Working in the classrooms and at the Community Farm and Garden, students will start tomato seeds, and learn gardening skills as they plant them at the Community Farm or Garden. They will harvest the tomatoes to make their own sauce. In its first year, the program will work with three classrooms, with plans to incorporate more students in future years.



LOCAL FOOD PURCHASE ASSISTANCE GRANT

Through a partnership with Region 9, Living Earth Center is participating in the Minnesota Department of Agriculture’s Local Food Purchase Agreement (LFPA) program. The program prioritizes local food procurement from socially disadvantaged and emerging farmers, as well as organizations distributing food locally where it’s grown. LFPA supports projects engaging in novel food sourcing and distribution outside of the traditional emergency food/hunger relief structures.

Our Emerging Growers will be paid for excess produce they grow and donate to our Community Partners. LEC will also be paid for produce we grow and donate through our Produce Donation Program. LFPA funds will strengthen our Emerging Grower’s ability to cultivate more land and develop pathways for them to enter the local food economy.

FARM SHED COMMUNITY MURAL

If you have been out to the Community Farm, odds are good you’ve seen our brown shed. While we love our shed for its storage, we have never been overly fond of its less than aesthetic appearance. LEC is talking with local artists who would create a design, and then help us coordinate a community mural painting day to help us paint the shed.

We are currently looking for grant funding to compensate the participating artists for their skills and time. Keep your eye out for future project updates and plan to join us for a day of painting fun!

