



# In the News

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# Biscuits for a Buck

Fund-raiser helps disadvantaged utility customers in four NECAC counties.

It was another outstanding year for the Heat Up St. Louis Rise & Shine fund-raiser Feb. 9 in partnership with Hardee's and NECAC.

The purchase of \$1 sausage or egg biscuits, contributions collected by 765 volunteers and corporate donations added up to more than \$955,000 that will benefit income-eligible utility customers in 44 Missouri and Illinois counties. Despite lingering inflation, contributions were up by seven percent compared with 2023.

"We are thrilled by the love generated by the public in Missouri and Illinois, and those who made special grants during this time period," said Heat Up Board President Ben Turrec.

"People are truly hurting, because we are seeing more and more who live paycheck-to-paycheck, stretching the region's safety net," said the Rev. Earl E. Nance, Jr., Heat Up's chair emeritus and corporate treasurer. "They are usually donors. Now, many of them are hurting."

"There are so many people in need at this time, and we are thankful that Hardee's customers and our corporate partners responded so well to Rise & Shine," said NECAC CSBG Operations Director Kayla Wasson. "We greatly appreciate everyone's help."

Others from NECAC who participated included St. Charles County Board Member Diane Hileman, Lincoln County Service Coordinator Janice Allan, Pike County Service Coordinator Penny Dixon, St. Charles County Service Coordinator Carrie Dina, Warren County Service Coordinator Desiree Antoniou, Lincoln County Housing Assistance Counselor Lori Vanzant, Lincoln County Administrative Assistant Heather Burnett, Lincoln County Intake Assistant Carey Westerman and St. Charles County Intake Assistant Karen York.

Two factors helped boost contributions — Hardee's expanded bulk pre-sales in the weeks leading up to the event, and the weather was unseasonably warm. For the past several years, temperatures have dipped well below freezing on Rise & Shine day.

Since its founding, Heat Up estimates it has raised millions of dollars and impacted 1.7 million people. The price of biscuits has not changed. All proceeds stay in the counties in which they're donated so that contributors know their neighbors are receiving help.



By Brent Engel, Public Relations Officer

The 24th annual Heat Up St. Louis Rise & Shine fund-raiser in partnership with Hardee's, NECAC and other organizations brought in more than \$955,000 for utility assistance programs in Missouri and Illinois. In top photo, NECAC's Kayla Wasson is interviewed live by Laura Simon of KTVI TV Fox 2 news during a \$200,000 check award by Spire at the Hardee's in Chesterfield. Also pictured are Spire's Vernita Rodgers and Heat Up Board Member Margie Price. In photo at bottom, NECAC St. Charles County Service Coordinator Carrie Dina participates in a \$200,000 check award by Ameren at the Hardee's in St. Peters. Dina was interviewed live by KSDK TV Five on Your Side Chief Meteorologist Scott Connell. Also pictured are Joe Solari of Ameren, Greater St. Louis Area Fire Chiefs Association President Steve Olshwanger and Community Council of St. Charles County Executive Director Todd Barnes. Additional photos on Page 2.

# Four counties benefit from Rise & Shine program

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St. Charles County Board Member Diane Hileman collected at Hardee's in St. Peters.



Warren County Service Coordinator Desiree Antoniou, left, and Lincoln County Administrative Assistant Heather Burnett teamed up at the Troy Hardee's.



Motorists stopping by the Hardee's in Troy also got a wave from Intake Assistant Carey Westerman.



Lincoln County Coordinator Janice Allan, left, and Housing Assistance Counselor Lori Vanzant collected up at Troy.



Pike County Service Coordinator Penny Dixon managed to snag a donation from her in-laws, Ron and Wilma Dixon, at the Bowling Green Hardee's.



St. Charles County Coordinator Carrie Dina, talks with KSDK Meteorologist Scott Connell. Photos by Brent Engel, Heather Burnett, Carey Westerman and Lori Vanzant.



## Employee Spotlight: Former job helps Marissa Laffoon

Marissa Laffoon credits a former job with helping her to excel at NECAC.

The In-Home Services Office Manager joined the agency on Sept. 26, 2016.

"At my last job as a staffing agent, I learned attention to detail and organizational leadership skills," she said. "Keeping the files so that they can be audited is the most important part of my job."

Laffoon finds that "keeping up with the ever-changing needs of clients, aides and funding sources" is also a challenge. In-Home's 35

aides provide quality services and care for about 150 clients. Services include homemaker chores, personal care, respite and medicine set-up.

"I am always learning to stay in compliance," she said. "This keeps me on my toes and keeps the communication between myself and the supervisors open."

Laffoon enjoys NECAC four-day work weeks and says the job helps her maintain "a healthy work-life balance. She looks forward each day to "helping someone and making a difference."



Laffoon

## Rent-assistance voucher applications to be accepted in March

NECAC is accepting applications for a federal rent-assistance program in 11 counties during the month of March.

Applications to the Housing Choice Voucher program will be placed on a waiting list. Counties covered are Lewis, Lincoln, Macon, Marion, Monroe, Mont-

gomery, Pike, Ralls, Randolph, Shelby and Warren.

The agency has contracted for more than 40 years with the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development to administer the program, which provides partial rent payments to approved income

-qualifying applicants. NECAC also oversees the program in St. Charles County, where the waiting list remains closed.

Applications will be available starting March 1 at [www.necac.org](http://www.necac.org). Elderly and disabled people may call 573-324-2055.

# Simulation is an eye-opener, even for poverty-conscious

Katelyn Hunziker sees the effects of poverty every time she steps into a classroom.

But the Lewis County educator got a little taste of what it's really like during a NECAC poverty simulation.

Hunziker, a second-grade teacher, and her Canton R-5 school district colleagues played the role of people in need for three hours on Feb. 5. She portrayed 25-year-old Glen Guten, who was staying at a homeless shelter while trying to find a job and get back on his feet.

"It just shows me what my students could be going through at home so that at school I know how to handle different situations that come my way (with) a more positive outlook," Hunziker said.

Following the guidelines is an important part of poverty simulations. Participants must go to school or work, arrange transportation or babysitting, pay mortgage or rent, provide meals for their families and pay other bills as they arise.

"We're trying to promote poverty awareness, increase community understanding, inspire local change and transform people's perspectives,"



Katelyn Hunziker, left, portrays 25-year-old Glen Guten, during a poverty simulation Feb. 5 in Canton. Also pictured is NECAC Monroe County Service Coordinator Shelby DeOrnellis, who was serving as the banker.



The wheels on the bus go 'round and 'round, but in poverty simulations students are transported to school via another "vehicle." By Brent Engel, Public Relations Officer

said NECAC's Kayla Wasson, who oversees the program. "Many people across Missouri live in poverty, but unless you've experienced it, it's difficult to understand. Each family situation in the simulation is based upon a real-life experience."

The agency hosts three to five poverty simulations each year and can handle up to 80 participants at a time. In the last year, 240 teachers throughout the agency's 12-county area were part of the experience.

In addition, NECAC hosts the Reality Enrichment and Life Lessons (REALL) program. It's similar to the poverty simulation with one huge difference.

REALL participants start by portraying people who did not finish high school and are struggling to find a job and get by, even with public assistance. They then are given a new identity that includes a high school or college education and a job as a doctor, lawyer, teacher or professional. The idea is to give students a chance to view how important education is to success in life.

## Kitzmiller embraces new role as assistant finance director

Stephen Kitzmiller fondly remembers the advice his late father used to get him interested in finance.

"Accounting always makes the decisions," Kitzmiller said. "It always comes down to numbers and I love numbers. I have an affinity for them."

The 42-year-old Hannibal man has been named assistant finance director at NECAC. He replaces Sherry Windland, who retired recently after more than 30 years.

"Stephen has been a great asset to the finance team and I look forward to the future as he steps into his new role," said NECAC Finance Operations Director Vicky Pritchett.

A graduate of Fort Zumwalt High School in

O'Fallon, Kitzmiller quickly learned the ropes of assisting customers and clients. He spent 13 years as a customer service representative with Dierbergs, the St. Louis area grocery chain. He started as a NECAC finance specialist on Sept. 10, 2012.

With a budget of more than \$28 million, Kitzmiller is excited that NECAC continues to assist disadvantaged clients with cutting-edge programs. "I just want us to keep moving forward, get more efficient and just keep pressing on with technology," he said. "We need to keep growing."

Kitzmiller and his wife, Jennifer, have two daughters. He enjoys performing and producing music at his church.



Kitzmiller

## Randolph County senior apartment project expected to start soon

NECAC is clearing the final hurdles for a major renovation project in Randolph County.

The \$14 million conversion of the former Moberly Junior High School to 48 senior apartments is expected to begin with a groundbreaking in late March.

The project is a long time coming. NECAC was awarded initial funding in December 2020. A rise in material costs due to the COVID pandemic forced the agency and its construction partners to seek additional dollars.

"We are very excited about the rehabilitation of the old junior high school building into much needed housing for seniors," said NECAC Deputy Director for Housing Development Programs Carla Potts. "We look forward to beginning construction in March, and are grateful to all the partners who have worked so hard to make this a reality."

Construction will take about a year. The development at 101 N. Johnson will feature apartments with one and two bedrooms for income-qualifying people ages 62 and older.

# NECAC brings smile to the face of Macon County man

Before he got help, Derrick Paris usually was expressionless.

Now, the 31-year-old health care worker from Callao is all smiles. Paris received help from NECAC through the Coronavirus Aid, Relief and Economic Security (CARES) Act. Paris first came to the agency a few years ago for food assistance. He blames genetics and a lack of proper care for his bad teeth.

Insurance covered extractions and CARES paid for dentures. The process took about a year, but Paris is happy with results that he calls "a life-changer."

"It's made a big difference," he said.



By Brent Engel, Public Relations Officer  
Derrick Paris meets with NECAC Macon County Service Coordinator Terri Laughlin.

whole lot before. It's nice to be able to smile and not be self-conscious about it. It's been a life-changer."

NECAC Macon County Service Coordinator Terri Laughlin has noticed the difference.

"Derrick has completely changed his appearance and his personality since he has started on this journey," she said. "His confidence is greater, he plays a guitar and sings with his church group, and he is more outgoing. He is currently employed, loves his job and is now a deacon in his church. I am very proud of Derrick and his accomplishments."

"Confidence mostly. I didn't smile a

## Vandals strike food box in Randolph

NECAC has scaled back its free Feed Your Neighbors food box in Randolph County due to escalating vandalism.

The box was installed in 2021 outside the Randolph County Service Center at 1903 N. Morley in Moberly.

Vandalism began about five months ago and has gotten worse. Items are dumped or destroyed, usually during weeknights. To address the problem, NECAC has decided to limit food availability.

"We regret that we have to do this, but we have no other choice," said NECAC Randolph County Service Coordinator Patsy Redding. "This is a very necessary service, and we are sad that someone would destroy food that was meant for those in need. We hope residents will continue to support the food box."

The decision means food may not be available on some nights or weekends. Contributions continue to be accepted during office hours.



By Brent Engel, Public Relations Officer  
NECAC Ralls County Service Coordinator Stephanie Dunker opened a one-day satellite office at Perry City Hall on Feb. 21. The idea was to accommodate clients who live in the western part of the county and have long round trips between home and the agency's service center in New London. Dunker hopes to continue offering the service on a monthly or bi-monthly schedule.



## Agency donates to Macon fire relief

NECAC has donated tissue and pencil sharpeners to LaPlata Elementary in Macon County as part of the ongoing effort to bounce back after a Dec. 1, 2023, fire heavily damaged the building.

Pictured, from left are donation supervisor Karleen Randolph and NECAC Macon County Service Coordinator Terri Laughlin.

The school is holding classes at LaPlata First Baptist Church while reconstruction proceeds.

## Top score earned for rent assistance

NECAC has received a 100 percent score from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development for its performance in administering the Housing Choice Voucher Program.

The annual Section Eight Management Assessment Program (SEMAP) tested NECAC in 15 areas.

"This is HUD's way of monitoring which housing agencies and authorities are doing a good job of administering the programs in an efficient, effective manner," said NECAC Housing Voucher Director Dianna Clair. "We're very pleased. This reflects highly on the quality of the work we do. Our staff is making sure that tenants are receiving affordable and safe housing, and that landlords are receiving top-quality service."



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Chairman of the Board



Dan Page,  
President & CEO

