

ANNUAL REPORT



Friends of the Living Earth Center,

When I reflect on this past year, I keep coming back to the magic that happens when people sit together. There is something that shifts around a table when hands are busy shelling beans or cleaning seeds. Stories surface. Worries are named. Laughter breaks through. Dreams get spoken out loud.

This past winter, our own staff would gather around a table working through hard moments in exactly this way — and I was reminded that this kind of collective presence is quietly one of the most powerful things we do. Living Earth Center holds this space for so many people.

For kids tasting salsa and declaring they want to grow their own tomatoes at home.
For volunteers who arrive carrying the weight of the world and leave with a sense of purpose and a plan.

For partners building coalitions that can change our communities.

For staff brainstorming the resources to keep the dream alive.

For people from all walks of life gathering in a winter garden to reflect on the seasons of life.

Now more than ever, it is clear that we need each other. Not just to weather the storms — personal and societal — but to dream together and turn those dreams into something real. I am deeply proud that Living Earth Center gets to be a witness to that power, in both the grand moments and the quiet ones over a bucket of seeds. This is the work that Living Earth Center does. And it has never mattered more. Thank you to all who have been a part of that collective space.

I am excited to see where it can take us all.



Laura Marsala Peterson
LEC Executive Director



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2025 Staff

Laura Marsala Peterson - Executive
Director
Amy Hunt - Office Support Specialist
Melissa Martensen - Finance
Manager
Mal Murphy - Garden Manager
Cora Uyigue - Program Manager
SkyAnne Walker - Farm Manager
Jean Carstens - Summer Intern
Jeana Denton - Summer Intern
Rukayah Jamea - Summer Intern

Contact

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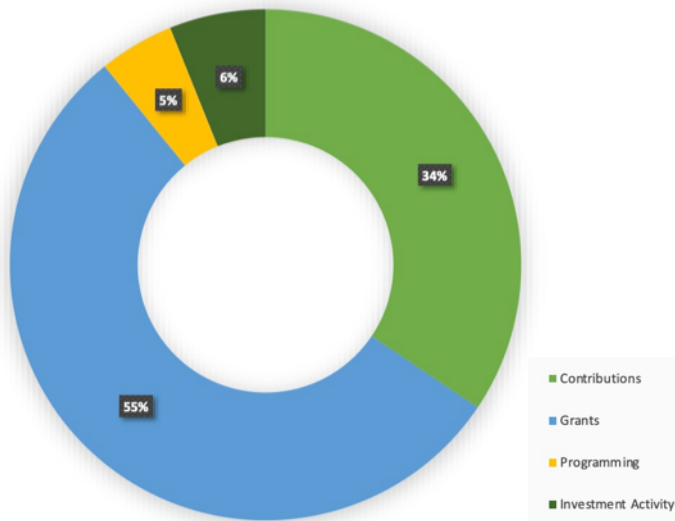


FINANCIAL STATEMENT - 2025-2026 FISCAL YEAR

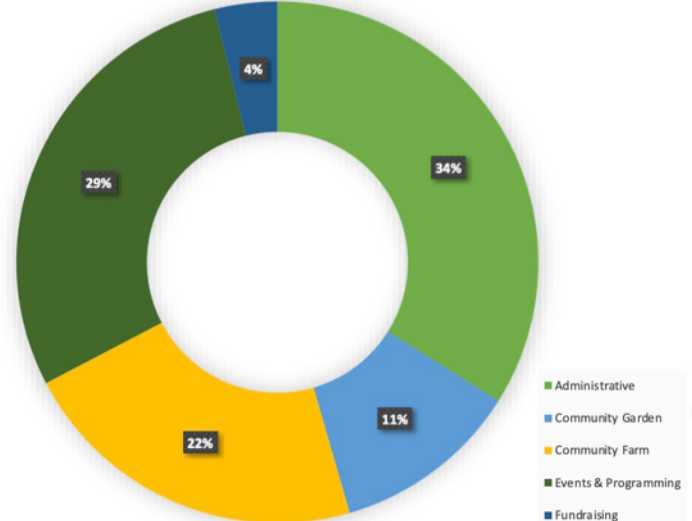
Living Earth Center (LEC) is a sponsored ministry of the School Sisters of Notre Dame (SSND) who are a substantial supporter of our mission. We are grateful for the continued support of SSND and are honored to carry on their legacy of Care for Creation and Right Relation with the Land.

The percentages below reflect our operating expenses for fiscal year February 2024 - January 2025. For more detailed financial breakdowns, LEC's 990 returns can be found at our website.

INCOME



EXPENSES



2025 HIGHLIGHTS

3936

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

715

Volunteer hours were logged at the Community Farm by over 100 individual and group volunteers. This is almost double the total for 2024!

1982

Youth attended 110 workshops as part of our **Seed to Sauce Program's** second year. Partners included ISD 77, MY Place, Loyola, YMCA, and Children's Museum of Southern Minnesota. Through a partnership with MNSU Dietetics, we were able to hire 3 summer interns to assist with Seed to Sauce programming.

23

Garden Scholarships were awarded to Community Gardeners at our Good Counsel Hill Garden, insuring that anyone, regardless of socioeconomic status had a place to grow food for themselves and their families.

11

Emerging Growers participated in a Local Food Purchase Assistance Grant, and were paid \$13,250 for produce they grew and donated to local food shelves and food recovery programs.



LIVING EARTH CENTER GROWTH



NEW SUMMER INTERN PROGRAM

2025 saw a new partnership with the MNSU Dietetics Program create the opportunity for LEC to hire interns to assist with our Seed to Sauce Programming. Three interns were hired for the summer: two to assist our Program Manager with the planning and implementation of classes and one to help our Farm Manager with growing and tending the Seed to Sauce produce planted at the Community Farm.

Their knowledge of nutrition added a new depth to Seed to Sauce classes and created new healthy recipes from produce grown at the farm. Pictured to the left is LEC Intern Jeana working with 5th grade students from Jefferson Elementary to make pasta sauce from tomatoes the students had grown themselves from seed.

Through this partnership, two interns are already lined up for the 2026 Seed to Sauce season.



LEC OFFICIAL MERCH STORE OPENS

You can now get yourself some LEC Merch through our Official Store, which is operated through the Bonfire website.

There are t-shirts, sweatshirts, hats, and mugs available with our logo, as well as “I dig gardening” t-shirts and tote bags. These are available year-round with special limited-edition items popping up from time to time, such as during our annual Give to Grow fundraising campaigns.

Watch our social media for updates about when new merch is added to the shop. All proceeds go to support LEC’s general fund. You can check out the store by clicking the QR code to the left or by visiting the website below:
<https://www.bonfire.com/store/living-earth-center/>



WINTER VOLUNTEER HOURS CREATE YEAR-ROUND COMMUNITY

This past November through March saw the addition of monthly Volunteer Days created for Community Farm Volunteers (and others) who were missing the community created through volunteering, or just looking to do a little off-season gardening work.

Volunteer Days were held once a month on a Saturday afternoon and were open to everyone - all ages and abilities were welcomed. Activities included saving seeds, preparing dried orange slices for LEC’s Winter Solstice Celebration, and as we got closer to spring - starting some seeds to be planted at the farm. Due to their popularity, LEC will be hosting these sessions again in the 2026-27 off-season.



LIVING EARTH CENTER FUTURE PROJECTS

NEW FUNDING NEEDED TO REPLACE FEDERAL LFPA GRANT

The two years that LEC participated in the Local Foods Purchasing Assistance (LFPA) Program through a federal grant in partnership with Region Nine Development Commission were a resounding success. In those two years, 11 Emerging Growers participated and were paid over \$18,000 for produce they grew and donated. Much of this produce was culturally significant and not readily available in south central Minnesota, making it a win-win for both the Growers and the community. The photo to the right shows Emerging Grower Joseph smiling with Farm Manager Sky Anne, who is peeping out from behind the mountain of greens Joseph is bringing in for donation.



Due to federal funding cuts, the LFPA program no longer exists. Minnesota Dept. of Agriculture has initiated a grant program called Farm to Food Security to replace LFPA and LEC has applied to receive funding to continue this important program with our Emerging Growers.



COALITION OF CARE CREATED

The focus of 2025's Earth Conference was setting the foundation to bring Mankato area groups focused on environmental justice together to create a Coalition of Care that will work together towards mutual solutions that benefit all.

At the end of the conference, a group volunteered to lay the groundwork for the Coalition. They have been meeting since the conference to create the Coalition's mission and goals. Once everything is laid out, they will announce a plan for the Coalition moving forward that will engage the community.

ENG-AGE-MENT GARDEN BEGINS 7TH SEASON

Since 2019, LEC has partnered with MNSU College of Allied Health and Nursing to host their dementia-friendly Eng-AGE-ment Garden. This program is designed specifically for individuals living with Alzheimer's or other dementias to participate with one another and MNSU student volunteers in activities involving smells, touch, sounds, and sights of the garden to facilitate conversations and memories.

LEC's Garden Manager Mal also participates in the weekly classes and tends the plot throughout the summer. In the photo to the left, Mal is sharing a small bouquet with a program participant. "I've enjoyed seeing the participants' eyes light up when they see a flower or vegetable growing at the garden," Mal said. "It's almost like they're teleported back to a different time when they see something familiar to them. They are all so kind and just want to take time, have a conversation, and make a connection."

