

Applying Lessons Learned from Past Crisis Responses



"OCS should have confidence that local entities can adapt to new approaches for doing business and look for ways to use and further strengthen these partnerships." – The Urban Institute¹

I. Introduction

Community Action Agencies (CAA) play a unique role in shaping a community's response to a crisis. Whether facing a natural disaster, economic downturn, or public health pandemic, communities in crisis need organizations that can quickly adapt to changing circumstances and provide innovative assistance tailored to a community's specific needs. During the COVID-19 pandemic and the long-term public health and economic recovery, each CAA can play this crucial role through establishing innovative programs, expanding existing services and populations, and increasing organizational capacity by coordinating with community partners. CAA responses in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis provide examples of crisis response best practices that can be adopted by CAAs responding to the COVID-19 pandemic and its ensuing economic recovery.

II. The Issue

Since their inception in 1964, Community Action Agencies have always served on the front lines of poverty in America, working to alleviate both the causes and conditions of poverty. National and local crises increase this responsibility tremendously, as more people are in need, too often in life-

threatening need. CAA's play a critical role as often being the first people turn when crisis hits. Families with limited incomes are often hit the hardest by natural disasters or economic crises as they may not have the extra resources and are also often the last to recover.

III. Community Action Responds to the Great Recession

The American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 (ARRA) provided \$1 billion in supplementary funds to the Community Services Block Grant (CSBG).² Examining how CAAs effectively deployed ARRA funds to assist communities provides insight into how CAAs can best determine spending priorities for the \$1 billion appropriated in the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act passed in March, 2020.³ CAAs used ARRA funds in at least three innovative and effective ways. Three uses of ARRA funds are especially relevant today: creating new programs and expanding existing programs; expanding service populations; and increasing organizational capacity.

Expanding Programs and Services

In the wake of the financial crisis, CAAs expanded existing services and created new ones to meet the needs of their communities. One agency added 10 full-time employees to their weatherization program, allowing them to weatherize an additional 445 homes.⁴ Another CAA used the funds to implement a previously researched but unfunded transportation program for workers with low-incomes by partnering with a local bank and rental car company to match workers with affordable cars.⁵ Still another

agency used CSBG ARRA funds to expand their food warehouse service footprint by implementing a healthy food program that ultimately transported nearly 100,000 pounds of fresh produce from area farms to 39 local pantries.⁶

Expanding Size and Demographics of Service Populations

During the Great Recession, and under federal authorization that allowed them to serve people up to 200% of poverty, most CAAs expanded their service populations. In one report, 70% of CAAs surveyed were providing services to families with higher incomes and education levels than they were before 2009.⁷ In that same survey, CAAs reported changes in their service population demographics, including serving a new mix of age groups, new disability populations, or individuals from new geographic areas.⁸

As more families experienced reduced incomes and financial stress, more community members were both in need of and eligible for assistance provided by CAAs. Like the recent CARES Act, ARRA allowed states to expand CSBG service income eligibility from 125% to 200% of the Federal Poverty Level (FPL).⁹ To identify and assist these populations, some CAAs used CSBG ARRA funds to increase outreach, particularly to populations that had never applied for assistance before.¹⁰ Outreach included traditional methods such as mailings, newsletters, and flyers, but also more innovative methods like videos at community events, staff presence at orientations, and partnerships with local organizations like schools and faith-based organizations to promote referrals.¹¹ Under ARRA, 1% of each State's CSBG ARRA allocation was directed to encourage benefit coordination. The Urban Institute report provides examples of benefit coordination efforts that can help lead to existing resources.¹²

Increasing Organizational Capacity

Considering increased demand for services, multiple CAAs used CSBG ARRA funds to expand organizational capacity. Most CAAs did this through increased human capital, but some formed new contracting relationships, collaborations or partnerships. One agency used funds to partner or contract with a local employment center to create a new culinary academy for homeless people, which trained 23 individuals who became employed as a result of the program.¹³ In addition to service expansion, others made

investments in service-delivery infrastructure to address immediate needs for crisis response, such as additional vehicles for transportation services, or equipment to streamline and increase service provision, such as new computers, IT systems, and accounting software¹⁴ in order to strengthen organizational capacity and ability to respond to future crises.

Lessons Learned

A key lesson is for CAAs to focus on this long-term and more permanent changes to service delivery efforts and economic models. It is recommended that agencies invest in agency infrastructure that will be valuable after CARES Act funding is no longer available.

During ARRA, Garrett County Community Action Committee, located in Oakland, MD, focused on answering the question, "How can the organization change the way that it does business to ensure that it has a strong financial base that allows the organization to weather any storm going forward?" This led to a change in the organization's strategic plan which led to an integrated, family centered approach to meeting needs of customers and also a change in organizational capacity, especially as it related to the use of technology and data and a transformation of the organization culture.

In Garrett's case because of the changes they made through ARRA, the result was the local community and the state begin to look at the agency differently which has led to important opportunities for the organization and their customers during the current COVID-19 crisis. Investments in the organization's capacity during ARRA made the entire organization and its leadership stronger making Garrett well positioned to respond to the current evolving needs of its community. Because the agency is stronger, it can now think creatively about meeting the urgent needs of customers in the current crisis while also thinking proactively and strategically about the future and how it take the lead on cultivating long-term locally controlled financial assets and community sustainability, for example community affordable housing, which will ensure that families who need it the most will have access to what they need regardless of the future crises which will likely occur.

IV. Community Action Responds to Natural Disaster

CAAs in communities across the country have been active partners in community responses to a range of natural disasters including hurricanes, wildfires, tornadoes, floods, and winter storms. After natural disasters CAAs have responded by directly addressing immediate housing and food needs and working with others in the community to coordinate supports via emergency management and disaster response committees or teams. Through various disasters, CAAs have revealed key considerations which are important to keep in mind during the current COVID-19 disaster.

- A. Be prepared. Develop an emergency preparedness plan now. The current pandemic has taught everyone that disaster or crisis can affect any of us at any time. Also, preparedness is not only critical to saving the lives and improving the welfare of elderly, disabled, and low income but can also help a community greatly by saving money on disaster response and recovery.
- B. Rural communities in particular, because of their location and in some cases lack of access to immediate post disaster services are vulnerable to disasters more than other populations.
- C. Populations that are limited income, persons of color, special needs and the elderly frequently do not have the resources or the capacity to respond effectively to disasters and their recovery time is often among the slowest.
- D. Built a network of community volunteers which recruits and trains vulnerable, at risk persons and civic groups who can identify vulnerabilities and be mobilized to assist their community before, during and after an emergency.

V. Conclusion

CAAs are on the front lines of their communities during times of crisis. Their ability to quickly pivot to meet the needs created by changing circumstances make them a unique and powerful force for community resilience. Although the COVID-19 pandemic presents an unprecedented challenge, the Network's innovative use of CSBG ARRA funds demonstrates that expanding services, outreach to new populations, increased organizational capacity, and experience responding to a range of local natural disasters can be the key to reducing immediate suffering and hardship and helping communities stabilize and recover in the long-term.

VI. Resources

- [Leveraging Crisis as a Springboard for Action and Innovation](#) This webinar highlights Garrett County Community Action Committee Inc.'s ARRA story and the ways that it motivated the agency's shift to service integration and 2Gen/Whole Family Approach initiatives and opportunities or areas of pivot that staff are currently considering in the current crisis to inspire other CAAs to be more strategic with their CARES investments.
- [The Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security \(CARES\) Act of 2020](#) This resource includes the complete text of the CARES Act released January 3, 2020 (H.R. 748).
- [Implementation of Community Service Block Grant \(CSBG\) under ARRA - Urban Institute](#) This report presents findings of the Urban Institute's (UI) evaluation to document services, promising practices, and challenges that resulted during the CSBG ARRA initiative. In some instances, entities were able to develop new partnerships and agencies recognized the importance of having plans in place before needing to implement new processes with recovery assistance.
- [Can Subsidized Employment Programs Help Disadvantaged Job Seekers? OPRE Report to ACF](#) This report summarizes findings from an Enhanced Transitional Jobs Demonstration (ETJD) in order to develop evidence on effectiveness of creating subsidized employment programs and provide implications for practitioners, policymakers,

and researchers. The report also highlights employment and earning impacts during the follow-up phase, providing insight into whether subsidized employment programs can help participants make lasting life changes. The study found that subsidized employment programs can improve employment and earnings under certain circumstances and for certain populations.

- [Learning From the 2009 Recovery Act: Lessons and Recommendations for Future Infrastructure Stimulus](#) This report reviews lessons from transportation spending in the last stimulus and how spending was used to create jobs and support recovery. The lessons are drawn from Smart Growth America's close [analysis of the 2009-2010 stimulus spending](#). One lessons states that public transit spending creates jobs the fastest and a second lesson shows that states did not spend funds on current public priorities.
- [ARRA & the Economic Crisis - One Year Later: Has Stimulus Helped Communities in Crisis?](#) This report by the Kirwan Institute uses expertise from equity and social justice advocates to explore mixed results on how ARRA has provided relief to the hardest-hit communities and worked to promote improved equity in our nation, and offers lessons learned from ARRA one year later. The authors provide recommendations for achieving goals of ARRA, creating jobs, and reducing racial and economic divides, while also guiding future policy. The report stresses the need to reduce inequities in funding allocation, improve tracking of resources and outcomes and increase small and minority business participation to ensure the hardest-hit communities experience job growth.
- [Emergency Preparedness Resources for Persons from Diverse Cultural Origins, Guidance for Integrating Culturally Diverse Communities into Planning for and Responding to Emergencies](#), National Consensus Panel on Emergency Preparedness & Cultural Diversity, February 2011. This resource provides analysis of the impacts of persons of diverse cultural origins and response strategies during crisis.

The Community Action COVID-19 Resource Series

1. Applying the Equity Lens to COVID-19 Response and Recovery
2. A Trauma-Informed Agency Response to COVID-19
3. Applying Lessons Learned from Past Crisis Responses
4. Technology Innovations in Response to COVID-19 Service Delivery and Recovery
5. Leveraging Partnerships in COVID-19 Response and Recovery
6. Whole Family Approach Responses to COVID-19

¹ Carol J. De Vita and Margaret Simms, Implementation of Community Services Block Grants under ARRA, at 23, Urban Institute (2012), available at <https://www.urban.org/sites/default/files/publication/25571/412602-Implementation-of-Community-Services-Block-Grants-under-ARRA.PDF>.

² The American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009, Pub. L. No. 111-5, § 5, 123 Stat. 115, 179 (2009).

³ The Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act of 2020, Pub. L. No. 116-136, Div. B, Title VIII, 134 Stat. 281 (2020).

⁴ The American Recovery and Reinvestment Act: Creating and Saving Jobs in Pennsylvania, Senator Bob Casey (2010), available at <https://www.casey.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/RecoveryAct.pdf>.

⁵ Carol J. De Vita and Margaret Simms, Implementation of Community Services Block Grants under ARRA, at 23, Urban Institute (2012), available at <https://www.urban.org/sites/default/files/publication/25571/412602-Implementation-of-Community-Services-Block-Grants-under-ARRA.PDF>.

⁶ Id. at 15.

⁷ De Vita, et al., at 15.

⁸ Id. at 16-17.

⁹ 123 Stat. 115, 179 (2009).

¹⁰ De Vita, et al., at 18-19.

¹¹ Id. at 19.

¹² Id. at 22.

¹³ Id. at 25.

¹⁴ Id. at 25-26.

Acknowledgements. Thanks to Community Action leaders on the frontlines who contributed to this series and to the leaders behind the scenes, the National Community Action Partnership staff: Tiffney Marley, Vice President, Practice Transformation; Aaron Wicks, Vice President, Organizational Capacity; Aimee Roberge, Program Associate; Ryan Gelman, Policy Associate; Lauren Martin, Program Associate, T/TA; and Courtney Kohler, Sr. Associate, T/TA. Designed by Stephanie Knechtle.

This was created by the National Association of Community Action Agencies – Community Action Partnership, in the performance of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Office of Community Services Grant Number, 90ET0466. Any opinion, findings, and conclusions, or recommendations expressed in this material are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families.