

# ANNUAL REPORT



Annual report season is one of my favorite times of the year. While I am a self-proclaimed geek of charts and reports, the real reason I love it is because I get to reflect on the year that our staff, interns, volunteers, growers, donors, and partners have co-created with such pride and joy. I get to see how ideas that started over a conference table have sprouted into programs that get kids into the Garden, provide economic pathways for growers, or become long-lasting partnerships.

This past year, I assisted Cora, our Program Manager, with a group of students at Rosa Parks Elementary School who were learning how to start seeds. In addition to being blown away by the amount of joy and interest the kids had in planting what would eventually become cilantro, peppers and tomatoes, I couldn't help but feel excited about bigger meaning behind it all. In addition to planting seeds that grow into healthy food, the Living Earth Center is planting seeds of interest in food, stewardship, and community among Mankato Area youth.

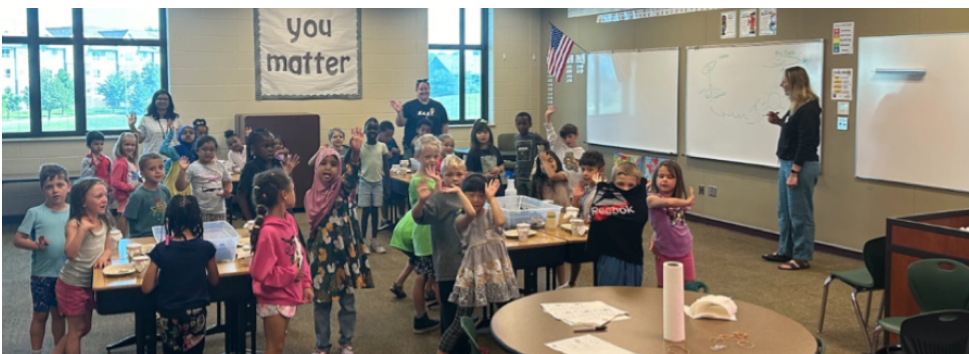
Unlike the growing cycle that will take a couple of months and that will eventually result in a delicious fresh salsa, the results of our efforts to plant these ideas and values will grow over time. We are committed to the long and intentional process it takes to cultivate care for the greater social and environmental community that we all share.

Annual report time connects the data and numbers to the bigger story behind why we do what we do and allows me to revel in the real-life impacts that the Living Earth Center has on the Mankato Community. You, our Living Earth Community, make this possible.

We have much work to do to continue to sow those seeds around us. With your continued help and support, we can continue our Seed to Sauce initiative, along with other programs that grow good throughout our community.



Laura Marsala Peterson  
LEC Executive Director



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## 2024 Staff

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

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# FINANCIAL STATEMENT - 2024-2025 FISCAL YEAR

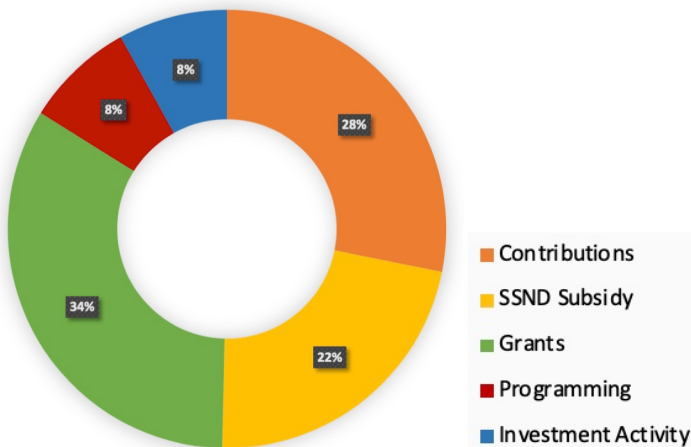
Living Earth Center (LEC) is a sponsored ministry of the School Sisters of Notre Dame (SSND). Along with our annual subsidy, for the 24/25 fiscal year SSND paid:

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

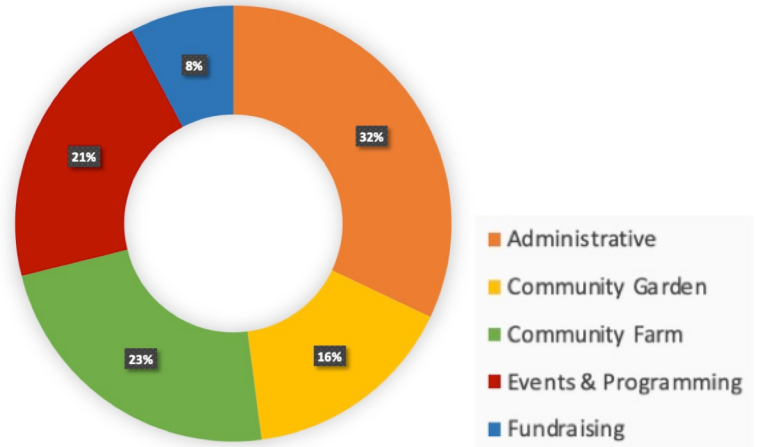
We are grateful for the continued support of SSND.

The percentages below reflect our operating expenses for fiscal year February 2024 - January 2025.

## INCOME



## EXPENSES



## 2024 HIGHLIGHTS:

2957

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, MY Place, and Southern Minnesota Food Recovery.

385

**Volunteer hours** were logged at the Community Farm by over 100 individual volunteers. Volunteers play an integral part in the success of our Produce Donation Program.

1507

**Youth** attended 60 workshops as part of our **Seed to Sauce Program's** inaugural year. Partners included ISD 77, MY Place, Loyola, YMCA, Generations Child & Memory Care, and the Children's Museum of Southern Minnesota.

16

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

105

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

2024 was our third year partnering with Southwest Minnesota Housing Partnership at the Homestead Apartment Complex in Mankato and the first year working with residents at the Solace Apartments in St. Peter.

The Solace Apartments had a large existing space that had originally been a non-food garden. LEC Staff worked with residents to create space for them to grow food for themselves and their families, as well as a community plot where food was grown for any residents who wanted fresh vegetables.

We learned a lot in this first year, and were able to apply this knowledge to planning the 2025 growing season, incorporating a partnership with MN Master Gardeners to plant a pollinator garden in the spaces not utilized by residents to grow food.

## EMERGING GROWERS PROGRAM BENEFITS FROM LOCAL FOOD PURCHASE ASSISTANCE GRANT

Thanks to a Local Foods Purchase Assistance (LFPA) Grant, awarded in partnership with Region Nine, LEC created a pathway for Emerging Growers wanting to enter the local food economy to be reimbursed at market-rate prices for produce they grow and donate to local food shelves.

In 2024, we had 4 Growers participate and they were paid a total of over \$5,000 for produce they grew and donated. Much of the donated produce was culturally significant - greens like saga and managu, common in East Africa, but not readily available in Southern Minnesota. The LFPA Grant will continue through the 2025 growing season, but then will end due to federal funding cuts.



## FARM TO TABLE FUNDRAISER: A TASTE OF THE GARDEN

In September 2024, LEC hosted its first garden-to-table fundraiser, “A Taste of the Garden.” We partnered with Sherburn-based chef Seth Lintelman, who designed a multi-course menu around produce that was grown at the Community Garden at Good Counsel Hill especially for this evening.

Attendees enjoyed a gourmet meal seated in the actual garden where the food they were eating was grown. It was a beautiful evening, with a string quartet and an elegantly appointed long table illuminated by candlelight. Along with the locally grown produce, the meal included pasture-raised pork from Blue Dirt Farms and a signature apple and cardamom mock-tail with mixer donated by Sweet Haven Tonics.



# LIVING EARTH CENTER FUTURE PROJECTS

## LEC + SCC PARTNERSHIP EXPANDS EMERGING GROWER SPACE

During this past winter, South Central College reached out to LEC about using their high tunnel greenhouse on their North Mankato Campus. It was perfect timing as we had 3 Emerging Growers looking to expand the size of their growing space past what was available at the Community Farm.

For the 2025 growing season, we have partnered with SCC to have those Growers utilizing the growing space on the SCC campus. They will be growing produce that will be donated to local area food shelves and then through the LFPA Grant, the growers will be reimbursed at market-rate prices.



## SEED TO SAUCE PROGRAM CONTINUES TO GROW

Riding the success of its inaugural season, LEC's Seed to Sauce Program continues to grow. "Already after just one year, teachers have heard about Seed to Sauce and are reaching out to us asking to bring the program to their classrooms," said LEC Program Manager Cora Uyigue. "It highlights the need for hands-on, outdoor learning for our students."

New partnerships through ISD77 will bring different groups out to the Community Farm in 2025, including Monroe Elementary and Camp Ignite, as well as new partnerships with Head Start and ECFE (Early Childhood and Family Education). Continuing partnerships with Jefferson Elementary, Dakota Meadows Middle School, Loyola, and MY Place will see new and expanded programming for the 2025 growing season.



## LEC FUTURE ON GOOD COUNSEL HILL

We at LEC have known for a long time that things at the Good Counsel Property would be changing. We are pleased that the School Sisters of Notre Dame and Southwest Minnesota Housing Partnership (SWMNHP) have worked out a purchase agreement for the sale of the Good Counsel Property.

We are in communication with SWMNHP and will be able to keep our garden on the Hill until they are ready to develop that space. We are in the process of finding our forever home, and are grateful that SWMNHP timeline gives us the time to find that home and work to move the gardens at a pace that will benefit all involved.

