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## MCA's Mission

To serve member agencies and strengthen their capacity to alleviate the causes and circumstances of poverty.

## Community Action Partnership 2016 Management & Leadership Training Conference:



America's Poverty Fighting Network will host the 2016 Management and Leadership Training National Conference, to be held at The Westin in New Orleans Jan. 6-8, 2016. The conference focuses on the impact that Community Action has had on the lives of millions of families across the United States during hard times.

"Resilience is our theme at the family, agency and community levels and we know you are focused every day on keeping your Community Action Agency and Association healthy and resilient in the face of challenging times," says Chief Executive Officer **Denise Harlow**.

"Sessions will bring Community Action colleagues together with subject matter experts to engage both in training and dialogue."

The conference will show attendees how to look at new ideas, new approaches and ongoing research to strengthen Community Action Agencies and those they serve.

Sessions are designed to address the CSBG Organizational Standards that have recently gone into effect as well as help CAAs navigate what is coming in terms of ROMA Next Generation.

"This is a critical time for Community Action," stresses Harlow, "and I hope you will take advantage of this opportunity to join your colleagues for training, networking and support."

For more information about the conference and how to register, click [here](#).

## Did You Know?

Only 9 percent of those served by MEAP through a CAA in 2014 returned for assistance in 2015, indicating the true value of the program: helping families get through a crisis and returning to self-sufficiency.

## WEATHERIZATION



According to national studies, energy usage for households that receive Weatherization Assistance Program (WAP) services generally drops 15 to 20 percent. As a result, utility bills generally decrease on average about \$250 to \$400 per year.

In 2013, 2,910 single-family homes in Michigan were weatherized using a combination of U.S. Department of Energy and federal Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP) funds. Weatherization also improves the state's weathering stock which, in turn, improves the surrounding neighborhood and benefits the entire community.

Since the WAP program began in 1977, more than 600,000 homes have been weatherized in Michigan. Every \$1 invested generates \$4.50 in energy savings and nonenergy benefits, according to a 2015 national evaluation of WAP programs by the Oak Ridge National Laboratory.

To read more about the issue and Michigan Community Action's role, click [here](#).



Left to Right: Beth Schuler, IT Director; Heather Buehler, Finance/HR Director; Michael Lovell, Training/Communications Asst.; Kate White, Executive Director; Angela Miller, Grant Administrator; Cary Colburn, Program/Policy Director; Larkie Pollock, Grant Administrator; Manja Hish, Accounting Clerk; Molly Kanabo, Program/Policy Specialist; Mike Staley, Member Services Director

**Happy Holidays from MCA!**  
**Celebrating 40 Years of Membership Support 1975-2015!**

## School Success program a "20-year overnight sensation"



Kids work on life skills in a "ropes course" during the School Success Partnership Program.

An elementary school student who was often suspended is particularly memorable to **Lisa Siegert**, School Success Partnership (SSP) Program coordinator with Northeast Michigan Community Service Agency Inc. (NEMCSA).

Struggling with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, the then-fourth grader was aggressive in the classroom, easily distracted and on a path to academic failure. Today, that student is an honors graduate, a volunteer firefighter and a productive, working member of the community, Siegert says.

Such outcomes were exactly what organizers envisioned when they created the SSP program in 1991, says Dorothy Pntar, program director.

"Human service department heads were working with the same families over and over again. The program was designed to address issues that hinder academic success at their root cause," she explains.

Encouraging parental involvement, such as attending parent/teacher conferences, Parent Advisory Council (PAC) meetings, parenting classes and home visits is a key to success, she says.

Siegert helped the boy develop skills that lessened his aggressiveness in the classroom and got his parents more involved in school activities, among other measures.

"What School Success liaisons do is build a bridge between the home, school and community, figure out what the barriers are and solve them," Pntar says.

Over its 20 years, the SSP program has accumulated an impressive track record of helping improve children's academic performance and has garnered the attention of Gov. Rick Snyder and other state leaders, who directed funding toward the program for support and expansion.

The program also caught the eye of researchers from the University of Michigan School of Social Work, who validated its effectiveness.



SSP staff and children pose during a session called "I Care Cat"

The SSP Program has a staff of 32 who are NEMCSA employees, including program administrators in the agency's Alpena headquarters and liaisons stationed in each participating school. School Success liaisons have bachelor's degrees in a human services field.

School Success Program students and families typically experience a variety of issues that affect school performance, such as unemployment, death or divorce in the family; absenteeism; and unmet mental or medical health needs. The program works with families, school administrators, teachers and other community agencies to increase attendance, decrease incidents such as suspension and detention and, subsequently, improve academic performance.

The program also has the force of the court system behind it, with parents facing the threat of educational neglect charges for students with chronic absenteeism. Before matters escalate to that level, however, a judge will hold an informal, off-the-record preliminary inquiry with parents in an attempt to resolve the issues.

"We just want to solve the problems," Pntar says. "We're trying to keep them out of the courts before we have to deal with them as adults."

Children in elementary school are the focus of the program because their behavior is easier to change than older students' and parental involvement is more evident, she explains.

School Success currently operates in 29 of the 58 schools in an 11-county region of Northeast Michigan. The program originally operated in four counties but was able to expand to four more when Gov. Snyder allocated \$300,000 for 2014-15, boosting the program's budget to \$1.3 million. For 2015-16, the state is increasing its support to \$450,000, allowing for the program's reach into three additional counties.



Gov. Snyder presents Dorothy Pntar with a "Create Award."

School Success drew Gov. Snyder's attention after it was evaluated by UMs Curtis Center Program Evaluation Group and after program leaders were invited to speak at the Governor's Education Summit in 2014, where they received the governor's Create Award.

The UM researchers found overwhelmingly high levels of satisfaction from parents and school principals, who said the program is effectively addressing attendance-related and academic needs of students. Students showed an 82.7 percent increase in academics and a 98.5 percent increase in attendance upon program completion.

The UM researchers were also impressed, telling Pntar that the program was deserving of a higher profile based on its uniqueness and effectiveness.

"They called us a 20-year overnight sensation," she says.

## A client's story:

### My Path to Homeownership

For me, homeownership always seemed out of reach. For many years I struggled to escape the "rental trap," moving from place to place, paying thousands of dollars and having nothing to show for my efforts. As a high school honor student with an associate degree, I thought I was prepared for success in the world.

Unfortunately I did not have the knowledge or education to navigate the financial challenges or overcome credit barriers to homeownership. At the age of 38 I was exhausted from renting from landlord after landlord. I felt that I had reached rock bottom. I was divorced, my credit score was in the dumps, I was living with my parents and everything I owned fit into one laundry basket. I decided to get serious about educating myself toward a home purchase. I began monitoring my

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credit and exploring programs available to help reach my dream.

I was fortunate to have a conversation with a loan originator from a local bank who gave me advice on my credit issues. I began to explore online and I was eventually led to the Southwest Michigan Community Action Agency (SMCAA). I learned that I could take classes to prepare me for homeownership and possibly receive down payment assistance to purchase a home.

**Kim Smith-Oldham**, community development manager at SMCAA, conducted the course I attended, along with bank representatives and a Realtor, who discussed the challenges we were facing.

Without the necessary education, making the decision that will lead us to our ultimate goal can seem impossible at times.

I now have the keys to my home. In two years' time I managed to achieve a lifelong dream that would not have been possible without the help I received. Perhaps my story may inspire another and give someone hope.

*Footnote: The writer came to a Homebuyer Education Workshop in March 2015 and purchased his home at the end of August 2015.*

## NCAF's Bradley urges long view in nation's war on poverty



*David Bradley outlines the history of the War on Poverty at a seminar Nov. 24 in Okemos.*

Illiteracy, social inequality and lack of economic opportunity contribute to the cycle of poverty that many Americans face, according to **David Bradley**, National Community Action Foundation (NCAF) executive director who spoke Nov. 24 in Okemos to a group of Community Action leaders, staff and board members about the history of Community Action.

Bradley, with the mentorship of **Sargent Shriver**, co-founded NCAF in 1982 in an effort to ensure the federal government continued to support the Community Action Program.

Community Action Agencies (CAAs) were formed in the 1960s in order to coordinate poverty relief programs during **President Lyndon Johnson's** War on Poverty. Popular programs created by CAAs include Head Start, Weatherization and Meals on Wheels. Today CAAs serve 99 percent of counties in the United States.

Bradley noted that it's hard to tell when victory has been reached in war on poverty, a sentiment that many attendees echoed in their community work. Bradley's seminar provided insights not only on the progress MCA has made in communities but also as a reminder that the battle to eradicate poverty is constant.

A reason for bringing the History of Community Action workshop to Michigan was to remind members of our roots and empower Community Action Agencies (CAAs) to think beyond the programs they offer, to the key role that CAAs play in community economic development, convening and proposing solutions to poverty and ensuring that low-income people have a seat at the table when decisions about their community's resources and policies are made.

Bradley urged Community Action leaders to take a long view and consider how far the effort has come and how it continues to have a positive impact on communities in need of assistance.

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