

Linking through the heart: *Moving from grief to growth*

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Craig Toberman of Toberman Wealth LLC recently shared the story of a local grassroots nonprofit in Belleville with which he had connected. His description of the work being done at Heartlinks Grief Center was like none other in southwestern Illinois.

In fact, Heartlinks is the only full-serve grief counseling and support program serving all ages throughout the region. Toberman is one of the center’s sustaining partners.

“Now, with a recently secured \$2 million in state appropriations in the latest budget to build a new facility, this is an exciting story for our community and for the expansion of services for those who are suffering from the loss of a loved one,” Toberman shared.

And, while increasing the number of people that can be reached through Heartlinks’ services, the state-supported project is also expected to create up to 40 new union construction jobs, encompassing roughly 45,000-man hours.

The Illinois FY 2024 budget plan, signed by Gov. JB Pritzker on June 7, includes a \$2 million allocation for Heartlinks to acquire a new building in Belleville and make renovations so that it is ADA-compliant and accessible.

The prospective new location is a 9,300-square-foot facility on Belleville’s West End, at 4820 West Main Street. The organization credits the work of State Rep. Jay Hoffman (D-Swansea) and State Senator Christopher Belt (D-Swansea) for securing the appropriated funds.

Heartlinks Grief Center is a division of Family Hospice of Belleville, a 501 (c) (3) not-for-profit independent healthcare organization. Currently housed in the Family Hospice’s Building at 5110 West Main Street, it is a comprehensive support center that provides a wide range of services for anyone of any age who is grieving.

It is the belief of the Heartlinks organization that grief is a natural process and everyone who goes through it needs support, no matter the age or circumstances that surround the loss. Serving 20 counties throughout the southwestern Illinois region and beyond, Heartlinks therefore offers several grief programs without charging for its services.

Heartlinks programs include professional counseling, support groups for various categories of grief, and school



State Rep. Jay Hoffman (D-Swansea), shown at the digital sign’s immediate right and holding “a very big thank you” card, visited Heartlinks Grief Center in Belleville after the passage of \$2 million in state appropriations for the organization to use for a new building and an expansion of services. (Courtesy Heartlinks Grief Center)

programs. The center works with those grieving in the workplace, in the schools, through Zoom, or elsewhere in the community – places that are comfortable and grief-friendly for its clients.

Heartlinks also goes out into the community to provide training to those who have direct interactions with those grieving, including clergies, agencies, schools, and other groups to teach them how to help.

A program that began as single home visits to grieving children has grown, reaching over 4,000 in 2022 in 92 different ZIP codes.

Diana Cuddeback, LCSW, is the organization’s executive director. In a conversation with the Illinois Business Journal, Cuddeback shared that Heartlinks Grief Center’s focus is on supporting individuals, youth, families, and the community before and after a loss due to death.

For example, “The number of children who will experience the loss of a parent or sibling continues to rise in the state of Illinois,” she further noted. “One in 13 children will lose a parent or sibling by the age of 18.”

Another eye-opening statistic: In 2022, 22 percent of grieving children had an opioid-related loss, with nearly 10 percent of children losing a parent to suicide.

The center supports those grieving, Cuddeback explained, through direct support and counseling services, and by providing education to businesses and community organizations.

“Area business leaders use Heartlink’s services when there is a sudden death in the workplace or a loss that is particularly traumatic like a suicide, homicide, or overdose

loss,” said Cuddeback. “Heartlinks can provide initial support to managers, organizational informational meetings, and even debriefings. Heartlinks can also provide guidance and written materials for organizations anticipating a loss due to death.

“Local businesses will often contract with Heartlinks to provide grief services on an as needed basis as a way of supporting employees,” she added. “Studies have shown that employees’ job performance is impacted significantly by bereavement. Getting them support is good for employees and the business.”

Businesses can help Heartlinks in many ways, too. “Of course, direct donations of money or items such as Kleenex, art supplies, and wish list items from our website are appreciated,” said Cuddeback. “and groups that want to help and do team building at the same time are welcome. For instance, this Spring, an enthusiastic group from Associated Bank came and helped Heartlinks with a morning’s worth of chores.

“We are getting ready to move into a new space and we welcome volunteer teams who want to help us inside and out. We also have events with our kids and family that we love to have help with, like our Grief Carnival in September,” she said further.

Heartlinks began as a lending library for grieving children in 1997 with a small grant from Ronald McDonald House Charities. Later that same year, Cuddeback started making home visits to children who had lost a loved one. Soon the paths merged as Cuddeback realized a greater need for care and support for

those grieving a loss, which is essentially everyone at some point in time.

“If you live, if you love, if you’re connected, you’re going to grieve,” said Cuddeback in a Nov. 2022 interview with KMOX Radio. “It’s the price we pay for being connected – with other people, with animals, with projects, you name it. We’re going to intersect with grief at some point in our life.”

Coming up on Sept. 7 from 6:30 to 9:30 p.m. is the fundraiser event that helps to support the services and programs of Heartlinks Grief Center. For a second year, the center will host “The One Where Everyone Gets Together” live music and trivia night grief carnival with a theme based on the hit TV show, “Friends.”

Along with live music and “Friends” trivia, there will be a themed photo booth, raffles and still more. The event takes place at Eckert’s Cider Shed (951 S. Green Mount Rd.) in Belleville. Tickets are on sale now.

“Friends We Miss Sponsorship” tickets at \$60 each can be purchased at <https://my-heartlinks.com/friendswemiss/> and come with a 6” x 6” canvas of a loved one to take home after the event. The deadline to sign up at this sponsorship level is Aug. 23.

Standalone event tickets at \$20 each are available online at <https://www.myheartlinks.com/friendstickets/>. Further sponsorship opportunities also remain available.

To inquire about Heartlinks Grief Center and learn more about their comprehensive list of services and programs, visit online at <https://myheartlinks.com/> or call Melissa or Diana at (618) 277-1800 to discuss how you can help.

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