

# DAILY NEWS

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## ‘Rooted in relationships’

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EightCAP is celebrating 60 years of bringing a better quality of life to local residents

*By Tim McAllister*

*on February 09, 2026*

0:00 / 0:00



Joan Tobias, left, has volunteered with local children at EightCAP Inc. for the past 26 years. — Submitted photo

ORLEANS — Established in 1966, as part of a national Community Action effort, EightCAP Inc. has fostered independence and empowerment while reducing poverty and increasing the quality of life for residents of Gratiot, Ionia, Isabella and Montcalm counties.

To accomplish these lofty goals, EightCAP delivers a wide range of vital programs and services to thousands of local individuals and families, including housing assistance, early childhood programs, weatherization, emergency bill assistance, community outreach, senior services and plenty more.

“For 60 years, EightCAP’s work has been rooted in relationships,” said President Lori Johnson. “This anniversary is about more than looking back, it’s about honoring the people, families, staff, volunteers and partners who have been part of our journey.”

“For 60 years, the agency has responded to evolving community needs across Gratiot, Ionia, Isabella, and Montcalm counties by expanding services that address both immediate challenges and root causes of hardship,” agreed EightCAP Communications/Development Director Amy O’Brien. “Grounded in compassion and driven by collaboration, EightCAP remains committed to helping people achieve stability, opportunity, and self-sufficiency.”

### History of volunteers

The organization has a long history of volunteerism and local involvement. EightCAP currently has 28 staff members with 20 years of service or more.

For example, Rosie Fisk has worked there for 46 years, foster grandparent volunteer Joan Tobias has dedicated 26 years to working with children, Ralph Loeschner served as the agency’s president from 1978 to 2004 and Jan Lacy served as assistant to the president for 49 years before her retirement in 2024

“Lloyd Walker (who passed away in 2022) was a Greenville man, and he was our weatherization manager for over 30 years,” O’Brien recalled. “He also served on the EightCAP governing board, representing the Montcalm County Board of Commissioners. He also served as mayor of Greenville three different times between 1970 and 2006, for a total of 13 years.”

EightCAP was founded in 1966 during the national “War on Poverty” effort that was launched under the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964 and intended to address poverty at its roots.

In response, local community leaders and residents came together to establish a Community Action Agency, with local government, community stakeholders and people with lived experience coming together to fight poverty locally by empowering communities and delivering vital services to low-income individuals and

families.

“The agency was grounded in the belief that everyone deserves the opportunity to achieve economic stability and self-sufficiency,” O’Brien noted. “For 60 years, EightCAP has carried that founding mission forward, adapting to changing community needs while addressing both immediate challenges and long-term barriers to success. Through collaboration, compassion and accountability, EightCAP continues to help individuals and families build stability, opportunity and lasting self-sufficiency.

“EightCAP has grown by doing what Community Action Agencies are designed to do, listen closely and respond directly to the changing needs of the communities and individuals it serves,” O’Brien continued. “From the beginning, the agency was designed to be flexible and community-driven, adjusting programs and services as local challenges, economic conditions, and family needs shifted over time. As those needs have changed, so has EightCAP’s programming. Over the decades, the agency has expanded and adapted its services to include early childhood education, housing and homelessness support, weatherization and energy efficiency, senior volunteer programs, veteran services, and child advocacy through CASA (Court-Appointed Special Advocate). Programs have been added, refined or reshaped to address emerging issues such as housing affordability, workforce participation, aging in place and access to early education.”

### **A stable leader for health and education**

EightCAP has earned a strong reputation for fiscal excellence and sound management.

“That stability allowed the agency, at various points over the last 60 years, to step in and provide administrative leadership when no other organization was positioned to do so,” O’Brien said. “EightCAP supported Region 6 Special Olympics and served as the administrator for workforce development programs at Michigan Works and established Threshold Academy, a charter school focused on providing quality education opportunities for children from the lowest-income households in rural Ionia and Montcalm counties.

“While specific programs have evolved, EightCAP’s purpose has remained constant: listening to the community, removing barriers to stability and helping individuals and families build pathways to self-sufficiency.”



Former Greenville Mayor Lloyd Walker was EightCAP’s weatherization manager for more than 30 years. He also represented the Montcalm County Board of Commissioners on EightCAP governing board. — Submitted photo



EightCAP Inc. is led by President Lori Johnson. The organization is celebrating its 60th anniversary this month. For more information about EightCAP and its services, visit [8cap.org](http://8cap.org), call (866) 754-9315 or find them on social media. — Submitted photo

Today, EightCAP offers a wide range of programs, including Head Start and Early Head Start for young children and families, housing and homelessness services, Supportive Services for Veterans’ Families (SSVF) to help veterans and their families achieve housing stability, community services and emergency assistance, weatherization and energy efficiency programs, CASA for children in foster care, senior services through the senior companion and foster grandparent programs and the Greenville Optimist Camp for persons with disabilities.

Families in Gratiot, Ionia, Isabella and Montcalm counties benefit from EightCAP’s early childhood education services through access to high-quality early learning combined with strong family support. EightCAP’s early childhood programs currently serve 426 children and 384 families through 22 Head Start and Early Head Start classrooms throughout Montcalm County as well as in Belding, Orleans, Saranac and Ionia in Ionia County, and nine home visitors provide reliable early education and family-centered support where it is needed most.

“Through Head Start and Early Head Start, EightCAP serves children from birth to age 5 while supporting the parents as each child’s first and most important teachers,” O’Brien said. “These services help strengthen working families. Across EightCAP’s programs, approximately 69% of Head Start families and 81% of Early Head Start center-based families are employed, demonstrating that access to dependable early childhood education supports parental employment, education, and

household stability. Children benefit through measurable gains in early literacy, math, social-emotional development, and overall school readiness, helping them enter kindergarten prepared to succeed.”

Families also receive comprehensive support such as health and developmental screenings, nutrition services, home visiting and connections to community resources. Together, these services reduce barriers for local families while laying a strong foundation for local children’s long-term academic and life success.

### **Housing assistance and senior programs**

EightCAP’s Community Services and Housing programs have provided emergency assistance to 613 individuals — more than \$1.27 million — including housing and homelessness prevention, rapid re-housing and other financial support. In addition, 2,697 individuals were successfully enrolled in

EightCAP programs address immediate needs and connect individuals and families to longer-term solutions. They can also receive essential basic-needs support, with 2,422 families helped with diapers and diaper supplies across 12 counties, actions which reduce financial strain and support childhood well-being.

“The agency responded to 6,521 housing hotline calls from individuals seeking help with housing needs, and works closely with 295 community partners, including landlords, utility providers and local organizations to coordinate services and advocate for broader solutions to poverty and housing insecurity,” O’Brien said. “Through SSVF, EightCAP also helped 59 veterans secure or maintain housing, providing \$60,645 in housing assistance and supportive services. Together, these efforts help individuals and families overcome immediate challenges, maintain housing stability and build a more secure future.”

Local families benefit from EightCAP's senior volunteer programs through services that support older adults while strengthening families and communities. Through these programs, EightCAP, Inc. helps reduce social isolation, promote independence and connect individuals with meaningful support.

"Across its service area, EightCAP's senior volunteer programs include the foster grandparent program, which currently has 40 active volunteers supporting 906 children through consistent mentorship and emotional support," O'Brien said. "The Senior Companion Program, which engages 14 active volunteers serving 67 clients, helps older adults and individuals with disabilities remain independent and safe in their homes. By pairing older adult volunteers with children, adults and families who need support most, EightCAP's senior volunteer programs create meaningful connections that benefit both those receiving assistance and the volunteers themselves, strengthening families and communities across the region."

### Challenges and successes

EightCAP's biggest challenges over the past 60 years have been the same ones shared by many communities across rural Michigan: Economic downturns, rising housing costs, changes in federal and state funding and workforce shortages have all impacted both the families seeking assistance and the agencies working to support them.

"One of the ongoing challenges has been meeting growing needs with limited resources, particularly as housing affordability has declined and more families are working but still struggling to make ends meet," O'Brien said. "Like many nonprofits, EightCAP has also navigated complex regulations, shifting funding priorities and the need to continuously adapt programs to remain responsive and sustainable."

"Despite these challenges, EightCAP has remained resilient by building strong partnerships, listening closely to community needs and adapting services to meet people where they are. Those challenges have helped shape the agency into what it is today — flexible, community-driven and committed to helping individuals and families achieve stability and self-sufficiency."



Ralph Loeschner, right, and Tim Vanaman inspect a document in this image from around 1983. Loeschner served as EightCAP's president from 1978 to 2004. — Submitted photo



EightCAP Inc.'s administrative office at 5827 Orleans Road in Orleans. Established in 1966, the organization is celebrating its 60th anniversary this month. For more information about EightCAP and its services, visit [8cap.org](http://8cap.org), call (866) 754-9315 or find them on social media. — Submitted photo

"Our proudest successes are measured in the lives changed and the trust built within the communities it serves," O'Brien continued. "Over 60 years, the agency has helped generations of families find stability through early childhood education, secure safe housing during times of crisis, support children in foster care through CASA, assist older adults through senior volunteer programs and help veterans and families move toward independence. These successes create a ripple effect. When a child has access to quality early education, it strengthens an entire family. When a household avoids eviction or reduces energy costs, stability follows, supporting employment and health. These examples of individual outcomes add up to broader community stability and resiliency."

EightCAP has remained relevant and responsive by continually adapting its programs based on community needs, economic conditions and feedback from those it serves, ensuring services are both effective and meaningful.

"That flexibility, paired with strong partnerships and dedicated staff and volunteers, has allowed EightCAP to deliver lasting impact across rural communities," O'Brien concluded. "Perhaps most importantly, EightCAP is proud of the relationships it has built — with families, partners, volunteers and supporters — who have trusted the agency for decades. That trust reflects a legacy of compassion, accountability and community-driven work that continues to guide EightCAP's mission today."

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A Blanchard man was found dead outside near his home after leaving his home on foot on Saturday. Gregory Brisboy, 59,...



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