

My name is Jacquie Graham, and I am the social worker for River Falls school district. I am the first school social worker River Falls school district has hired. I started my year learning what different organizations were in the area and reaching out to many local resources to understand all the options available to River Falls residents. Getting to know the students and families I quickly realized families were not only struggling with the day-to-day struggles and economic issues, but they also now had the added stress of the pandemic. Realizing the fear, insecurity and economic hardships people were experiencing meant I needed to respond with kindness, compassion, and reliable and available assistance.

I must admit I was apprehensive about building trust with families and connecting students and families with effective and reliable resources that did not require a lengthy application process. It was apparent to me through the initial phone calls I made getting to know resources that the River Falls community is an extremely generous community. I quickly learned how amazing one local organization was. Assistance and Resource Center of River Falls (ARC) was on my list to contact. My initial interaction with ARC was helpful and respectful.

Volunteers that take calls are solution-focused and meet clients where they are at. ARC requires a simple form to qualify for assistance, which can be completed over the phone; ARC understands that it is difficult to ask for assistance and they do not want clients to feel intimidated or humiliated by a lengthy process to gain access to resources. My experience working with ARC has been extremely positive.

I had a student who needed a haircut and ARC stepped up and donated haircut cards. This may seem like a simple item but when money is tight a haircut is a luxury. A haircut can boost someone's self-esteem to enable them to engage in life and feel good about themselves.

Some other ways ARC has helped students and families were with rent assistance and utilities. I had a family share that could not drive their car because they needed new brakes. I called ARC who then partnered with a local garage to assist so the family could safely drive. ARC assisted numerous families with gas cards and grocery cards to ALDI.

My favorite story working with ARC was assisting a student living on their own who did not drive. The student had been walking to work. The student was apprehensive to call ARC on their own, so I called ARC on the student's behalf. We discussed how to assist the student and decided taxi vouchers would be helpful. After getting to know the student's situation better we found out a bike might be helpful. ARC partnered with The Garage Bikes & Brews and purchased a bike. I had the pleasure of delivering the bike to the student who rode off on the new bike with a huge smile yelling "I have a bike!"

I have referred numerous families to ARC, and I always tell students and families it is an easy call and ARC is willing to work with clients. Whether it is rent, transportation, groceries, or a bike, ARC is there willing to assist in whatever way the client needs. I am grateful the River Falls community has such a wonderful organization that is willing to help students and families get back on their feet while treating them with compassion, kindness, and respect. I am looking forward to connecting more families and students to ARC this fall.