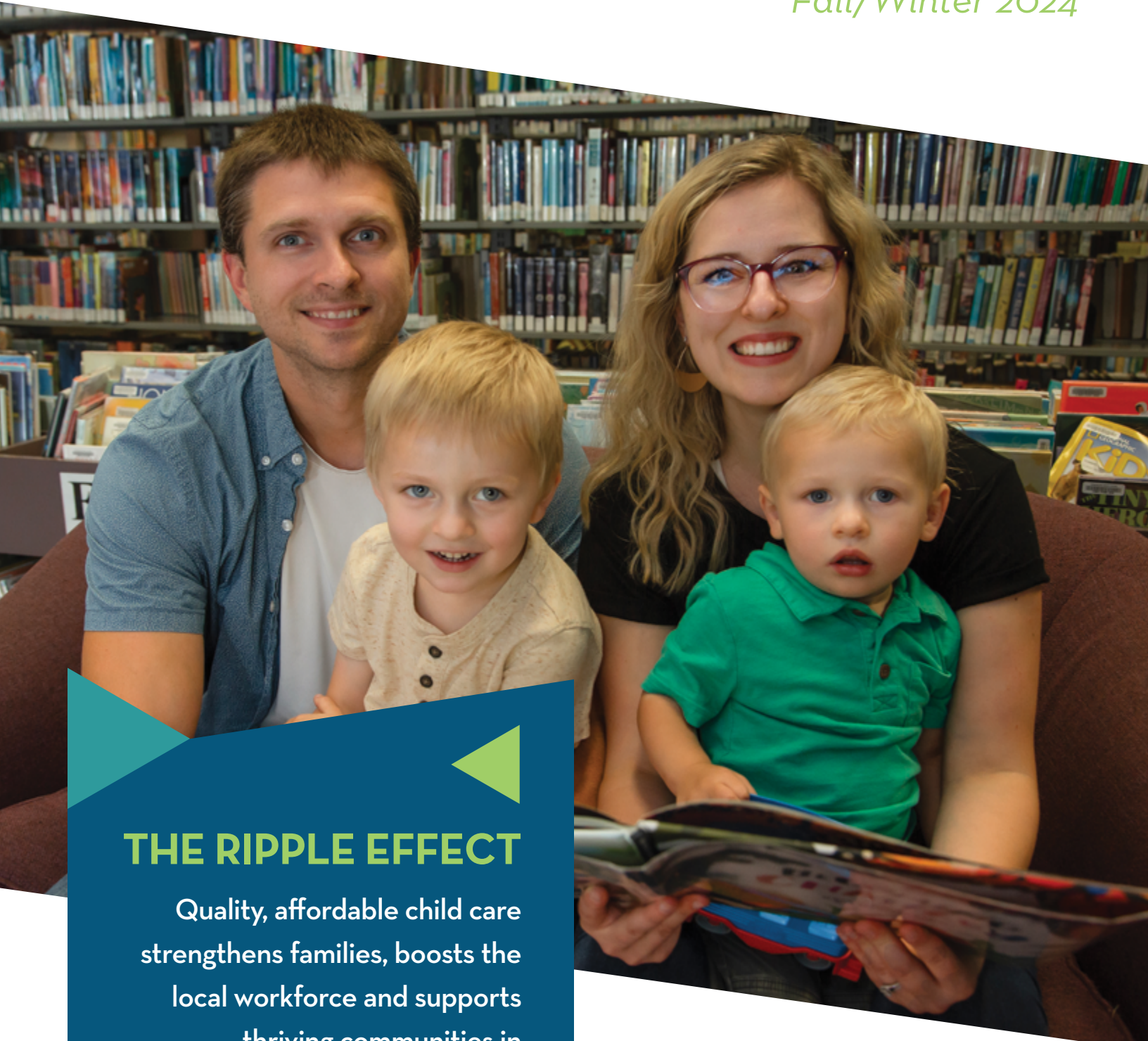


CONNECT

Fall/Winter 2024



THE RIPPLE EFFECT

Quality, affordable child care strengthens families, boosts the local workforce and supports thriving communities in southwest Minnesota.

Pictured: Charlie and Noah Zaske visit the Hutchinson Library with dad and mom, Mark and Ari, after work. The Zaske family benefits from and supports local child care solutions.



SOUTHWEST INITIATIVE
FOUNDATION

THE RIPPLE EFFECT OF QUALITY, AFFORDABLE CHILD CARE



Ari and Noah Zaske

Ari Zaske loves spending time with her two little boys. Charlie is 3, and Noah is 1. They are creative and adventurous. Both love dirt and construction vehicles. They want to know how things work and like to build stuff.

"I've always loved little kids, and now having them in my house all the time is amazing. They have the coolest imaginations," Ari said. "They like to pretend to be superheroes at home. They want to save the world."

Their mom is something of a superhero herself. Ari is a member of the Hutchinson Child Care Coalition promoting and supporting child care businesses in an effort to increase child care slots in the Hutchinson area. To recognize her work, the Hutchinson Chamber named Ari Volunteer of the Year (after receiving a record number of nominations recommending her).

"Ari moves the needle. She focuses in and does what she says she will, and then some," said outgoing Hutchinson Chamber President Mary Hodson. "Her ability to network and connect the dots and make things happen is so fun to watch. She really is making the difference for our child care coalition, which directly impacts our providers."

Solving the child care shortage is a complex task, and the going can be tough. It's especially challenging to know that comprehensive solutions take a long time. But Ari is optimistic, and she sees positive change.

"There are a lot of good things happening. We're seeing different parts of the community come together in a way I think we haven't before," Ari said. "The need for child care is striking a lot of chords with a lot of people."

Child care is key for Ari and her husband, Mark, who both have careers. The couple met when they were teenagers working together at the local Papa Murphys. To this day they critique each other's pepperoni placement skills on homemade pizzas. They moved away for college, and eventually came back to town and settled into their careers. Now Mark works at 3M as a Multi-Skills Craftsperson who fixes machines. Or, "Mr. Fix-it" as he's known at home.

Ari works as a real estate loan administrator at Citizens Bank & Trust Co. in Hutchinson. While she has a degree in literature, she's always loved math and numbers and has worked in the banking industry for years.

Jodi DeMeyer is a real estate loan officer at the bank and works with Ari to help homebuyers. She appreciates having Ari on the team.

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"Ari is a benefit to have on the team because she is connected with her coworkers and works well with all departments. She also takes the initiative to research issues, learn something new and make changes as needed," Jodi said.

Child care not only makes it possible for Ari and Mark to be employed but also empowers Ari's contributions to the community. In addition to the child care coalition, she's volunteered with Junior Achievement, the Hutchinson Ambassadors and the Jaycee Water Carnival. Mark has been super supportive of all these volunteer commitments, and so has Ari's employer.



Left: Ari works as a real estate loan administrator at Citizens Bank & Trust Co. While she has a degree in literature, she's always loved math and numbers and has worked in the banking industry for years.

Right: The Hutchinson Chamber named Ari Zaske its Volunteer of the Year for her role with the Hutchinson Child Care Coalition.

"I love what I do and having a workplace that supports the endeavors everyone is into is really unique and such a cool benefit," Ari said.

Meanwhile, Noah and Charlie are pretending, learning and doing some teaching of their own at Our Savior's Lutheran Church. The church campus is home to a birth to school age child care center, which is open to members of the congregation as well as the community.

"I'm a person that needs a work-life balance to be my best self. Child care is the workforce behind the workforce. Without child care providers, those of us with kids could not do what we do," Ari said.

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SOUTHWEST MINNESOTA CHILD CARE LISTENING SESSIONS SUMMARY REPORT

In response to the draft licensing standards published by the Minnesota Department of Human Services (DHS) in April 2024, Southwest Initiative Foundation (SWIF) hosted a series of five listening sessions to gather regional feedback on the draft standards. More than 150 child care providers, directors, economic development professionals, employers, parents and community leaders attended these sessions to voice their concerns and recommendations. Cheryl Glaeser of Achieve TFC, LLC facilitated the sessions and developed a summary report in partnership with SWIF to highlight the key challenges noted in the listening sessions and a summary of recommended changes to the standards.

The insights from these listening sessions highlight the urgent need for balanced and practical regulatory frameworks that prioritize both child safety and the operational realities of child care. SWIF remains committed to improving access to quality, affordable child care in southwest Minnesota and has shared the report with DHS, urging the agency to continue engaging with the child care community to ensure the final standards reflect a comprehensive understanding of the diverse needs and realities faced by providers.

Visit [swifoundation.org](https://www.swifoundation.org) to view the summary report.

Originally, DHS planned to revise the draft licensing standards, followed by a legislative proposal in early November to be considered during the 2025 legislative session. In August, DHS announced it will postpone proposing revised

child care standards until the 2026 legislative session, instead of presenting them in 2025. DHS received extensive feedback from the child care community requesting more time for additional feedback and engagement on the next draft version of standards.

If you have questions about child care initiatives at SWIF or the listening sessions, contact Briana Mumme at brianam@swifoundation.org or (320) 583-5025.



More than 150 child care providers, directors, economic development professionals, employers, parents and community leaders attended southwest Minnesota child care listening sessions to voice their concerns and recommendations.

KIDS FIRST CONFERENCE CHAMPIONS CHILD CARE PROVIDERS



Kids First Conference planning team members Melissa Schofield, Collene Jacobson, Roxie Tanner and Sue Thomes.

meals and snacks included, all for a \$50 registration fee. Funding from SWIF helps keep the cost low for conference attendees, and keeping that cost low allows providers to attend who may not be able to otherwise.

“The beginning keynote speaker was great for me and my group. It allowed us to see that we were possibly nearing burn-out and gave us some strategies on how we could find our joy again and get back to what we love to do.”

Miranda Evenson, Little Eagles Daycare Center (Madison)

Kids First is also designed to acknowledge and celebrate providers' dedication as child care professionals.

“Child care, and subsequently its workers, is a profession that is very much needed by many people but is easily overlooked as the essential part of our workforce that they are. This conference is as much about giving back to these child care professionals as it is about the training hours they receive,” said Sherri Looft, executive director for Child Care & Nutrition, Inc. (CCNI) and part of the event planning team.

The Kids First Conference Team includes Child Care & Nutrition Inc, Prairie Five Community Action, Prairie Five Head Start, Southwest Initiative Foundation (SWIF) and United Community Action Partnership. This event is made possible by funding from the Minnesota Department of Employment and Economic Development (DEED) and SWIF.

“With my busy schedule, the conference enables me to get almost all the required training hours needed in one weekend.”

Nancy Stredde, First Step Family Daycare (Willmar)

Southwest Initiative Foundation (SWIF) has been deeply involved in child care for many years, and we constantly see the challenges providers face. This spring's sold-out Kids First Conference highlighted just how awesome they are.

“Attending conferences like the Kids First Conference helps educators like myself stay on top of the game. Research is always changing the way we understand young children and how we should approach their care and education.”

Carol Rothmeier, Family-Based Child Care Provider (Olivia)

“Being in the same room with nearly 300 rural child care providers was inspiring,” said Scott Marquardt, SWIF President. “Their dedication, even amidst limited resources and growing needs, is remarkable. They keep our children safe, nurtured and learning every single day, and that's a foundation for a strong community and thriving economy.”

The 2024 Kids First Conference offered 12 hours of training in one location with

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Watching her boys make new friends and grow together has been inspiring for Ari. Charlie's can-do attitude helped a shy buddy's confidence blossom. Their shared experiences, including the milestone of potty training, have been a testament to their growing independence and the power of friendship.

“Those kinds of character-building skills are really hard to teach at home,” Ari said. “The things they learn from and teach their peers are endless.”

CHILD CARE COALITION

Personal experience informs Ari's commitment to finding quality child care solutions for everyone. When she and Mark were expecting Noah, Charlie's child care closed suddenly in 2022. The closure was “so emotional,” with families scrambling to find an alternative. Our Savior's Lutheran Church made a special waiting list for families affected by the closure, and luckily Zaské's were able to send both their children there.

In the aftermath, Mary Hodson at the chamber reached out to First Children's Finance about Rural Child Care Innovation Program (RCCIP). Hutchinson was accepted into the program and convened a local committee in August 2022. Mary called Ari to ask her to join the effort, and her answer was an enthusiastic yes.

“If we could make a difference through this process so other families and other kids don't have to go through this, I definitely want to be a part of this,” Ari said.

Since 2014, 43 communities, 11 located in southwest Minnesota, have participated in the First Children's Finance Rural Child Care Innovation Program (RCCIP); previously named Greater Than MN (>MN). The program helps communities identify the scope and size of their child care challenges and empowers and supports them to develop right size solutions to address those challenges.

RCCIP brought a much-needed spotlight to the child care shortage in Hutchinson. Over 18 months, a dedicated core committee collaborated with community members to address this pressing issue. First Children's Finance conducted an analysis and identified that Hutchinson is short roughly 485 child care slots.

Inspired by the program's momentum, the cohort formed the Hutchinson Child Care Coalition to sustain the progress made. The coalition was established as a chamber committee and has collaborated with the Hutchinson Economic Development Authority.

“Part of our mission is to give parents a choice,” Ari said. “No family should be forced to settle for whatever child care is available.”

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Since 2017, Southwest Initiative Foundation has invested more than \$3 million in local child care solutions.

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In addition to traditional approaches including forgivable loans and grants for child care providers, one innovative project of the coalition is being part of the Harvest of the Month initiative,

which introduces early care providers and the kids in their care to fresh produce, at no cost to the provider. Originally focused only on school-age kids, Hutchinson is part of a pilot to expand the approach to younger kids.

Currently, Harvest of the Month partners with 10 child care providers around the state, plus 18 providers just in Hutchinson – four centers plus 14 home-based providers. One fruit or vegetable is highlighted each week for kids to explore. In Hutchinson, child cares also received child safe knives with activities to engage kids in the process of food prep. Deliveries are all done by volunteers.

“Whenever we get shipments, it’s ‘Who can we get on deck to help deliver?’” Ari said. “It’s super cool.



Mark, Charlie, Ari and Noah Zaske

I love that my kids get to be a part of it. Both of them are super into cooking.”

Early wins like Harvest of the Month and the opening of a couple new child care programs thanks to the coalition’s funding are hopeful signs, but Ari knows they have just scratched the surface of what’s needed for sustainable changes.

“A lot of our goals are large and are going to take time,” Ari said, undeterred.

A REGIONAL PARTNER FOR CHILD CARE

Southwest Initiative Foundation has been a partner in the Hutchinson RCCIP and other efforts locally and across the region. Southwest Minnesota has an estimated 13,247 children under the age of five with all available parents in the workforce. According to First Children’s Finance, there is an estimated need for 4,891 additional child care slots in our region. Despite the critical need for early childhood services, the region has experienced a decline in the number of child care programs. Although many communities are working to address this gap, the competitive nature of state funding, complex community planning and a limited pool of individuals interested in entering the child care industry highlight the urgent need for more robust solutions.

As part of our economic development work, SWIF is a trusted partner in addressing critical child care shortages in southwest Minnesota. In total, the foundation has invested more than \$3 million in child care solutions including community planning, financing of local child care projects, investing in appreciation and professional development opportunities for early child care and education professionals, and collaborating with communities to ensure local child care solutions align with their needs.

SWIF also supports child care industry pathways for students, engages in public relations efforts, and advocates for public policies for the betterment of child care programs in the region.

“The foundation’s investments in child care have a ripple effect, strengthening families, boosting the local workforce and nurturing thriving communities,” said Briana Mumme, SWIF Economic Development Manager.

In Hutchinson, Ari is hoping those ripples continue and grow.

“It’s so much bigger than just me or just my family. I think about what the workforce and the child care options are going to look like when my kids have kids,” Ari said. “The time for real change is now, and if we don’t seize it, we’re going to miss our opportunity.”



Child care gets a boost from local community foundation



Kaye Fury (left) accepts a grant for the Heron Lake Day Care Center from the Heron Lake Okabena Community Foundation. Presenting the grant is local foundation board member Tracy Freking.

Heron Lake Day Care Center opened in 1975 in the small town of Heron Lake in Jackson County. Kaye Fury started caring for kids at the center in 1980 and is currently the sole staff member.

“I just always thought it was a really good job, and a good fit for me. It’s very varied. It’s not just kid stuff. I do bookwork, too, and I look for grants,” Kaye said.

Earlier this year, Heron Lake Okabena Community Foundation (HLOCF) awarded a grant to the center to pay for in-service training to comply with licensing requirements as well as supplies and activities for school age kids.

“It’s an everyday struggle just to keep it open. Any kind of grant, any kind of fundraising, anything helps,” Kaye said. “It’s important for people to have options of where to take their kids.”

Since June 2019, southwest Minnesota has seen a decline in the number of licensed child care centers and licensed family child care, placing a larger strain on child care availability. In Jackson County alone, First Children’s Finance estimates an additional 181 slots are needed to accommodate parents who want or need to be in the workforce and have young children.

Tracy Freking’s kids went to the Heron Lake Day Care Center when they were little, so she knows firsthand the importance of local child care.



“Having the child care center is such a great benefit to our community. Kaye was there all the time, so I didn’t have to worry about, ‘What if day care is closed? She’s never closed,’” Tracy said.

Tracy works as the business manager for Heron-Lake Okabena Schools, and she’s a founding member of the HLOCF board. The local community foundation’s mission is to solicit funds and award grants that enrich the communities of Heron Lake and Okabena by promoting education and opportunities to create a legacy of pride and partnership.

Great things have happened since the foundation was organized locally in 2001. The board has awarded more than \$265,000 in grants to 20 local organizations, including several for the Heron Lake Day Care Center over the years. HLOCF hosts two annual fundraisers, a silent auction and a golf fundraiser. They rely heavily on those events to fund local projects that keep their communities vibrant.

“This last year our goal was to try to grant everything that was submitted. All of the programs in our small communities are important,” Tracy said.

In addition to supporting the Heron Lake Day Care Center, HLOCF also awarded grants this year to:

- Jackson County to support the summer library program

- Heron Lake Okabena Caring Connections to purchase gifts for students as part of the Best Birthday Project
- City of Okabena for the fire department to replace handheld ARMER radios and repair and add LED scene lighting on fire trucks
- ISD #330 - Heron Lake-Okabena Schools to upgrade the lighting at the softball field in Okabena, purchase a new scroll saw for the woodworking shop, purchase aquaponics equipment to support the horticulture class and expand vegetable growing within the greenhouse for the school lunch program.

HLOCF is one of Southwest Initiative Foundation’s (SWIF) 31 community foundation partners. This program inspires people to give back to their community and empowers local leaders to ignite positive change.

“The Heron-Lake Okabena Community Foundation is a strong example of what can happen when community members are dedicated to investing in the future of the places they love. We’re grateful for the hard work of all our volunteer boards,” said SWIF Community Gift Officer Jeff Vetsch, who oversees the program.

Check out our community foundation directory at swifoundation.org/communityfoundations to learn about the exciting projects that might be happening near you!



**SOUTHWEST INITIATIVE
FOUNDATION**

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Support your local child care providers



Want to know how important child care providers are in southwest Minnesota? Ask a working family or a local employer, and they'll tell you early childhood professionals are key to keeping life running smoothly during working hours and helping our kids thrive. This year for National Child Care Provider Appreciation Day, we asked providers in our region to share meaningful things community members can do to show their appreciation.

Find out what they had to say by visiting swifoundation.org/five-ways-to-appreciate-child-care-providers/

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