

# 2025 Minnesota Head Start Heroes

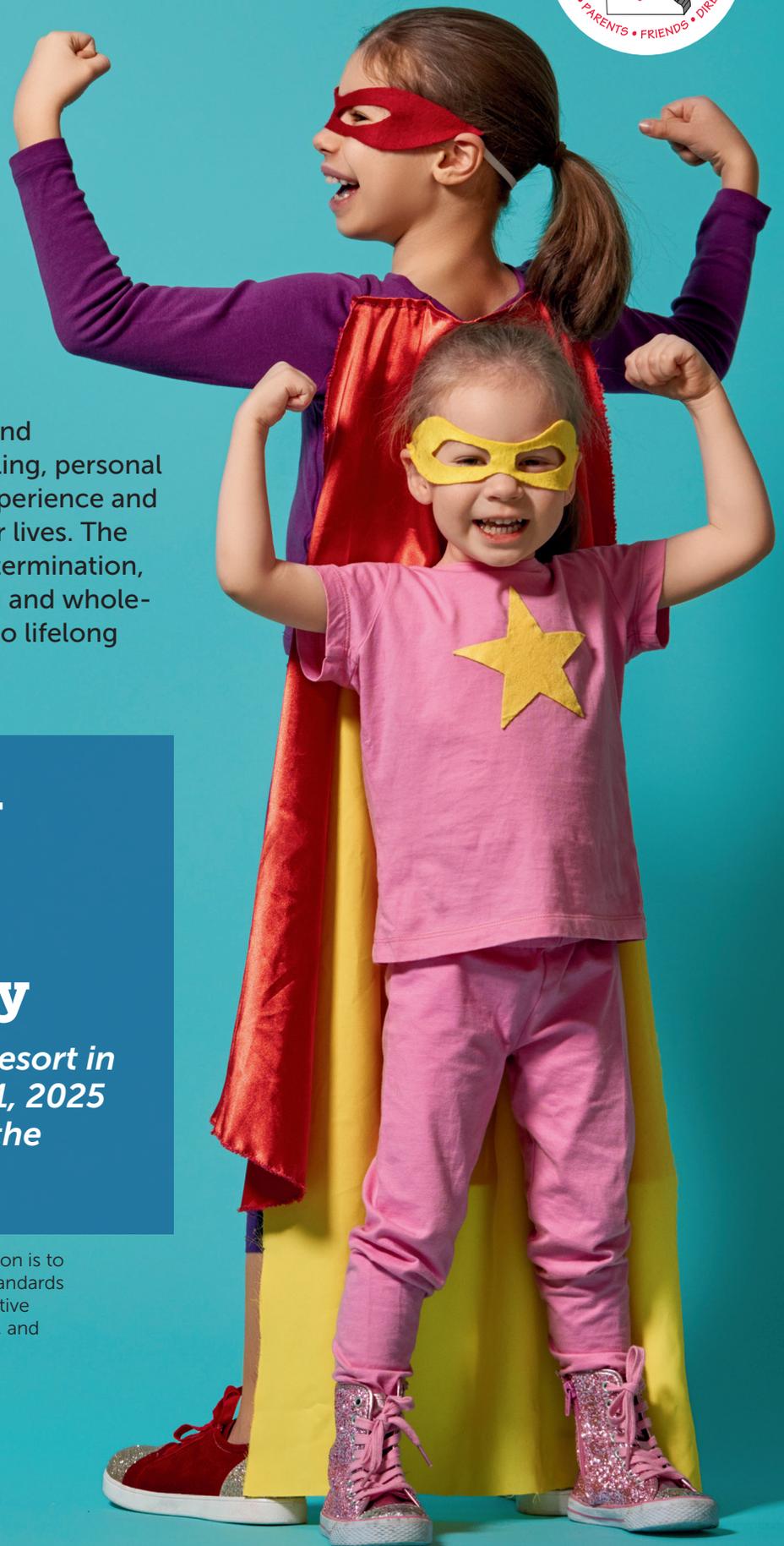


Head Start Heroes is an annual event that honors members of the Minnesota Head Start community who overcame tremendous challenges and achieved personal and family success. These children, families, alumni, and staff members have been selected by the Minnesota Head Start Association Scholarships and Awards Committee based on compelling, personal testimonies about their Head Start experience and how they were able to transform their lives. The Head Start Heroes epitomize how determination, fortitude, and access to early learning and whole-family approaches can pave the way to lifelong success.

## Minnesota Head Start Heroes Reception and Award Ceremony

*Hosted by Cragun's Hotel & Resort in Brainerd, Minnesota on April 1, 2025 with lunch at 12:00 p.m. and the awards event at 1:00 p.m.*

The Minnesota Head Start Association (MNHSA) mission is to advocate for low-income families and inspire high standards of service for young children by providing innovative leadership and programs to help children, families, and communities reach their full potential.





## CATEGORY 1: STAFF MEMBER

*Head Start alumni who has become involved in their local program as a staff member and demonstrates a passion for serving through advocacy, career growth, or being involved in Head Start, the community, or the state/national level that benefits Head Start families.*



### Emily Stangl

*Tri-County Community Action Partnership*

I first started working with Head Start when my son was three years old. At that time, we had just moved from Washington State back to the Pierz area where I grew up. Prior to moving, I had gone through a tough divorce. The relationship included domestic violence. Being a newly single mom, it was difficult, and overwhelming trying to navigate a new life and start over with next to nothing to my name. I had taken my son for a preschool screening at the school and there was a TCC staff handing out white cards and chatting with people about TCC and the programs they offered. I had never heard of TCC, but I was interested, and she told me it was income based. I met with a family advocate to do my application in the Little Falls building. It was very emotional as we talked about the divorce I went through and the abuse. She was so kind and sweet

and never made me feel judged or like I couldn't talk to her. My son started Head Start in the Pierz classroom, and the staff was amazing. They greeted him every day with a smile and a hug. The family advocate I worked with was also amazing at finding me resources and helping me feel supported whenever I needed it. She always made sure we had what we needed and was always willing to listen and make me feel heard. My youngest daughter is also still currently enrolled in EHS at TCC. Her teachers are amazing, and they always make me feel safe.

I began as a substitute teacher with TCC. After substituting for a while, I decided it was something I would like to pursue as a career. When there was an opening for an Assistant Teacher in a Head Start classroom, I quickly applied for the position and eagerly

accepted. I was in the Assistant Teacher role for one year before moving into the Lead Teacher position, which is my current role. Upon employment with TCC, I attended school to obtain my AAS Degree in Child Development. After obtaining that degree, I decided I wanted to further my education. I am currently enrolled in school for a bachelor's degree in Elementary Education with a Minor in Early Childhood Special Education.

I try to ensure every child comes to school and has a safe place to learn and grow. I am still currently in college and have worked hard to finish my degrees. I try to make sure all my families have the resources they need and feel supported, in not only their child's education, but in supporting the family as a whole.





## CATEGORY 2: FAMILY SUCCESS

*Head Start family who has made significant life changes within the past 12 months and is currently enrolled in a Head Start or Early Head Start program or is serving on a Policy Council.*



### **Pam Zimmerman**

*West Central Minnesota Communities Action*

Pam Zimmerman’s story is one of deep love, unyielding strength, and relentless perseverance, starting with an ordinary family — Pam, her husband Brian, their two sons Jaxon and Kenny, and their daughter Amanda who hadn’t yet arrived in the world, living in a small trailer house in rural Parkers Prairie. What seemed like a typical life was about to be forever altered by tragedy, but it was also a life that would show the power of resilience in the face of unimaginable loss.

I met Pam in August of 2021, when I was hired as an Early Head Start home visitor. Pam and Brian were working hard to provide for their family — Brian working long hours on the farm and Pam doing factory work. But life was about to take a turn that no one could have predicted. In November of that same year, Pam gave birth to Amanda, the youngest of their three children. It should have been a time of celebration, but just days after the birth, Brian became gravely ill with COVID. He was rushed to the hospital where he fought for his life. Pam, overwhelmed by the stress of having a newborn and two other young children to care for, kept a brave face. But on December 18, 2021, tragedy struck. Brian passed away, leaving Pam to raise their three children alone.

I remember reaching out to Pam after hearing the news, offering my condolences and asking how I could help. Her response was that she wanted to continue with our regular home visits and wanted help in the form of guidance, and a steady hand to help her navigate the overwhelming new life she had to face.

Our weekly visits became a lifeline for Pam. We talked about the small victories: the moments when she found a new routine, when Jaxon helped out or Amanda smiled for the first time. Pam poured all her energy into her children, never once faltering in her love and devotion to them.

The small community that surrounded Pam gave her the support she needed to begin rebuilding. Her friends, neighbors, and family rallied around her, offering help and encouragement. With their support, she moved out of the trailer house and into a new 2-story home. It wasn’t just a new house, it was a new chapter for the family, a place where her children could play in the backyard, where they could grow and heal.

As Pam began to adjust to life without Brian, she also found her way back into the workforce, securing childcare and

finding a job at a local convenience store. The steady work provided not just financial stability, but a sense of purpose. Pam’s resilience was evident in every step she took toward creating a new life for her family, but it was also in the quiet moments. The way she stayed connected with her children, always present, always loving.

Pam’s journey didn’t stop there. She found herself drawn to her local church, seeking comfort and a sense of belonging. She began attending religious classes, and after much soul-searching, she was baptized into the Catholic faith. Through it all, her faith grew stronger, and so did her resolve to give her children the best life possible.

Over the past three years, Pam’s resilience has been nothing short of awe-inspiring. She has faced each challenge head-on moving from one day to the next with courage, even when the weight of the world seemed to be on her shoulders. Through it all, she has never wavered in her ability to care for and love her children. She’s been their rock, their constant source of strength, and her love has shaped the people they are becoming.



## CATEGORY 3: CHILD SUCCESS

*A currently enrolled child who has made tremendous developmental progress while enrolled in a Head Start / Early Head Start program.*

### Joshua Jackson

*Lakes & Prairies Community Action*

Joshua is a ray of sunshine in our Head Start program this year! He is a delightful child full of personality and a big smile. Everyone loves Joshua, especially his teachers, and everyone loves watching him grow.

Joshua started his education journey attending the Early Head Start Program when he was 2 years old. At that time, he was very limited in his gross motor skills and hadn't started talking yet. With the help of the Home Visitor visiting once a week, a referral was completed for Early Intervention Services. After completing an assessment, Joshua qualified for services and was put on an IFSP and received services for developmental delay, speech, and occupational therapy.

In 2023, Joshua began attending Head Start in a full-day classroom. He struggled joining group settings, such as small group, large group, story time, mealtime and following classroom directions. His teachers helped to teach him strategies like using a visual timer to sit during group time. Joshua would have the sand timer next to him and

would say, "wait, timer" as a reminder to himself that he needed to stay there while the timer was going. When the sand timer finished, Joshua would get excited and say, "done?!" Now, he can sit independently in group settings both at the table and on the carpet. Nap time was another struggle for him. His teachers couldn't get Joshua to sleep or stay on his cot. Little by little, his teachers figured out that independently sleeping at school was hard for him, because it's not what he does at home. His teachers started laying next to him on the floor until he fell asleep. Today, Joshua goes to his cot on his own and covers his eyes with his blanket and his Skye toy. We are so proud of him.

When he started in the preschool classroom, he scribbled, knew very few letters, and his communication was very limited, saying one word at a time. Now he can write his name and identify all the uppercase and lowercase letters. He is using sentence fragments and can count to 400+, can identify all numbers, and can identify some sight words; Joshua's Early Intervention teacher acknowledged, "Joshua has been

able to implement strategies that he has been taught in the classroom to be able to learn with others. The hands-on learning has helped him to expand his cognitive and social skills daily! Josh has been provided with social opportunities that have allowed him to build friendships! When talking with Joshua's parents about his growth, they said, "We have noticed him making life changing strides. He can express himself and let us know his feelings, which was a struggle a year ago. He is able to play cooperatively. He has grown to the point that he wants to help with everything, even making dinner! I feel that without Head Start, he would not be where he is today as far as milestones. It's been life changing for us as parents, as Head Start has helped us with things like implementing a schedule, recommit to eating as a family, and reading together."

Despite his disabilities, Joshua can learn. With another year of Head Start, he will be even more ready for kindergarten. Joshua gave us renewed faith in the power of early education and intervention. He is a true Head Start Hero.





## CATEGORY 4: LOCAL ADVOCATE

*A Head Start Alumni who has demonstrated advocacy by becoming involved in their local program or community, such as Policy Council, their agency's Board of Directors, a parent committee / board at their public / private school, leadership in a local organization, etc.*

### **Lyubov Slashcheva**

*West Central Minnesota Communities Action*

I became involved as a Head Start parent in winter 2023-24 when my husband and I accepted the foster care placement of four siblings. At that time, we had cared for twelve previous children from foster care, five of whom were adopted into our family and three of whom were still in our home as teenagers. We were so grateful to have our three-year-old foster daughter join a half-day Head Start class that met the unique needs of this child and our family in that intense time of transition. Four months into the sibling group's placement in our home, we learned that their parents had voluntarily terminated their parental rights, and that the county would be seeking permanent placement options for the sibling group. Having fallen head-over-heels in love with the precious children, we were delighted to move through the stages toward the eventual adoption of all four children about a year after their initial placement with us. Now as a household of nine, spanning child ages of three to eighteen, our two youngest kids attend the same half-day Head Start class. They are thriving in that environment as they develop secure attachments to their forever family. We are overjoyed at the healing and growth we've seen in each of our family members, especially in the two youngest who have benefited from Head Start's family-centered programs.

My day job is as Research Director and dentist for the non-profit dental organization, Apple Tree Dental, whose mission is to overcome barriers to oral

health by inspiring partnerships that foster healthy communities. Before the start of the 2024-25 school year, I reduced my day job hours to expand my capacity to become active in supporting their school experiences, including Head Start. Given my training in dental public health and employment with a non-profit dental organization that frequently performs oral health screening outreach in partnership with Head Start programs, including establishment of a dental home with many of the kids' families, I was invited to consider participating as a parent representative on the West Central Minnesota Communities Action Head Start Policy Council. I was successfully nominated, and I agreed to serve as the Policy Council Secretary and MHSA Parent Delegate for the West Central Minnesota Communities Action program. I have enjoyed learning about and supporting the policy and administrative infrastructure that supports these critical programs across the nation. These appointments have granted opportunities to strengthen a supportive voice as a Head Start parent during MHSA Quarterly Meetings as well as special opportunities such as MHSA's Day on the Hill event. This level of engagement with the West Central Minnesota Communities Action staff and the statewide Association provides invaluable opportunities to both learn about how our community can be supported through state and federal opportunities and allows me to lend voice on behalf of my fellow Head Start parents/

families as well as the unique circumstance by which I became a Head Start parent through caring for foster/adopted children. In addition to serving my local Head Start program on the Head Start Policy Council, both my husband and I are active in the West Central Minnesota Food Policy Council, I co-chair the subcommittee on Marketing Local Foods and my husband chairs the subcommittee on Urban Agriculture. For our personal household, raising/growing food, working together to preserve/cook food, and enjoying eating food together plays a central role in our family life and parenting strategies. Experiencing firsthand the benefits of involving children in growing and cooking food and prioritizing a nutrient-dense whole food diet, we use the opportunities in the regional Food Policy Council to make these experiences accessible to all peer Head Start and other families and children in our region.

Having an awareness about Head Start from my professional work cannot compare to the learnings and appreciation that I have gained from receiving services as a parent to children enrolled in a local Head Start program and through participating in the Head Start Policy Council. I am grateful to have both experienced the services of Head Start as a parent and for the opportunities to support the program using my voice, experience, and skills as a foster/adoptive parent and oral health professional.

## CATEGORY 5: PARENT SCHOLARSHIP

*Head Start child alumni or current/past parent that is going on to achieve their education goals by attending an institution of higher education.*



### Tanaya Murdock

*West Central Minnesota Communities Action*

My name is Tanaya Murdock and my journey with WCMCA Head Start began the day my eldest daughter, Zaniyah, was born. As a mother of three, Zaniyah, now five, and her siblings Zarrian and Zymora, Early Head Start has been an essential part of our lives. From weekly visits with our Early Head Start teacher to attending socializations, the program has supported my family in immeasurable ways.

Zaniyah is now a Head Start graduate and Zarrian is thriving at Head Start where he continues to grow and learn each day. Soon my youngest, Zymora, will join him in the program. Even during the weeks when my two oldest children are with their father, Early Head Start services remain a constant source of support for Zymora and myself.

My dedication to Head Start aligns with my broader educational goals and dreams. After earning my GED in June of 2023, I immediately enrolled at Alexandria Technical and Community College, where I am pursuing a degree in Behavioral Health and Human Services.

Beyond being a participant, I have found joy in actively contributing to the Head Start community. I serve as Vice Chairperson and a parent representative on the Policy Council. We attend family nights and socializations faithfully and diligently update our In-kind sheets with activities we do outside of the program. I also make it a point to spread the word about Head Start, referring other families and organizing parent meetups to share experiences and knowledge about this incredible program.

As a single mother, I am determined to break generational curses and prove to my children that challenging work and perseverance can turn dreams into reality. Education has become the cornerstone of our family's journey. I aim to not only secure a better future for my children but also inspire them to embrace the love and kindness found in our community. I want them to see the value of giving back and becoming involved from an early age. Head Start has been more than just a program for my family, it has been a lifeline and a foundation for our future. My experiences have shaped my passion for helping families and building stronger communities, and I am committed to continuing this work both during and after my educational journey.





## CATEGORY 6: HIGH SCHOOL SENIOR SCHOLARSHIP

*Head Start child alumni that is a high school senior and is going on to achieve their educational goals by attending an institution of higher education.*

### **Victor Osanyintola** *Parents in Community Action*

My name is Victor Osanyintola and I am an eighteen-year-old senior at Park Center Senior High.

I have two older sisters; both have graduated high school but only one of them has completed college and earned a bachelor's degree. My time at PICA Head Start was a profound experience. I met my best friends there and all three of us happened to end up going to the same elementary school where we continued to be friends and learn more about each other along the way. I don't talk to them as much as I used to since we did not end up going to the same middle school or high school. It just so happens that my cousin still talks with one of them so now that I think about it, that could give me a chance to get all three of us back together for a hangout. Head Start gave me a chance to build on the values of friendship and I am forever thankful.

I would also like to mention that my mom, Adefunke Osanyintola, has been and continues to work as a teacher at

PICA Head Start. She has been there for twelve years, and she loves every part of working there.

At my high school. I have been a part of multiple after and during school activities. I was in Robotics during my freshman and sophomore years as a coder; choir during my sophomore, junior, and senior years as a bass vocalist; orchestra during my freshman year playing the cello; and National Honor Society during my junior year and as the vice president during my senior year. I have been awarded multiple achievements during my high school career. I was on the "A" honor roll during my freshman, sophomore, and junior years of high school as well as lettering in choir.

In addition to my school activities, I have also been a part of my church activities. This includes my church youth group. In youth group, we focus on bible study, and we also volunteered around the church by helping during the service and in the community

by going to a food-shelf to hand out food. I volunteered at church when we did a Toys for Tots drive during the Christmas season, and I gave a sermon at my church.

After graduating high school, I plan on attending a college, preferably in Minnesota since staying in the state is cheaper. I am still deciding on where to go in Minnesota, but I have already been accepted into numerous colleges in Minnesota. I will be going to college as a first-generation student. I want to major in computer science because I have an interest in becoming a software engineer and wish to have a successful career. I have plenty of motivation to become a software engineer due to my passion for technology. I love how technology is always evolving which means that there is always more to learn about the latest and greatest technology.





# SPECIAL RECOGNITION FOR HEAD START ALUMNI AND PARTNERS

The Minnesota Head Start Association, Inc. also honors Head Start alumni and partners who provide exceptional leadership in education and early childhood in Minnesota.

- 2016:** *Minnesota Governor Mark Dayton*
- 2017:** *Leah Pigatti, Executive Director, Mahube-Otwa Community Action Partnership*  
*AND Kay Willmoth, Regional Program Manager, Region V Office of Head Start*
- 2019:** *Gayle Kelly, Executive Director Minnesota Head Start Association*
- 2020:** *Alyce Dillon, Executive Director, Parents in Community Action, Inc.*
- 2021:** *Mark Carlson, Head Start Director, Northwest Community Action Agency*
- 2022:** *Cherry Brouwer, Professor at BSU and Friend*
- 2023:** *Laurie Coleman, Former Head Start Child and Family Programs Director, Tri-Valley Opportunity Council, Inc.*
- 2024:** *Pete Stauber, Congressman, Minnesota District 8*
- 2025:** *Tina Smith, Minnesota Senator*



## Tina Smith, Minnesota Senator 2025 Honorary Head Start Hero

The Minnesota Head Start Community would like to honor Senator Tina Smith for her years of support and dedication to Minnesota's youngest, most diverse, and at-risk children. Senator Smith has led the way in so many important issues for the families we serve and the programs that serve them. She has always taken the time to talk with the Minnesota Head Start Association and the many Head Start Program leaders in Minnesota.

Senator Smith's leadership in this area includes:

- Leads the annual CCDBG/Head Start/PDGB-5 funding letter
- Authored the Childcare Supply Improvement Act
- Leads the Child and Dependent Care Tax Credit Enhancement Act
- Leads the Expanding Childcare in Rural America Act
- Cosponsor of the Child Care for Working Families Act and the Child Care for Every Community Act
- Led push for \$50 billion in COVID relief funding for ECE and childcare
- Called on Biden Administration to develop contingency plans for the 2024 Head Start rule related to funding
- Championed ECE facilities through the congressionally designated spending (or "earmark") process, leading to at least four different childcare facilities
- Longtime supporter of increased funding for Child Care Access Means Parents in Schools (CCAMPIS) program that help student parents and offer training for ECE and childcare workforce
- Supported the inclusion of SNAP in the eligibility criteria for Head Start

Senator Smith has been a true friend to Head Start.





Senator Melissa Wiklund  
Health & Human Services Committee  
Senate Building, Room 1100  
SF1013/HF1002: Funding for HeadStart

March 25, 2025

Dear Chair Wiklund and Committee Members:

The Prenatal to Three Coalition (PN-3) is writing to express our support for continued and increased funding for Head Start programs in Minnesota, as introduced through SF1013/HF1002. Head Start plays a critical role in providing children—especially those from low-income families—with high-quality early education, comprehensive health services, and family support to build a strong foundation for academic achievement, social-emotional development, and long-term well-being.

In Minnesota, Head Start and Early Head Start programs provide high-quality early childhood education, developmental screenings, and family engagement opportunities that set children on a path to success. Head Start's commitment to culturally responsive learning environments and parent engagement aligns closely with the values and needs of Minnesota families.

Head Start is a key workforce support, allowing parents to pursue employment and education while ensuring their children are in safe, enriching learning environments. The program strengthens Minnesota's early childhood workforce—nearly a quarter of staff are current or former parents, providing meaningful career pathways in early care and education.

As Minnesota continues to face challenges in early childhood education access and affordability, robust federal funding for Head Start is more important than ever. We urge you to prioritize Head Start funding in the upcoming appropriations process to ensure that every eligible child in our state has access to these transformative services.

Thank You,

Alisha Porter,  
Children's Defense Funds-MN, State Director  
MN Prenatal to Three Coalition, Co-Chair

Laura LaCroix-Dalluhn,  
MN Prenatal to Three Coalition,  
Coalition Coordinator

Nancy Jost,  
Retired Early Childhood Advisor,  
MN Prenatal to Three Coalition, Co-Chair

Alexandra Fitzsimmons,  
Children's Defense Fund-MN,  
Senior Policy Director