



Gathering the Village Cohort 2025



United Way
of Central Minnesota



Abdi Ahmed

Psychotherapist

Centers for Victims of Torture

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My name is Abdigani Ahmed and I go by Abdi. I am currently a part time psychotherapist with the Centers for Victims of Torture. I also run my own nonprofit organization and private mental health practice. One of the values I hold dear revolves around the concept of serving those less fortunate.

One of my greatest achievements was getting my graduate degree in social work and starting my nonprofit organization, which is CommunityWise Services inc. I have been social worker in Minnesota for the past 15 years. I enjoy working in the sectors of community development, nonprofit management, and strengthening public services.

I came to the United States as a young refugee. This county has blessed me with many opportunities and I intend to give back as much as I can. I enjoy collaborating with others and contributing to positive change within the communities I reside in.



Abigail Davis-Nelson

Children and Youth Advocate

Anna Marie's Alliance

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I serve as a children and youth advocate at Anna Marie's Alliance, where I walk alongside others in creating spaces of healing and possibility. I am drawn to community transformation because I've seen how lives change when people are truly listened to and given room to lead. At the heart of my work is the value of dignity, believing every person carries wisdom worth honoring. My leadership is shaped by years of collecting the stories of others; listening and letting those stories shape how I show up, with empathy, humility, and resolve. These experiences remind me daily that transformation begins with compassion, courage, and connection.



Amy Spohn

Education Program Manager & Culture Facilitator

CentraCare

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I am currently an Education Program Manager & Culture Facilitator for CentraCare and am working toward developing a social enterprise with a mission to equip everyday people with knowledge and tools to navigate real life. I strongly believe that knowledge is power and, having felt powerless in many situations in my own life, feel the best way for me to contribute to others' success is by bringing together local stakeholders to capture their expertise and lived experience and share it with our communities.



Anne Redetzke-Perry

*Advocacy & Community Engagement
Coordinator*

The Arc Minnesota

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I am an Advocacy & Community Engagement Coordinator with The Arc Minnesota. I have a passion to be actively engaged and connected in the community through advocacy, community building and networking. I was meant to be a "change agent" in the community by advocating for inclusion, equity and access for all.



Brandon Higgins

Business Owner

Unified Social Services

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I am the owner of Unified Social Services, a supportive housing and MNsure navigation agency. My biggest draw to community transformation is creating a meaningful impact in the community and building a stronger foundation. I value the work that I do and making a meaningful impact in placing individuals in permanent housing. A personal value that shapes my leadership is that I value my staff's input and insight and know that they are experts in what they do and help them grow to learn more.



Dexter Hanson

Community Engagement Specialist
Central Minnesota Mental Health Center
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I'm Dexter Hanson, a Community Engagement Specialist with Central Minnesota Mental Health Center (CMMHC). My work focuses on reducing stigma and building awareness around mental health and chemical health needs, topics I'm deeply passionate about. I value being a connector of people, learning about resources that strengthen our local communities, and living adventurously by exploring new ways to engage and collaborate. Community partnerships fuel my purpose and allow me to help others discover what's possible when we work together. Guided by Leadership through Service, I'm committed to building a brighter future alongside fellow leaders who share the vision of a healthier, more supportive community.



Emily Bertram

Director of Marketing and Communications
St. Cloud Area Chamber of Commerce
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As the director of marketing and communications at the St. Cloud Area Chamber of Commerce and also the editor of Business Central Magazine, I work hard to keep a pulse on the business community and its ever-evolving stories and needs. Business in St. Cloud looks vastly different than it did 20 - even 5 - years ago, and I seek to learn how we can better serve all business owners in our region in order to strengthen our community as a whole. I bring a curious mind and a passion for seeing different perspectives to the table, recognizing my own experiences and biases and how they differ from others. I want to listen, learn, and grow through this experience - and be able to take that back to my personal and professional life.



Emily Davis

Coordinator of Exploring Potential Interests and Careers (EPIC)

Greater St. Cloud Development Corporation

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Emily Davis is the Coordinator of Exploring Potential Interests and Careers (EPIC), a Central Minnesota collaborative that connects students with hands-on career exploration opportunities. She is passionate about community transformation, believing that communities thrive when people learn from one another and embrace different perspectives. Emily is committed to helping students discover local opportunities so they can return to their communities and contribute to their growth—an approach that shapes every decision she makes.



Jen Buie

Coordinator

Reclaiming & Advancing Leech Lake Youth

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Short autobiographical haiku:

Collaborator,
Real conceptualizer
Connector always.

Slighter longer autobiographical vignette:

My current role is that of a mother, daughter, wife, aunt, niece, cousin, friend and coordinator of a MDH-sponsored youth substance misuse and suicide prevention coalition, Reclaiming & Advancing Leech Lake Youth (RALLY), that serves Walker, Onigum, Hackensack and Akeley youth and their families. As a social worker, one of the throughlines of my professional life has been promoting the potential of individual, as well as communities - I have always found the idea of transformation irresistible.



Jennifer Wucherer

Director of the Retired and Senior Volunteer Program (RSVP)

City of St. Cloud

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Jennifer Wucherer has dedicated her career to strengthening the St. Cloud community through service, collaboration, and connection. As Director of the Retired and Senior Volunteer Program (RSVP) with the City of St. Cloud, she engages older adults in meaningful volunteer roles that foster belonging and enrich community life. Jennifer also serves as Co-Chair of the Age-Flourishing St. Cloud Task Force, advancing efforts to build an Age-Friendly community where all generations thrive. Beyond her professional role, she actively volunteers with local youth organizations her children take part in. Guided by a belief in the power of collective action, Jennifer is passionate about transforming communities into stronger, more connected "villages" where every person has a place and purpose.



Jessica Gilder

Child Care Program Officer

Initiative Foundation

Email: jgilder@ifound.org

I am the IF- Child Care Program Officer. *What draws me to community transformation:* I love seeing passionate, curious, and committed people come together to make real change. When folks bring different experiences and ideas to the table, amazing things can happen. *Why this work matters to me:* I've lived and worked in communities in Central MN where I've seen firsthand how powerful this kind of work can be. It's shaped me, and I want to keep learning and sharing what I've picked up along the way. Much of the passion I have my past and present work came from participating in groups such as these. *What guides my leadership:* "Lived experience as a foundation for learning and leadership." I believe our personal stories—good and tough—can be a spark for change. With the right support, mentoring, and learning, I think we can help others see what's possible and lead with purpose. Change starts with understanding and leading people to see their strengths and resources.



Jolene Foss

Single-Family Housing Program Manager
Central Minnesota Housing Partnership
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Jolene Foss is a Central Minnesota native and has had the honor to work in a variety of environments. She strives to improve the quality of life for the people around her. She is currently the Single-Family Housing Program Manager for Central Minnesota Housing Partnership. CMHP has played an important role fulfilling the needs of families within 16 counties for over 30 years. Her past employment includes licensed childcare, special education, ceramic tile installation, city planning and regional economic development. She enjoys swimming, listening to live music and traveling. Her goal is to be intimately involved in the creation of, and implementation of lives lived easier for our future generations.



Khalif Hassan

Workforce and Housing Supervisor
Center for African Immigrants and Refugees Organization
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I am Khalif Hassan, living in St. Cloud, Minnesota, and currently serving as the Workforce and Housing Supervisor at the Center for African Immigrants and Refugees Organization (CAIRO). For the past ten years, I have been deeply engaged in serving the Central Minnesota community through roles with CAIRO, Avivo, and Lutheran Social Service. My work focuses on helping families and individuals achieve housing stability and meaningful employment. Having witnessed both the struggles and the strength of our community, I am passionate about building partnerships that drive equity, opportunity, and transformation. I believe lasting change happens when people come together with empathy, shared purpose, and a commitment to uplifting one another.



Katie Kostohryz

Community Development Administrator
Sourcewell

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Hello, I am a Community Development Administrator with Sourcewell based out of Staples, MN. I work to foster inclusive, resilient communities through collaborative planning and local engagement. I have a passion for helping communities thrive. Most recently, a cornerstone of my work has included the development of a land use and zoning Ordinance for the city of Flensburg and a whole land use and zoning review and update for the city of Upsala. My leadership is shaped by a commitment to equity, listening first, and building trust—believing that every voice matters in shaping the future of a community.



Keyanna Barker

Child/Youth Trauma Support Specialist
Anna Marie's Alliance

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I am a Child/Youth Trauma Support Specialist at Anna Marie's Alliance. What draws me to community transformation is my deep belief that change starts at the individual level but grows strongest when it is rooted in community. Community transformation is where advocacy meets action and positive change flourishes. I value creating spaces where people feel heard, accepted, and empowered.



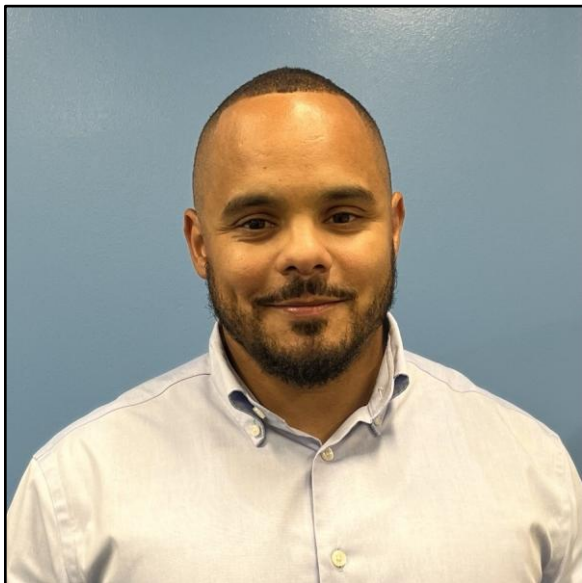
Lindsey Clark

Jail Social Worker

Stearns County Human Services

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Lindsey Clark is a Jail Social Worker with Stearns County Human Services, bringing over seven years of experience as a dedicated county social worker. A proud St. Cloud State alum with a graduate certificate in Addictions Counseling from Winona State, Lindsey is also a Licensed Alcohol and Drug Counselor passionate about supporting individuals on their path to recovery. When she's not making a difference in the community, you'll find her on the yoga mat or getting lost in a good mystery novel.



Malik Stewart

Assistant Dean of Multicultural Services

College of Saint Benedict and Saint John's University

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Malik Stewart currently serves as the Assistant Dean of Multicultural Services at College of Saint Benedict and Saint John's University. His commitment to community transformation is rooted in a deep belief in education and the power of inclusive spaces to foster belonging and growth. He draws inspiration from his own journey as a first-generation college graduate and remains actively involved in the local community.



Mary Ellen

Broker/Owner

Kerber Castle Realty Group

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Mary Ellen Richter is the Broker/Owner of Kerber Castle Realty Group in St. Cloud, Minnesota, where she combines professional expertise with a passion for helping individuals and families move into their next chapter. Deeply committed to community transformation, she believes strong neighborhoods are built through relationships, trust, and service. As a past president of the St. Cloud Area Association of REALTORS®, Mary Ellen brings collaborative leadership and a strong network of partnerships to every endeavor. Guided by values of integrity, connection, and making a positive difference, she sees her role as not only facilitating real estate transactions but also strengthening the communities she serves.



Melanie Legatt

Program Supervisor

Catholic Charities

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My name is Melanie Legatt. I work for Catholic Charities as Program Supervisor of the Services for Homeless Youth Program. I have been employed with Catholic Charities for 30 years in different leadership roles working with at-risk youth. Working with youth has been my passion. I am from Alexandria, MN. I graduated from SCSU and have been in the St Cloud/Sartell area for 34 years. I enjoy spending time with immediate and extended family as much as possible when not working.



Mindy Hortsch

Early Learning Scholarship Administrator
Milestones

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Mindy Hortsch is an Early Learning Scholarship Administrator at Milestones, bringing over 12 years of dedicated experience in supporting children and families. Guided by Milestones' mission to build brighter futures, nurture growth, and create pathways to success for the early childhood community, Mindy is passionate about helping families access quality childcare and preschool services. She specializes in providing resources and referrals to ensure families can find and afford the care their children need to thrive.

With a degree in Social Work and a well-rounded background that includes experience as a lead childcare teacher at a child care center and a Home Visitor at Reach-Up Inc. Head Start, Mindy has a comprehensive understanding of early childhood development. Her unwavering dedication to creating positive outcomes for children and families remains at the heart of her work at Milestones.



Rebekah Crosby

Co-founder
Connecting to Thrive

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I am the co-founder of Connecting to Thrive, a mission-driven organization focused on digital access. We work with small communities to plan for expanded digital support and resources, ensuring everyone has the ability to fully participate in both their community and the digital world. I'm drawn to community transformation because, in today's modern age, the ability and confidence to use technology is key to social connection and belonging. Communities can come together to make sure individuals are not left behind because of a lack of devices, skills, or technology help. My leadership is rooted in respect—for those I work with, for community voices, and for engaging with thoughtful consideration in all we do.



Renata Tichá

Senior Research Associate and Director of Education Practice & Policy
University of Minnesota's Institute on Community Integration
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Renáta Tichá, PhD, is a Senior Research Associate and Director of Education Practice & Policy at the University of Minnesota's Institute on Community Integration (ICI). She is also an adjunct faculty member in Educational Psychology at the University of Minnesota. In her work in developing, implementing and conducting research on assessments and interventions for individuals with intellectual and developmental (IDD), and related disabilities, Dr. Tichá is closely connected with communities where people with disabilities receive their education, where they work, and where they spend their free time. Working in community settings is important to her work as it reflects real lives, challenges, and opportunities for people with disabilities and their families. She is driven by Mahatma Gandhi's words "You must be the change you want to see in the world."



Sandra Theis

HeiJeu Art
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My role at HeiJeu Art varies. I help with planning programs, setting up for events, and facilitating art programs. Creating art gives individuals a way to express themselves. A value I hold is meeting people where they are at, and HeiJeu offering art activities to all, no matter ability, age or economic social status.



Smriti Shrestha

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Coordinator
Milestones

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Smriti Shrestha is the Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Coordinator at Milestones, where she leads initiatives that foster belonging, equity literacy, and inclusive practices across staff and community partners. With a background in social work and business, she is passionate about bridging systems-level thinking with heart-centered leadership to create sustainable community transformation. Having grown up in Nepal and now rooted in Central Minnesota, Smriti carries a deep commitment to building spaces where diverse voices—especially those of women, children, and underrepresented communities—are not only heard but centered in decision-making. She believes that true change happens when people come together with curiosity, courage, and compassion. Her leadership is shaped by the value of equity as action, and the belief that transformation begins with the relationships we cultivate