

# 2025

ANNUAL REPORT



Headwaters  
RELIEF ORGANIZATION

**Our Board  
Members**

Amy Kelly  
Brad Benesh  
Dan Leitner  
DelRae Messer

John Lom  
Judy Guerrero  
Kelly Trolander  
Mary Anderson

Melissa Hofstede  
Susan O'Keefe  
Tony Vanelli

**Board Advisors**  
Joel LeVahn  
Stephanie DeForrest

# Message from the Board President

As another year comes to a close, I am grateful for the opportunity to reflect on the work, growth, and collective impact of Headwaters Relief Organization over the past year. 2025 was a year marked by continued response, new initiatives, and a deepened commitment to our mission, made entirely possible by an extraordinary community of volunteers, partners, and supporters.

Throughout the year, Headwaters responded to a steady stream of disasters locally, nationally, and internationally. While our geographic proximity allows us to mobilize most quickly for local and national responses, deploying volunteers, materials, and resources with minimal delay, our history has shown that no location is too far when help is needed. Headwaters continues to build strong partnerships with trusted organizations already on the ground, ensuring that support reaches communities through public health initiatives, medical care, psychosocial support, home restoration, and safe living solutions.

Across all disaster responses, one truth remains constant: meaningful impact requires resources. Donated goods, professional services, volunteer labor, and financial contributions fuel every mission. We are deeply grateful to our supporters whose generosity, through donations and participation in fundraising efforts, makes this work possible.

Fundraising in 2025 continued to be a cornerstone of our success. Among many, our 6th Annual Mardi Gras Gala once again served as our flagship event, complemented by the Annual Headwaters Golf Tournament and the Halloween-themed event, which evolved into a popular Family Fun Bowling Event. Additional fundraising efforts included volunteer-run food stands at professional sporting events and creative private initiatives led by our members. With continued member involvement, we are hopeful and confident that 2026 will surpass the record-setting fundraising achievements of 2025.

The past year also brought well-deserved recognition to members of our Board. Cheryl Vennerstrom, one of our charter founding board members, was appointed to the Board of Directors of National VOAD (Voluntary Organizations Active in Disaster), a distinction that reflects her leadership and dedication to disaster

response nationwide. Additionally, DelRae Messer was honored by Twin Cities Business Magazine as a 2025 Notable Nonprofit Board Member, a recognition that speaks to her service and impact within our organization and beyond.

I would also like to offer special recognition to David Comb, who stepped down from the Board in 2025 after years of extraordinary service. Since Headwaters' inception, Dave's tireless dedication in the field has, in my view, earned him the distinction of being one of our greatest disaster response volunteers. A man of few words, his work ethic spoke volumes and set a standard that inspired everyone who had the privilege of serving alongside him. While he may no longer serve on the Board, his legacy and influence remain firmly embedded in Headwaters' culture.

Finally, we were pleased to welcome two new board members in 2025. Melissa Hofstede, a key planner in the success of the Headwaters' Annual Golf Tournaments, now a perennial favorite, joined the Board, bringing leadership and continuity to one of our most successful events. John Lom also joined the Board this year, and through his financial support, enthusiasm, and engagement, has already demonstrated the qualities of a dedicated and impactful leader whose contributions are only beginning.

On behalf of the Board of Directors, I extend my deepest thanks to our volunteers, sponsors, donors, and partners. Your support has been the catalyst for our success and the inspiration for our continued growth. Together, we look ahead to 2026 with optimism, determination, and a shared commitment to serving communities in need.

With gratitude,

**Daniel G. Leitner**  
Board President  
Headwaters Relief Organization



## Standing with Communities in the Aftermath of Disasters

### Brimson, Minnesota

In 2025, Brimson and surrounding areas of St. Louis County in Minnesota faced an unprecedented wildfire season. More than 40,000 acres burned over the course of several months, marking a significant escalation in both the scale and impact of annual fires in northern Minnesota. For a small, rural community like Brimson, the damage was overwhelming, leaving families with unsafe properties, extensive debris, and limited local capacity for recovery.

### Targeting the Greatest Needs

Working closely with local leadership, Headwaters identified multiple priority work sites, including homes of elderly couples, uninsured families, and residents with limited physical ability to complete heavy cleanup on their own.

Headwaters volunteer teams deployed for long weekends in both July and August, allowing for continuity of work while respecting the pace and capacity of the community. The primary focus of these deployments included:

- Removal of large quantities of scrap metal & fire-damaged debris
- Clearing fallen and burned trees from residential properties
- Assisting families in making their land safer and more accessible

St. Louis County supported these efforts by establishing a designated dump site, enabling volunteers to efficiently and responsibly dispose of collected materials.

### Volunteer-Driven, Community-Led Recovery

Brimson exemplified the kind of disaster response where Headwaters is most effective, in small communities with limited resources, where targeted volunteer labor can make a tangible difference. Volunteers traveled more than three hours from the Twin Cities, brought their own tools and skills, and worked long days in challenging conditions, including heat, insects, and physically demanding terrain.

Just as importantly, volunteers worked with the community, not around it. Decisions were guided by local insight, priorities were shaped by residents' needs, and every cleared property represented not just physical progress, but restored dignity and safety.

### A Minnesota Commitment

Headwaters' work in Brimson underscores the organization's commitment to serving Minnesota communities as they confront the growing realities of climate-driven disasters. As wildfire seasons intensify and rural communities face increasing recovery challenges, Headwaters continues to show up, bringing volunteers, partnership, and practical support where it is needed most.

Brimson's recovery is ongoing, but through collaboration, trust, and repeat engagement, Headwaters Relief Organization remains proud to stand alongside this northern Minnesota community on its long road toward recovery.



# Minneapolis Resiliency Centers

On Aug. 27, 2025 gunshots broke out in Minneapolis during morning mass at Annunciation Catholic Church and School. Two children died in the mass shooting. Twenty-eight other people were injured. The attack took place during a scheduled school-wide Mass attended by the students and faculty of Annunciation Catholic School.

On September 15th, 2025 there was a mass shooting on Lake Street in Minneapolis. Five people were injured and 1 person died.

As a result of these events, the City of Minneapolis opened Resiliency Centers in the two respective neighborhoods. Community members are invited to these centers for connection, resources and healing. Headwaters Relief Organization was asked to be a part of the support system to work with the children affected while their parents take advantage of other resources and support. Our volunteers have been assisting with the weekly open hours. The Annunciation Resiliency Center will be open through February 10th. The other partners in this project include COPE, Hennepin County's mobile crisis unit which provides phone or in-person crisis assessment and response. The Minnesota Office of Justice Programs, part of the Department of Public Safety, offers support to victims of crimes. North Star Therapy Animals brings trained dogs to provide comfort and support to children and adults.



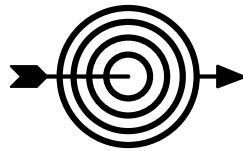
## Firefighter Challenge Midwest Regional Classic

Headwaters volunteers assisted Serv Pro of Northeast Minneapolis, the host of the Firefighter Challenge Midwest Regional Classic. Serv Pro requested our volunteer assistance for this 3-day event in June 2025. The event celebrates firefighters and touts the event as a showcase of strength, skill and spirit for firefighters from across the country. The competition includes individual and team events. Headwaters volunteers assisted with managing the equipment for the various competitions. We also helped with the other volunteers and participants as they registered, took lunch breaks and found their events.

The Firefighter Challenge Midwest Regional Classic is open to any firefighters in our Midwest Region residing in Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska, North Dakota, South Dakota, and Wisconsin. The athletes vie for Midwest Region titles and records. We were pleased to honor first responders who are critical to disaster relief.

# The Foundation of Headwaters

05



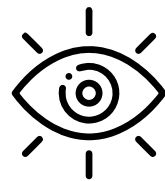
## GOAL

Headwaters seeks to inspire passion to serve others. We forge connections between those who are being served, the Headwaters team and the community at large. We work to ensure that every volunteer, regardless of age, background, skills, or experience, feels valued and motivated to continue to serve others.



## MISSION

Headwaters is a nonprofit organization bringing hope and building resilience in people and communities following disasters.



## VISION

Bringing Hope Building Resiliency

## Kentucky Tornado Response

In 2025, a series of devastating tornadoes swept across the Midwest and South, leaving a trail of destruction and claiming at least 28 lives. Communities in Kentucky were among those hardest hit, with families facing extensive damage to homes, infrastructure, and essential services.

In the immediate aftermath, Headwaters Relief Organization began coordinating with trusted local partners and organizations on the ground to assess needs and determine where support could be most effective. Recognizing that every disaster unfolds differently, our focus has been on listening first—working alongside local leaders to understand priorities and gaps in recovery efforts.

Initial response planning centered on hands-on, volunteer-driven support, including debris removal, cleanup assistance, and helping families begin the process of restoring safe

and livable spaces. As with all Headwaters responses, our approach emphasizes practical assistance, dignity, and community partnership rather than short-term intervention alone.

While deployment timelines were still being finalized during the reporting period, Headwaters remained actively engaged in preparation and coordination, ensuring we were ready to mobilize responsibly when conditions allowed. This measured approach reflects our commitment to effective, community-led recovery and long-term presence where it is most needed.

Kentucky's recovery is ongoing, and Headwaters continues to stand ready—guided by the same volunteer spirit and commitment to service that define our work across all disaster-affected communities.



## Kerr County, Texas

In August 2025, Kerr County continued to grapple with the aftermath of devastating flash floods that caused widespread damage to homes and disrupted daily life for many families. As floodwaters receded, long-term recovery needs quickly became clear, particularly for households facing extensive interior damage and limited resources.

Headwaters Relief Organization deployed an initial assessment team to reconnect with trusted local partners, evaluate conditions on the ground, and identify families most in need of assistance. Based on these findings, Headwaters prepared targeted relief efforts focused on practical, hands-on support.

Planned and ongoing recovery work included muck-outs, sheetrock removal, debris cleanup, and direct assistance to affected households, helping families take critical first steps toward restoring safe and livable homes. As with all Headwaters responses, efforts in Kerr County were guided by collaboration with local organizations and a commitment to supporting community-led recovery.





## **Headwaters' Mental Health Resource Center**

In 2007, Headwaters established the first and then the only walk-in mental health resource center in the Ninth Ward. This center has operated continuously for over 18 years adapting its services to meet the changing community needs. It has become an integral component of the neighborhood, offering mental health support, community services, and a place for healing and growth for the youth. Our presence in the Ninth Ward has been about more than recovery—it's been about empowering the community to rebuild and thrive. In partnership with the New Salem Baptist Church, regular events are planned with Headwaters volunteers to provide psychosocial support to the children in the neighborhood.

## Hurricane Melissa Relief

In the aftermath of Hurricane Melissa, a powerful Category 5 storm that caused widespread devastation across Jamaica, Headwaters Relief Organization mobilized quickly to support early recovery efforts on the ground.

While the scale of destruction limited the scope of what could be done immediately, Headwaters volunteers were present in Jamaica soon after the storm made landfall. Our team worked in coordination with national response structures, including the Office of Disaster Preparedness and Emergency Management (ODPEM), to ensure alignment with ongoing relief and recovery efforts.

Equally important, Headwaters volunteers connected directly with affected communities, prioritizing people over processes. Volunteers engaged with local schools and churches in the Montego Bay area, supporting grassroots recovery efforts and listening to community-identified needs. These trusted local institutions

served as essential hubs for outreach, coordination, and care during the earliest phase of recovery.

Looking ahead, Headwaters is committed to continuing its engagement in Jamaica by working alongside local partners and communities to support longer-term recovery and resilience-building efforts. By strengthening partnerships and responding to locally identified priorities, we plan to contribute to sustainable recovery that extends beyond immediate disaster response.

Although our role in Jamaica was modest, our presence reinforced Headwaters' core commitment: to show up quickly, work alongside local partners, and support community-led recovery with humility and respect. Even in moments when resources are limited, standing with communities during their most vulnerable times remains central to our mission.





## 7<sup>th</sup> Annual Headwaters Golf Tournament

On August 8th, 2025, Headwaters Relief Organization marked its 7th Annual Golf Tournament, bringing together supporters, volunteers, community partners, and sponsors for a day of camaraderie, fun, and purpose. Over the years, this event has become one of our key fundraisers, and this year's tournament continued that success with strong participation and solid community support.

The tournament welcomed golfers of all experience levels who teed off to support our disaster response programs. Golfers enjoyed a full day on the course, featuring contests, raffles, and opportunities to learn about the many projects made possible through this event.

This year's tournament was truly special, and it wouldn't have been possible without our amazing volunteers and everyone who generously shared their time, resources, and sponsorships. Our sponsors not only make this event happen but also give it a heartfelt purpose. Their support of Headwaters touches the lives of children, families, and communities facing challenges, and we sincerely appreciate their wonderful partnership.



## Twins Games

Headwaters Relief Organization continued its tradition of operating food stands at select Twins home games during the 2025 season. Staffed by volunteers, this unique opportunity not only fosters team building but also raises funds for our organization. Thanks to the efforts of our dedicated volunteers, we successfully managed stands at 10 games with 8-10 volunteers for each event. We have been invited back for another season of Twin's games in 2026,

We extend our deepest gratitude to every one of you, volunteers and team leaders, who have contributed to this success. In line with our 100% model, the donations collected by working at the event supports our fieldwork. Your generosity significantly contributes to our ongoing efforts and mission, making a meaningful impact on the lives of those we support.



## Miracle Gold Hockey Tournament

The Miracle Gold Hockey Tournament marked one of Headwaters Relief Organization's first attempts to engage a new audience through a hockey tournament-based fundraising event. The opportunity came through the leadership and initiative of our board member, whose connections helped open the door to this exciting and highly visible tournament.

Held over the weekend of June 20-22, 2025, the tournament brought together players, families, and spectators for a high-energy celebration of sport, teamwork, and community. Headwaters participated on Friday afternoon through Saturday afternoon, setting up a presence near the event check-in area to connect with attendees and share our mission.

Most importantly, this tournament offered Headwaters meaningful visibility within a new community space and reinforced the power of sports to bring people together. The thrill of competition, strong community participation, and enthusiastic atmosphere aligned closely with our values of connection and collective action. This first step has helped lay the groundwork for stronger partnerships and more effective engagement at future sporting events.

## Headwaters Relief Organization's First Halloween-Themed Bowling Tournament



### ***A Night of Community, Creativity, and Fun***

Headwaters Relief Organization hosted its first-ever Halloween-themed Bowling Tournament in 2025, bringing together families, children, volunteers, and supporters for an unforgettable afternoon of fun and community connection.

The event saw an incredible turnout, with participants of all ages arriving in creative costumes and festive spirits. From bowling games and lively music to raffles, bean bag contests, food, and friendly competitions, the tournament was filled with energy, laughter, and shared joy. Separate children's and adult divisions ensured that everyone, from young bowlers to seasoned players, could participate and feel included.

At its heart, the tournament was about more than bowling. It was a celebration of community spirit, creativity, and togetherness, as families and friends gathered in support of Headwaters' mission. The enthusiasm and participation throughout the event reflected the strong sense of connection that Headwaters strives to foster through its community-based initiatives.

We extend our sincere gratitude to our generous sponsors, dedicated volunteers, and everyone who joined us and helped make this event possible. Thanks to their support, our first Halloween-themed Bowling Tournament was a tremendous success and one we look forward to making an annual tradition.

## Sixth Annual Mardi Gras Gala

Our annual Mardi Gras Gala celebrates Headwaters' beginnings as a disaster relief organization when we responded to Hurricane Katrina in 2005 in New Orleans. The 2025 Mardi Gras Gala also commemorated 20 years providing disaster relief. Our board members, supporters, volunteers and friends joined us for a fabulous evening of entertainment and fun.

Attendees enjoyed The Frier Department, a local jazz band, during cocktail hour. Entertainment included a tarot card reader, photo booth, trapeze performer and a jazz singer and pianist. There was a live auction as well as a silent auction. The big event for the evening featured a casino night after dinner where guests enjoyed gambling with pretend money. The menu included New Orleans' Cajun food as well as other favorites specific to that region. The event was successful as a fundraiser as well as a great party.



## Strengthening Communities Through Volunteer Service

“ Volunteerism is not a single moment —  
it’s a commitment over time. ”

VOLUNTEER HOURS IN 2025

**21,159**

Across 2025, Headwaters Relief Organization, in partnership with North American Banking Company, sustained a full year of monthly volunteer engagement focused on strengthening communities, advancing preparedness, and supporting recovery. This collaboration enabled Headwaters to maintain consistent opportunities for service while remaining responsive to emerging needs across Minnesota and beyond.

*“ Together, small acts of service create meaningful change. ”*

At the heart of this work were volunteers who gave their time, skills, and compassion month after month. Through hands-on projects, volunteers supported children and families, service members, and communities affected by crisis. These efforts reflect Headwaters’ belief that meaningful impact is built through steady presence, trusted partnerships, and service rooted in dignity and care.

Each month offered opportunities for individuals and families to engage in purposeful service. Volunteer activities ranged from assembling hygiene and relief kits to organizing therapeutic programs for children, preparing school supplies, crafting handmade tie blankets, and packing care packages for deployed service members. These projects were intentionally designed to be accessible and impactful—allowing volunteers to see the tangible results of their work while contributing to broader efforts that promote health, well-being, and resilience.

In addition to recurring volunteer initiatives, Headwaters volunteers also supported community recovery efforts following disaster events. When wildfires affected the Brimson, Minnesota area, volunteers stepped forward to assist with cleanup and early recovery, helping residents take meaningful steps toward rebuilding. Community cleanup efforts in Golden Valley further reflected the organization’s commitment to local engagement and stewardship.

Throughout the year, volunteer participation remained strong and diverse. Individuals from different backgrounds and life stages came together through Headwaters programs, creating a shared sense of purpose and connection. Collectively, volunteers helped prepare hundreds of resources for children and families, created

items intended to provide comfort during times of crisis, and supported initiatives that addressed both immediate needs and longer-term recovery.

*“ Hands-on service creates connection—between people, purpose, and community. ”*

This consistency was made possible through the ongoing sponsorship of North American Banking Company. Their continued support provided stability that allowed Headwaters to plan ahead, sustain monthly engagement, and adapt programming as needs evolved. Rather than operating reactively, the organization was able to build continuity—deepening volunteer relationships, strengthening community trust, and ensuring that support was available when it mattered most.

*“ Sustained partnerships make long-term impact possible. ”*

Beyond the direct outcomes of each activity, these volunteer events fostered a culture of service and community leadership. Volunteers frequently shared how meaningful it was to contribute in hands-on ways and to be part of a collective effort focused on helping others. For many, these monthly opportunities became a regular way to stay connected to their community and to make a positive difference.

As Headwaters reflects on 2025, the year stands as a testament to what is possible through sustained partnership and volunteer-driven action. The collaboration with North American Banking Company continues to exemplify shared values of service, community investment, and leadership.

Looking ahead, Headwaters remains committed to expanding opportunities for meaningful service while preserving the core principles that guide our work. With continued partnership and community support, we will build on this foundation—creating pathways for deeper engagement, broader impact, and lasting resilience.

## Haiti Child Sponsorship Program



Our Haiti Child Sponsorship Program continues to be a vital source of stability and hope for children facing extraordinary hardship. Amid ongoing economic instability, political unrest, and the lingering impacts of natural disasters, this program ensures that vulnerable children have consistent access to education, nutritious meals, medical care, and the steady encouragement of caring sponsors.

Education remains the cornerstone of our sponsorship efforts. We continue to support two institutions that provide safe spaces for orphaned children and access to schooling, including Life Christian Orphanage. Through the generosity of sponsors, children receive school tuition, uniforms, books, and essential classroom supplies. In many communities, insecurity and financial strain have forced schools to reduce operations or close entirely. Our continued support has played an important role in keeping classrooms open, sustaining attendance, and helping students remain on track academically.

Beyond meeting basic needs, sponsorship fosters meaningful human connection. The exchange of letters, photos, and messages between sponsors and children provides powerful emotional support. For many children, knowing that someone believes in their potential creates a deep sense of hope, belonging, and motivation to dream beyond their circumstances.

### Exciting Progress in Haiti

We are thrilled to share major milestones in the growth of our work in Haiti. Life Christian has successfully completed construction of a new school and dormitory campus, enabling the organization to relocate from Port-au-Prince to a safer, more spacious community in Léogâne. This move was made possible through the persistent leadership of Jonathan Steers, Founder and President of Better Together International, our partner organization, and marks a transformative step forward in protecting and serving children.

The first dormitory is complete, and preparations are already underway for the second dormitory, along with a sanitation block, cafeteria, and water well. The children have officially moved into their new home, an important milestone that has been years in the making.

Once these initial structures are complete, construction will begin on the full school campus, which will include:

- Nine new classrooms
- A dedicated administrative building
- A playground
- A farm to support meals and long-term sustainability

Together, these additions will create a safe, nurturing, and vibrant environment where many more children will have access to education, clean water, healthy meals, and stability.

Our work in Haiti is made possible through close collaboration with teachers, caregivers, and local partners, and through the generosity of donors and sponsors like you. Together, we are doing more than building classrooms and dormitories, we are strengthening community resilience and investing in a future where children can learn, grow, and truly thrive.

## Media Coverage



### Cheryl Vennerstrom joined the Board of Directors of the National Voluntary Organizations Active in Disasters (National VOAD)

Cheryl Vennerstrom joined the Board of Directors of the National Voluntary Organizations Active in Disasters (National VOAD) in 2025. Cheryl has been part of Headwaters Relief Organization's leadership since its inception in 2005. She has been involved in Headwa-

ters' local, national and international disaster relief activities. Previously, Cheryl served on the Minnesota VOAD board. The National VOAD is comprised of non-profits engaged in providing disaster relief to communities throughout the United States after natural and man-made disasters, promoting cooperation, communication, coordination and collaboration. Cheryl is the board liaison to the Communications committee and the Open Door committee.

## Volunteer Highlight: Judy Guerrero



Service has always been a part of Judy Guerrero's life. Raised in a family where compassion and justice were core values, Judy learned early on that helping others was not optional, it was simply how one lived in the world.

Her father, an attorney, devoted much of his career to anti-discrimination work, often advocating for those whose voices were overlooked. Her mother volunteered extensively, organizing neighborhood fundraisers and bringing Judy along from a young age to collect needed donations for various causes. In their home, acts of service were described as mitzvahs- good deeds and were reinforced through the Jewish value of Tikkun Olam, meaning "to repair the world."

These early lessons shaped both Judy's personal and professional journey.

Judy began her career as a registered nurse, working in step-down intensive care and psychiatric nursing. Over time, she found herself increasingly drawn to understanding the emotional and psychological dimensions of healing. That curiosity led her to pursue a doctorate in clinical psychology, a decision she describes as deeply fulfilling and one she has never regretted. Throughout her career, she has worked with individuals facing anxiety, mental illness, and ultimately specialized in supporting those struggling with eating disorders.

Her path to Headwaters Relief Organization felt natural. Volunteering, for Judy, is not something she schedules, it is something she embodies.

Through disaster response deployments and community recovery efforts, Judy has gained profound insight into what people need most in moments of crisis. Again and again, she has witnessed the power of presence: showing up, listening deeply, and allowing people the space to tell their stories.

*"One of the most healing gifts you can give someone is simply being present and listening."*

During deployments with Headwaters, from refugee camps to disaster-impacted communities, Judy recalls moments when communities didn't ask for solutions or programs. They asked to be heard. Parents shared stories of their children's fears. Survivors spoke of loss, uncertainty, and resilience. In those moments, Judy learned that meaningful service does not begin with an agenda or a plan- it begins with humility.

*"It's not about what we think people need. It's about listening and responding to what they tell us they need."*

Judy is especially moved by Headwaters' commitment to returning repeatedly to the same communities. For her, trust is built not through promises, but through presence.

*"Showing up matters. Coming back matters. People remember when you don't forget them."*

Whether listening, helping rebuild homes, delivering food, or simply standing alongside people during their hardest days, Judy believes that service is about meeting people where they are. Her volunteer work has reinforced a belief she has carried since childhood: the world is better when we take care of one another.

*"When we help reduce suffering, even in small ways, we help repair the world"*

Judy's story reflects the heart of Headwaters Relief Organization: compassion rooted in action, service grounded in humility, and a belief that healing begins when we show up together.



### Dr. DelRae Messer named 2025 Notable Nonprofit Board Members

Executive Board Member of Headwaters Relief Organization  
Dr. DelRae Messer was named Twin Cities Business magazine's list of Notable Nonprofit Board Members of 2025.

"As an eight-year board member for the Golden Valley-based Headwaters Relief Organization, DelRae Messer has led and funded disaster response efforts, including home rebuilding projects and nutrition assistance programs for a mental health clinic serving schoolchildren

in New Orleans. She has also funded an award-winning children's coloring book series addressing Covid-19 emotional trauma, distributing more than 10,000 books globally. Messer's community initiatives demonstrate consistent leadership, from organizing tulip planting in local parks to hosting educational women's empowerment events. With a background in health and wellness, Messer in the past two years has consulted for youth sports and brain fitness technology platforms as well, focusing on accessibility, equity, and innovation."

## Twenty Years of Presence, Partnership, & Community-Led Recovery



In the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in 2005, few places symbolized both the scale of devastation and the inequities embedded in disaster recovery as starkly as the Ninth Ward of New Orleans. Home to one of the highest rates of Black homeownership in the city prior to the storm, the Ninth Ward also experienced some of the most severe losses, over 700 lives, prolonged displacement, and the slowest restoration of essential services, including electricity and drinking water. What followed was not only physical destruction, but the unraveling of deeply rooted community networks, cultural institutions, and generational stability.

Headwaters Relief Organization's work in New Orleans began not as a formal initiative, but as a promise. After witnessing the devastation firsthand while volunteering in October 2005, we met Pastor Warren Jones of New Salem Baptist Church in the Ninth Ward and made a simple commitment: "I'll come back, and I'll bring help." That promise became the foundation of a grassroots movement, originally known as River of Hope, that would grow into two decades of sustained, community-driven recovery work.

### From Immediate Response to Long-Term Commitment

On November 25, 2005— the day after Thanksgiving— a group of 35 volunteers arrived in New Orleans with a 48-foot trailer of donated supplies, limited experience, and determination to help where help was still desperately needed. What they encountered was a neighborhood largely abandoned by time and inattention: empty streets, uninhabitable homes, and community buildings reduced to shells. Early efforts focused on gutting and cleaning homes, restoring community centers, and reclaiming spaces for children, elders, and survivors of domestic violence.

New Salem Baptist Church became the operational and emotional headquarters of this work— for planning, reflection, and mutual support. Each day began and ended there. Seven months after the storm, when electricity was finally restored to the church steeple, it became a visible symbol of hope not only for volunteers, but for the wider community. Over time, logistics expanded through partnerships with local institutions such as Hotel Monteleone, which housed volunteers alongside displaced residents and essential workers, enabling sustained deployment despite challenging conditions.



### Twenty Years Later: Presence Still Matters

Two decades after Hurricane Katrina, the Ninth Ward is not the same community it once was. Homeownership has declined, fewer elders have returned, and many schools and playgrounds were never rebuilt. Racial and economic disparities are profound, with Black families in New Orleans continuing to experience disproportionately lower incomes and higher rates of poverty than their counterparts. Katrina was never an equal opportunity storm, and its long-term impact reflects decades of structural inequalities.

Yet Headwaters remains committed. In recognition of the 20th anniversary of Katrina, the organization returned once again, this time to build a playground and repair a community center, affirming that recovery is not a moment, but a generational process. The lesson of New Orleans has been clear: presence itself is a form of intervention. Being there: consistently, humbly, and in partnership, creates the conditions for healing, resilience, and trust.

# 20th Year Commemoration of Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans Ninth Ward

## 20 Years of Commitment

Over the past two decades, Headwaters volunteers have worked side-by-side with residents on projects that include rebuilding homes, restoring community spaces, and providing essential health and mental health services. The bonds we've formed with the Ninth Ward are not just partnerships, they are friendships built on mutual trust, respect, and shared hope.

## Commemorating 20 Years of Resilience

On August 29th and 30th, 2025, we organized a two-day community event to honor the progress made and the strength of the Ninth Ward community. The event was an opportunity to volunteer in the community. It also featured music, food, activities, and the chance to connect with residents whose resilience continues to inspire. We were joined by volunteers from all around the country.

**Rebuilding Efforts:** We worked on a couple of projects, both new and old. We restored a domestic abuse community center that has not been in use due to its need for repair. We also helped repair a family home that serves homeless families who are in need of housing. Our volunteer professional builders from TDB Construction in Minnesota, provided technical expertise and manpower for the construction work.

**Community Engagement:** Volunteers provided activities that supported children and youth. Activities included a bounce house, craft activities as well as drum-making and drum playing.

**Health Clinic Support:** Our Headwaters' nurse volunteers screened for health conditions including measuring blood pressures and blood glucose monitoring. The nurses were also available to answer health-related questions.



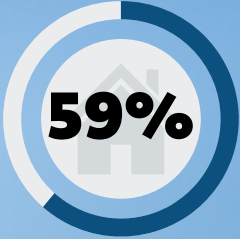
## Sharing Lessons Nationally: Leadership Beyond the Ninth Ward

In 2025, Headwaters Relief Organization brought these lessons to a national audience, presenting its 20-year journey in the Ninth Ward at leading emergency management and disaster response conferences. Through presentations at the International Association of Emergency Managers (IAEM) Annual Conference and the National Voluntary Organizations Active in Disaster (NVOAD) Conference, Headwaters highlighted the critical role of volunteer-driven, community-led recovery in addressing long-term public health and psychosocial impacts of disasters.

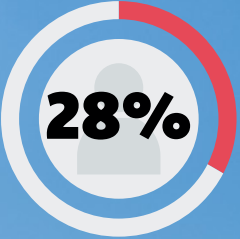
These national presentations elevated the voices of the Ninth Ward, shared evidence-informed practices, and reinforced the importance of sustained nonprofit engagement long after media attention fades. By translating lived experience into shared learning, Headwaters continues to influence how recovery is understood, not only as rebuilding structures, but as rebuilding trust, dignity, and human connection.



# 2025 REVENUE SOURCES



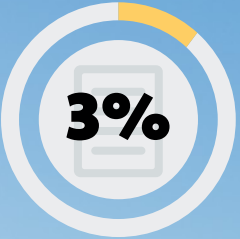
**FUNDRAISING  
EVENTS**



**GENERAL  
DONATIONS**



**HAITI  
SUPPORT**



**GRANTS**

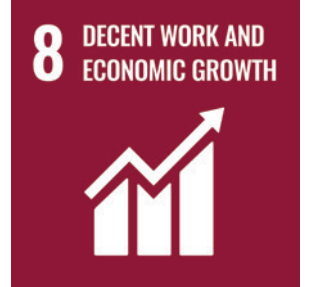


# THE 17 GOALS

## Global Goals, Local Action: Headwaters & the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

Headwaters Relief Organization aligns its disaster response, public health, and psychosocial recovery efforts with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). While our work is rooted in local communities, its impact contributes to global priorities that advance health, equity, resilience, and dignity for all. As we move into 2026 and beyond, we remain committed to deepening this alignment through intentional partnerships, community-led solutions, and sustainable recovery models.

In 2026, global SDG efforts increasingly recognize the critical role of grassroots organizations like Headwaters Relief Organization in advancing resilience, equity, and long-term recovery. Headwaters' volunteer-driven, community-centered approach reflects this shift—demonstrating that meaningful local action is essential to achieving global goals.





Headwaters  
RELIEF ORGANIZATION



9400 GOLDEN VALLEY ROAD, GOLDEN VALLEY, MN 55427  
HEADWATERSRELIEF.ORG