

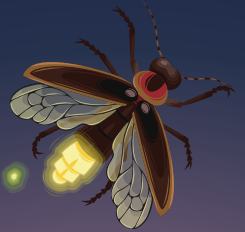


MISSISSIPPI PARK CONNECTION

Discover your river

2023 Annual Report

October 1, 2022–September 30, 2023



Tiny Seeds to Towering Legacies: Cultivating Growth on the River

Most seeds have within them a small but powerful force. Arising from the dormant seed after careful exposure to just the right amount of water and oxygen, the delicate cotyledon breaks through the seed coat. The cotyledon – the fragile and first leaves to emerge from a seed during germination – provides nourishment to the embryonic plant before photosynthesis kicks into gear. From this humble beginning, a great and towering tree grows.

In the lifecycle of a nonprofit, I like to think of the time up to this point as Mississippi Park Connection’s phase of the cotyledon. Nearly twenty years ago, the first leaf of a nonprofit grew when the National Park Service actively sought to form a friend’s group that would support its efforts. Over the years, more leaves were added as dedicated community members who wanted to support the Mississippi National River and Recreation Area cultivated our organization through volunteerism and philanthropy.

Since then, MPC has increased its ability to support the river through fundraising, programming, and partnerships. In 2023 alone, we planted nearly 1,000 trees, connected over 17,000 students to the river through youth education programs, co-created 14 safe and welcoming affinity programs for 209 BIPOC and LGBTQI+ attendees, and gave 3,206 people the equipment they needed to kayak the Mississippi River through Mississippi River Paddle Share – our biggest year yet! Through programs, Mississippi Park Connection has sustained our mission of enriching the life of the river and the lives of all who experience the Mississippi National River and Recreation Area.

To grow beyond the cotyledon phase, a tree must grow woody infrastructure that builds the internal strength that is necessary to lift its tall canopy to the sky. In our case, we are making investments in new staff positions like a new assistant director, program manager, and part-time administration support, to help us reach more people in service to our mission. In the coming years, we will support the National Park Service in finding a more permanent home at the Mississippi River Learning Center and National Park Headquarters. In addition to this, we will launch Paddle Share 2.0 with an improved user interface and customer experience in 2024 that will expand our ability to connect more people to the river through kayaking; restore more habitats and tree canopy throughout the park corridor; and reach many more people throughout the Twin Cities and beyond through BIPOC in the Outdoors, public programs and events, and more.

Like a young tree, Mississippi Park Connection is strong and stable, with more room to grow. With your continued support, we are extending our branches and providing places of respite along the river – your National Park. Thank you for being a friend of the park, and cheers to a fruitful 2024!



Barry Clegg
Board Chair



Ellen Reed
Executive Director



M. Tucker Blythe
Superintendent of the Mississippi
National River and Recreation Area



An Outdoor Education for All

In 2023, we celebrated the 25th anniversary of Big River Journey – the floating classroom that connects thousands of elementary school students to on-river experiences in the Mississippi National River and Recreation Area. In partnership with the National Park Service, outdoor and online youth education programs provide a fresh, hands-on approach to the ways learning can be integrated with the outdoors, empowering students to become avid learners, and enabling them to begin building lifelong relationships with the river. Take Me to the River, Winter River, Working River, and partnerships with Wilderness Inquiry for Canoemobile and the Mississippi River Explorers programs create ladders of opportunities for kids to discover the Mississippi River’s national park from 3rd grade through the end of high school.

This year, we updated Mississippi Park Connection’s online educator portal. More than **3,500 educators** and students from across the state accessed parkconnection.org/learn.

New ideas were also tested. A new Education Resource Development Team of 12 education professionals brought new ideas for curricula and programming for the future River Learning Center and piloted a field trip at Crosby Farm Regional Park in June.

Mississippi Park Connection’s youth education programs are generously funded by the National Park Foundation’s Open Outdoors For Kids Grant Program, Xcel Energy Foundation, Ecolab Foundation, and generous members who contribute to the Ticket to Ride Scholarship Fund.



Emerging Outdoor Leaders Share Their Talents



The Mississippi River Fellowship has supported college-aged young adults from historically underrepresented communities since 2014 in exploring careers in the outdoors. This year's fellows worked alongside National Park Rangers, Mississippi Park Connection staff, and other park partners to facilitate educational programs, volunteer habitat restoration events, and wildlife monitoring during their 10-week, paid internship in the Mississippi National River and Recreation Area.

Sairoong

Sairoong is originally from Madison, WI and attends UMN-Twin Cities. She is a senior studying Environmental Science, Policy, and Management and minors in Sustainable Food Systems and Urban Studies.

"The most fulfilling part of the fellowship was being able to learn from, educate, and work with other community members. I gained a much deeper appreciation for the generations of care and resilience that have preserved the Mississippi's diverse ecosystems."

– Sairoong's Reflections on the Mississippi River Fellowship



Photo by Bethany Birnie

Elise

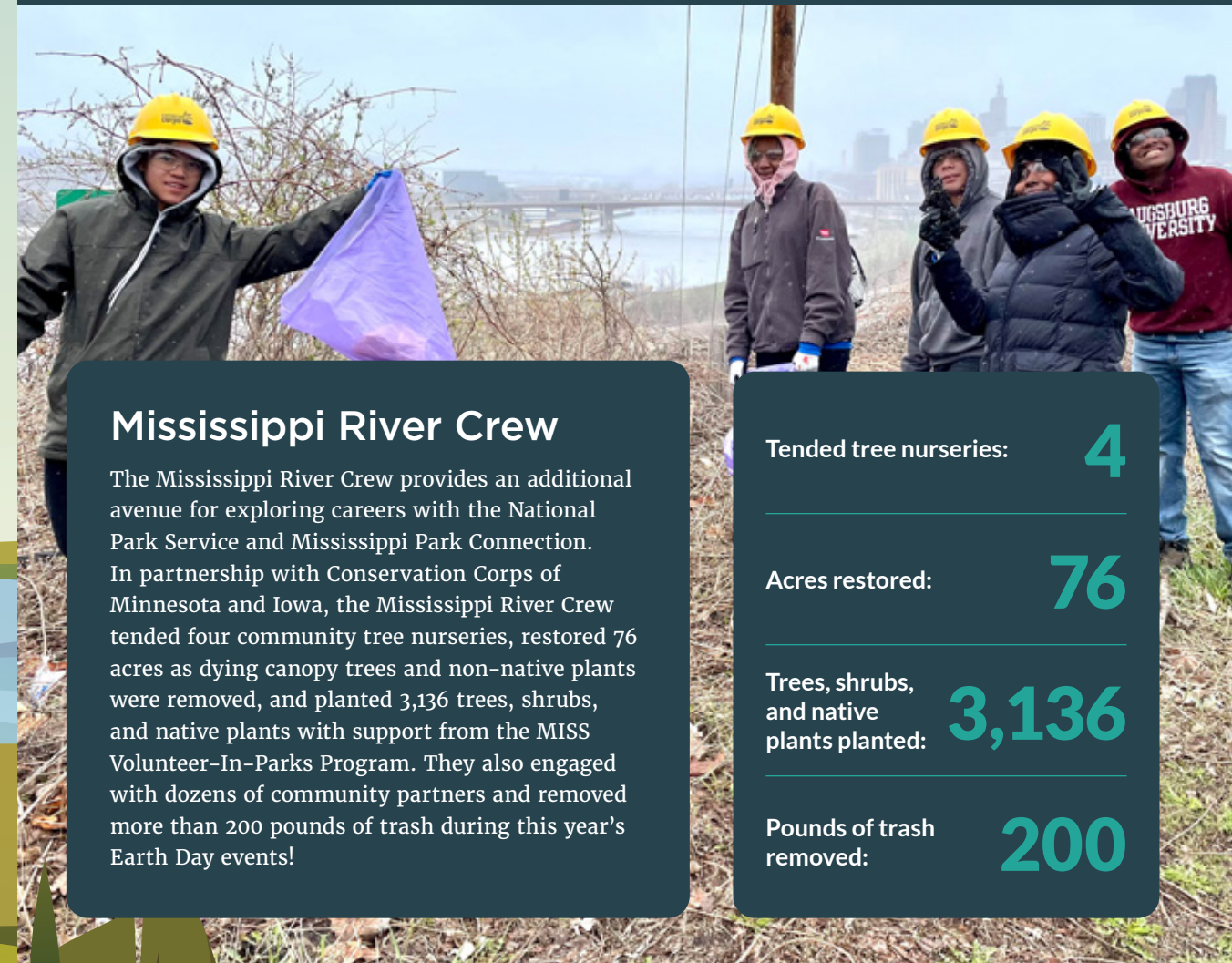
Originally from the Twin Cities, Elise is a sophomore at the University of Vermont. Elise is studying Sustainability, Ecology, and Policy (SEP), with a special concentration in Ecology. Elise is also pursuing a minor in Plant Biology and indulging in a bit of extra fun through a minor in Studio Art.

"I have been able to grow and hone so many of my skills, especially one of my favorites, plant identification. While being exposed to all different opportunities for the wide variety of careers in the environmental field, the fellowship also catered to my passions. It gave me many opportunities to spend more time in what I was specifically interested in."

– Elise's Reflection on the Mississippi River Fellowship



Photo by Bethany Birnie



Mississippi River Crew

The Mississippi River Crew provides an additional avenue for exploring careers with the National Park Service and Mississippi Park Connection. In partnership with Conservation Corps of Minnesota and Iowa, the Mississippi River Crew tended four community tree nurseries, restored 76 acres as dying canopy trees and non-native plants were removed, and planted 3,136 trees, shrubs, and native plants with support from the MISS Volunteer-In-Parks Program. They also engaged with dozens of community partners and removed more than 200 pounds of trash during this year's Earth Day events!

Tended tree nurseries: **4**

Acres restored: **76**

Trees, shrubs, and native plants planted: **3,136**

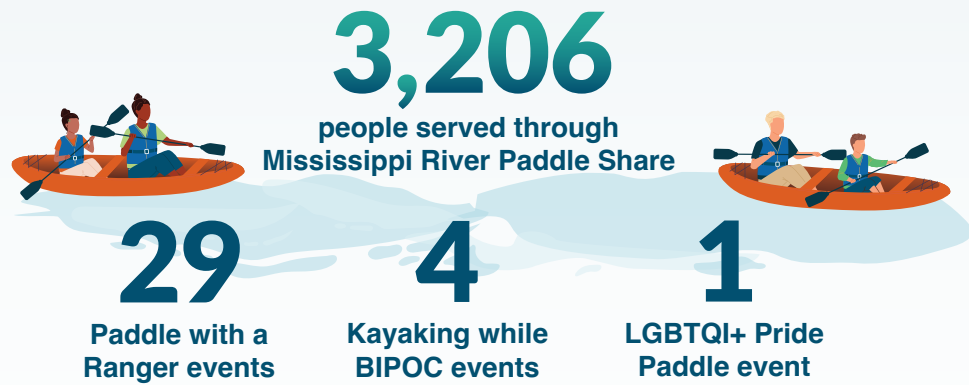
Pounds of trash removed: **200**

Sharing Joyful Days on the Water

Mississippi River Paddle Share

Mississippi River Paddle Share provided many opportunities for parkgoers to experience joy on the river in 2023. Paddling inspires individuals to incorporate river recreation into their relationships with the outdoors and builds confidence at the river's edge.

In addition to self-service kayak rentals, in 2023, Mississippi River Paddle Share supported public programming through Mississippi Park Connection and the National Park Service that included:



“Mississippi Park Connection continuously strives to make sure our community is engaged, educated, and proactive in protecting our national park system. We are proud to work with a dynamic team that helps to uplift our Greener Goals pillar at Minnesota United. Together we’re committed to the ecological health of our community.”

– **Cori Meixner**, Director of Community Relations, Minnesota United FC

Stewarding the River for Future Generations



Photo by Shari L Gross, StarTribune

Adaptive Silviculture for Climate Change (ASCC) Network Study

In collaboration with the City of Saint Paul, the University of Minnesota, the Northern Institute of Applied Climate Science, the U.S. Forest Service and the Adaptive Silviculture for Climate Change Network (ASCC Network), dedicated volunteers and staff members have conducted research to identify tree species flourishing in the floodplain forest. The outcomes of this research aim to provide valuable insights for stewardship strategies.

Ten Years of Coldwater Spring

Beginning in 2013, a small group of staff and volunteers came together two times a week to remove buckthorn, pick up trash, and plant native plants at Mni Owe Sni/Coldwater Spring. Dubbed the Coldwater Crew, the group spends most days removing buckthorn. This year, the crew celebrated its 10-year anniversary of caring for the spring and the surrounding landscape.



“I take pride in being a part of the prairie restoration. I enjoy seeing the living prairie change by the week, by the season and through the years. This city boy is grateful that NPS and MPC have created a volunteer opportunity that suits the part of me that needs dirt on my hands, dust on my boots, and green stains on my clothes.”

– **Denny Appleman**, Volunteer
Coldwater Crew Leader



Connecting to the River

Through the BIPOC in the Outdoors program, Mississippi Park Connection provides direct access for BIPOC Twin Cities residents to connect with the Mississippi River in a way that feels relatable and judgment-free. Programming such as kayaking and hiking along the river, and plant and tree identification are the direct result of community interest and feedback. Participants are encouraged to lead and share what they know about the outdoors to expand narratives of the human relationship to the Mississippi River and the land.

“Access to the restorative and healing wonders of nature is a fundamental human need. And access is too often obstructed or made difficult for some communities. Mississippi Park Connection’s work to create access to the outdoors for BIPOC communities is in full alignment with our aspiration to create an equitable, just and vibrant Minnesota where all people and communities thrive. We are proud supporters of this work to make the beauty of Minnesota available to all.”

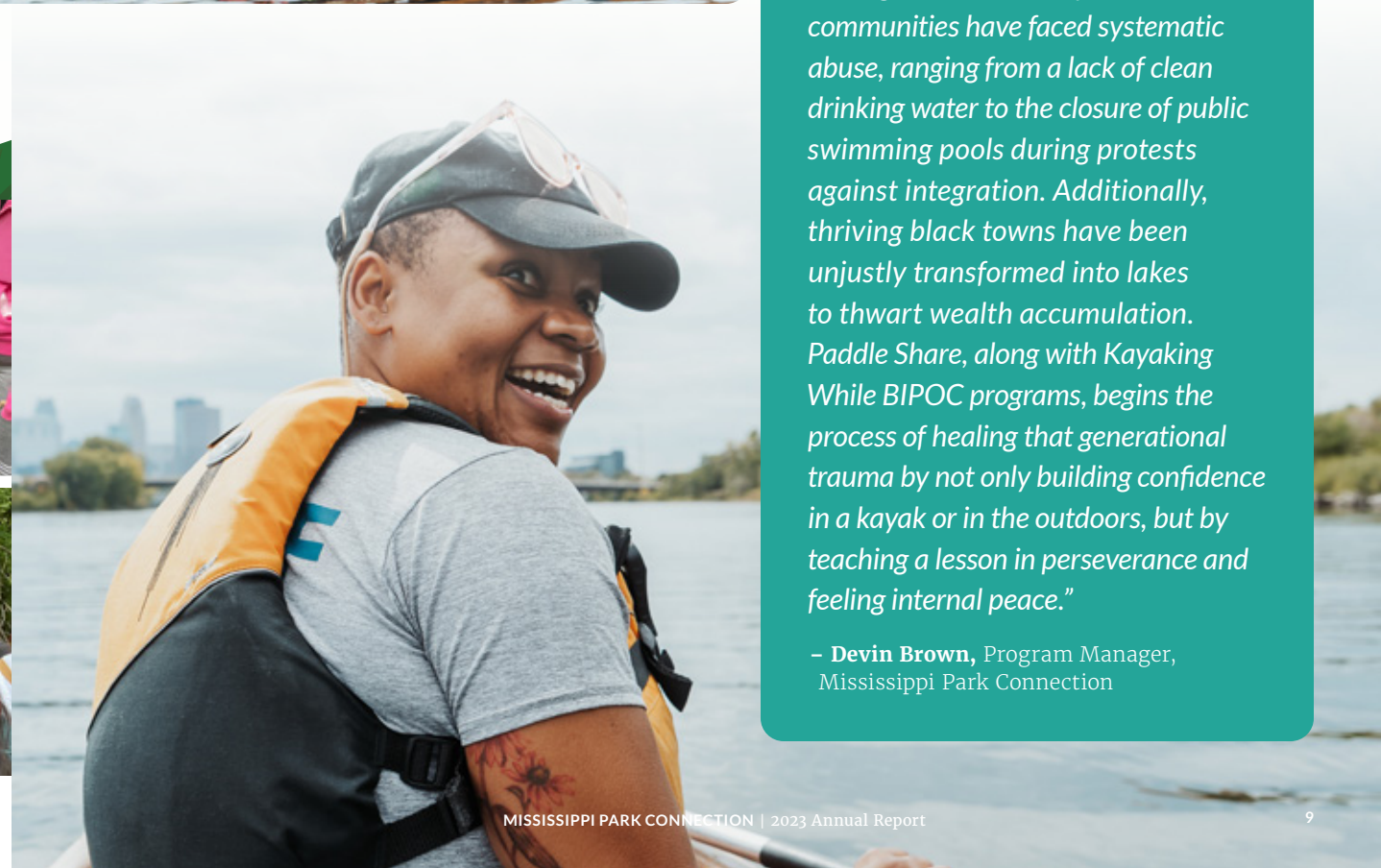
– **Eric Jolly, Ph.D.**, President and CEO, Saint Paul & Minnesota Foundation

Programming for BIPOC in the Outdoors is made possible by:

Hennepin County Green Partners
 Saint Paul & Minnesota Foundation
 Bigelow Foundation
 Minneapolis Park Foundation People for Parks Fund
 And support from Mississippi Park Connection members!

2023 BIPOC in the Outdoors community partners include:

Friends of the Mississippi River
 National Park Service
 Saint Paul Parks and Recreation
 Urban Bird Collective
 Wakan Tipi Awanyankapi



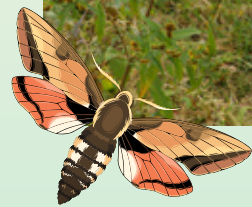
“Throughout U.S. history, black communities have faced systematic abuse, ranging from a lack of clean drinking water to the closure of public swimming pools during protests against integration. Additionally, thriving black towns have been unjustly transformed into lakes to thwart wealth accumulation. Paddle Share, along with Kayaking While BIPOC programs, begins the process of healing that generational trauma by not only building confidence in a kayak or in the outdoors, but by teaching a lesson in perseverance and feeling internal peace.”

– **Devin Brown**, Program Manager, Mississippi Park Connection

Experiencing the Park

National Public Lands Day

Mississippi Park Connection, the National Park Service, the MN Department of Natural Resources, and members of the community joined to celebrate National Public Lands Day! After boarding the Padelford Riverboats and sailing from Harriet Island to Pig's Eye Island Scientific and Natural Area, 100 volunteers cleaned up 30 bags of trash, ranging from bottles to an old tire. National Public Lands Day occurs on the fourth Saturday in September, and was begun in 1994 by the National Environmental Education Foundation - NEEF, in partnership with the National Park Service and other agencies, to promote outdoor recreation, public appreciation, and volunteer stewardship of our public lands. 2023 marked the holiday's 30-year anniversary, though we at Mississippi Park Connection and the National Park Service encourage everyone to connect every day. For future opportunities to volunteer, visit parkconnection.org/volunteer.



Park After Dark

"Park After Dark was an invitation for people to experience what normally is unseen. Living in an urban center, we often don't see many stars, so it was a great opportunity to showcase my augmented reality Dakota Star Knowledge installation that visitors could access through their smartphones and enjoy the stars anytime."

- Marlena Myles, Dakota Artist



BIPOC Tree Planting

"On a cool, but sunny day, Mississippi Park Connection and Wakan Tipi Awanyankapi staff led 25 volunteers to Wakán Tipi to plant 70+ trees and hundreds of prairie plants. After a sage-smudging ceremony, we walked through the golden prairie to the hillside planting area.

As they worked, personal stories emerged - memories of Abuela's yard work and a first-time tree planter joyfully connecting with dirt - interactions that highlight a universal bond with nature."

- Marielle Mateo, Forestry Coordinator, Mississippi Park Connection



2023 EVENT HIGHLIGHTS BY THE NUMBERS

5,641 people attended a Ranger-led event

3,500+ educators and students across the state accessed our education portal

PARK AFTER DARK EVENTS **634** ATTENDEES

165 participants

attended the History Cruise on the Magnolia Blossom

187

Let's Go Fishing! participants

BIPOC FOCUSED EVENTS

14

BIPOC affinity events

75

Kayaking Event participants

13

Bird Walk participants

67

Mushroom Clinic participants

Mississippi River & Saint Anthony Falls Visitor Centers Total:

137,031

People served through Mississippi River Paddle Share:

3,206

Contributors

Fiscal Year October 1, 2022–September 30, 2023

CONTRIBUTIONS OF \$50,000+	Wildlife Conservation Society	National Park Foundation	National Park Service – Mississippi National River and Recreation Area	
CONTRIBUTIONS OF \$25,000-\$49,999	3M Foundation F.R. Bigelow Foundation National Fish and Wildlife Foundation	National Park Trust Saint Paul & Minnesota Foundation The Driscoll Foundation+	Weyerhaeuser Family Foundation Winnebago Industries Foundation	Patrick & Aimee Butler Family Foundation
CONTRIBUTIONS OF \$10,000-\$24,999	Hennepin County Green Partners Merchology	Minnesota Pollution Control Agency Mortenson Family Foundation	Three Rivers Park District W. Second Growth Foundation	Bill and Judy Walter Wells Fargo Foundation Minnesota Xcel Energy
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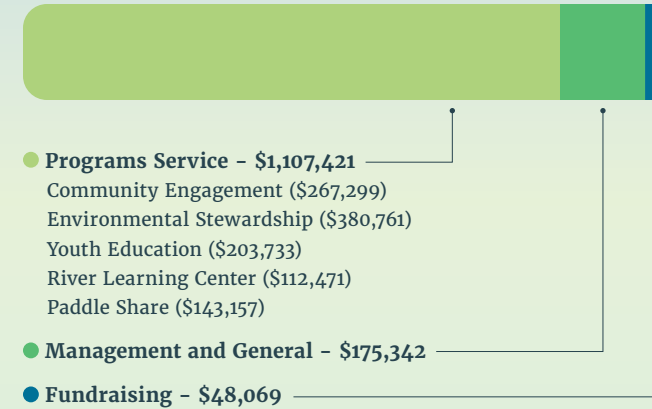
"Paddling a third-handed canoe on a small Minnesota River as a kid began my fascination with nature and started me on my path as a life-long river lover. Later I became a teacher and park ranger because I came to believe that the greatest need in the world is to connect kids with nature and to teach them that water is part of us, that trees, birds, animals and rivers are our family, our refuge, and our birthright. We care for what we love, so we protect and nurture our family. I've made Mississippi Park Connection a beneficiary in my will because I believe that one of the best things I can do is to nurture future river stewards, to ensure that kids can enjoy and understand and love the Mississippi River, and because I trust MPC to help make that happen. That's a legacy worth supporting!"

- **Lyndon Torstenson**, Former Youth Education Director, Mississippi National River and Recreation Area

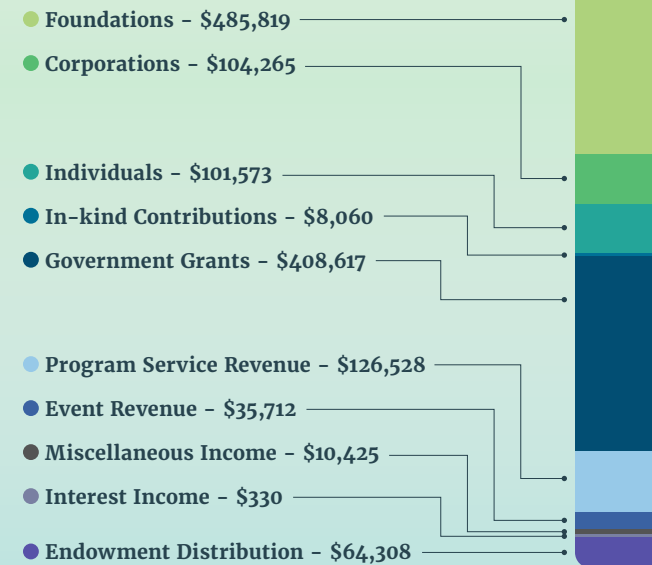


Financials

Expenses - \$1,330,832



Revenue - \$1,345,637



*Some funds that were raised in 2023 will be used for 2024 program expenses.

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