



### New Year, New Executive Director!

This month, Neighbor by Neighbor welcomed new executive director Keri Haskins. Keri has a bachelor's degree in communications and marketing from Miami University in Ohio and a master's degree in counseling from Andrews University. In the past, she worked at an advertising agency in Chicago in media buying and selling and most recently worked for 12 years as a school counselor at Bridgman Public Schools. While at Bridgman, she was given the opportunity to serve on the school leadership team and mentor other employees. She also is an adjunct professor at Andrews University in their counseling and psychology department.

Keri brings a lot to the Neighbor by Neighbor table – citing that her skills include strong mentoring, communication, and organizational skills while focusing on collaboration and working with others. She also has a passion for helping and serving others. When asked what she was most excited about for her career at Neighbor by Neighbor, she stated, "I am eager to help our neighbors in need in our community. We have a large amount of hidden poverty in our area, and I look forward to working with our fantastic staff, board of directors, and volunteers to help make a difference in people's lives.

In her personal life, Keri is married to her husband, Erik, and they have three children: Lily, Reid, and Wade. Her boys keep her busy with sporting events, but when she does have free time, she loves Lake Michigan and enjoys collecting beach glass at our beautiful beaches in Southwestern Michigan. She also enjoys reading, camping, and game nights with her family.

Welcome, Keri! Neighbor by Neighbor is delighted to have you!

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Pictured Above: Neighbor by Neighbor's new Executive Director, Keri Haskins.

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## Passing the Torch: A Goodbye from Linnea Berg

One of the founders of Neighbor by Neighbor, Linnea Berg, is retiring as of January 31, 2023. She has been part of the organization since its beginning, providing staff supervision, grant writing, grant reporting and direct client services. More recently she created the

financial literacy program for clients, volunteer orientation, and a mentor training program. To help educate the public about the existence of poverty in Harbor Country, Linnea authored a number of articles for local newspapers. As she leaves, she states: "Of all the things I've done in my career, I am proudest of Neighbor by Neighbor. It is simply thrilling to see something start so small and grow to where it is today, making a tangible difference in the lives of our low-income neighbors. Can't wait to see what is next for Neighbor by Neighbor!"



Linnea Berg poses in front of the Neighbor by Neighbor office, smiling her way into retirement.

## It seemed so easy, but it has been rolling on marbles: A letter from Peg Kohring Cichon

As I retire from Neighbor by Neighbor, I reflect back to the Neighbor by Neighbor Advisory Committee asking me to work 10 hours a week starting in January 2020. I heard there were only 150 clients during the first three years of Neighbor by Neighbor. One board member told me, "This job would be a walk in the park!" There was no office, Linnea and I shared a phone that we passed back and forth, and client records were kept on an Excel sheet. Neighbor by Neighbor operated under the umbrella of Harbert Community Church in collaboration with a five-member advisory board.

Are you laughing yet? Yes, you guessed it, March 2020, the pandemic hit. The number of clients served increased to 752 and the previous budget of \$30,000 was vastly insufficient. Linnea's amazing grant skills resulted in The Pokagon Fund granting \$85,000, Berrien Community Foundation and United Way gave \$65,000 for client needs, and Southwest Michigan Community Action accepted applications from 35 individuals who needed extensive help. One hundred forty people and 12 churches donated as well. Our goal in 2020 was to keep people housed, with the lights on and food on the table.

In 2021, the Berrien Community Foundation's three-year Alamar grant of \$75,000 was Neighbor by Neighbor's push to become more than a "ma and pa" operation

run by volunteers. Rob Gow helped find an office. Professionalization could not have happened without Tate Butler who tackled finding the right client and donor management software programs, phone apps, and so many more things. Our first competitive market rate hire was a social worker as the client load rose by another 270 clients. The Board grew by two people who came with outreach and legal skills.

I heard often, "Why don't those people work?" Many don't realize that there is no reliable bus system for those who are not seniors. In partnership with Roger's Wrecker and Damon Automotive, eight clients were given vehicles. While the lack of transportation is a major barrier, so are the below living-wage jobs, often seasonal, with no health care or retirement benefits. Linnea wrote a series of articles to raise awareness of the invisible poverty in Harbor Country.

Full of optimism for 2022, Neighbor by Neighbor submitted a large grant called Dependence to Independence to The Pokagon Fund. However, that was difficult to achieve because of the economy. Soaring gas prices, the Consumer Price Index rising over seven percent and outrageous increases in rent meant wages could not keep up. People who never had to ask for help before became our clients, much to their shock. Seniors and people on Social Security Disability are particularly vulnerable as they live on \$700 per month or less. There is no way to absorb the increases in rent, food, and energy.

Also, clients without a high school diploma or GED are particularly vulnerable and are generally paid the lowest wages. Most left school in eighth grade. A bright spot has been the GED partnership with Michigan Works, The Village and Township of Galien, the Galien Public Library and volunteers, Kip Walker, and Liz James. There are fourteen students in the GED Program and one graduate.

As I leave at the end of 2022, over 1350 active clients have been served. Neighbor by Neighbor was granted nonprofit status by the IRS in early January, and the transition started with the amicable parting with Harbert Community Church as our 501(c)(3) host. Business and donor support grew exponentially, and over \$500,000 was raised and spent in 2022. Two of the four staff positions offer salaries at market rate. A great addition has been an AmeriCorps staff person, Michael Howe, who has focused on keeping homeowners in their homes with weatherization, new roofs, and furnaces—something that is completely out of the budget for those with incomes at or below 250% of federal the poverty level.

In early 2023, Neighbor by Neighbor has hired the first market rate executive director, Keri Haskins. I look forward to cheering Keri and the capable staff on from the sidelines. I am proud to be one of the many hands that grew Neighbor by Neighbor to a professional nonprofit and you who are good neighbors!

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Pictured Above: Peg Kohring Cichon poses with some balloons, excited about the possibilities that await her in retirement!

## Last Month's Assistance Summary

**\$24,005.69** IN CLIENT ASSISTANCE PROVIDED

**98** CLIENTS SERVED

**1,341** TOTAL CLIENT COUNT

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