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Longtime CEO of Starfish Family Services to retire

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Ann Kalass

Starfish Family Services' longtime CEO Ann Kalass has signaled her plan to retire by early 2023, after leading the human services nonprofit for the past 15 years.

Kalass will remain with the organization until her successor is named through a regional and national search led by Korn Ferry.

Her retirement has been in the making for a while, she said.

"Just fulfilling other life goals with my family is what it comes down to after 15 very rewarding years at Starfish, things like travel and enjoying free time ... and having more time for family," said Kalass, 57.

Founded 60 years ago, Starfish provides early childhood education and behavioral health services to more than 3,000 metro Detroit children and families each year, nearly triple the number it served 15 years ago after dropping post-pandemic.

Kalass spent 14 years with Ford Motor Co. in a variety of local and national marketing and sales roles before joining Starfish, roles that helped her develop leadership, management, communication and data orientation skills that she said have served her well at the nonprofit.

Starfish has quadrupled its revenue to \$48 million and its employee numbers to 440 from 115 under Kalass' watch.

"We have expanded our footprint, the number of communities (and) families we serve ... and the continuum of care within early ed and behavioral health," she said.

Her time with the agency has not been without challenges. Low scores in a controversial scoring process led to a requirement that Starfish and two other Detroit Headstart providers be [requalified to continue as providers in the federally funded program](#) a few years ago. Kalass successfully led Starfish through the process and as part of that effort, co-led formation of the Detroit Headstart Provider Collaborative, a group of eight agencies that meet monthly to foster collaboration, problem-solving and shared best practices.

Under Kalass' leadership, [Starfish was named a Crain's Best-Managed Nonprofit in 2018](#) for its commitment to building a master records database to consolidate client data that had been siloed across various service-based systems. To date, about 80 percent of the data from approximately 20 different systems has been added to the data warehouse since 2017. That's reduced the need to ask parents whose families receive multiple services to provide the same information again and again, while also enabling Starfish staff to get a more holistic picture of the issues families and children are facing as they work to help.

Kalass has played leadership roles in collaborations including Thrive by Five Detroit, Family Service Alliance for Southeastern Michigan and the Detroit P-20 Partnership on the former Marygrove College campus in northwest Detroit. Starfish was chosen by the Kresge Foundation to lead the development and operation of the \$22 million [early childhood center that opened on the campus last fall](#), provided nearly 150 young children and their families with educational and health care services.

"The Marygrove cradle-to-career work is the first time I've seen in my 15 years where children, families and education were put at the center of economic development work," Kalass said. "It really was a highlight of my career to see that work come together for children and families. ... It's such intentional work, the partnership, the integrated education for kids prenatal through high school."

The agency's work on the campus and beyond it, in partnership with many others, is one of her proudest accomplishments, Kalass said.

"The work we do at Starfish is really bigger than any one person. I'm incredibly proud of the community of people and organizations we've brought together over the past 15 years...(with) a shared belief we have to do better for children," she said.

Beyond Starfish, Kalass has been an advocate for vulnerable children in the region and state. She was an appointee of Gov. Rick Snyder's 21st Century Education Commission and currently serves on the Michigan Department of Education Office of Great Start Advisory Council and the Michigan League for Public Policy board, among other roles.

"The entire team at Starfish is thrilled for Ann as she enters this next chapter in life with her family," Starfish Chairman W. Howard Morris said in a release.

"She will be missed, and her legacy is permanent. Starfish has thrived while she carried this organization with grace through times of extreme challenges and times of success, and (she) deserves every accolade."

