

Leveraging PARTNERSHIPS in COVID-19 Response & Recovery



*"The novel complexity of the COVID-19 pandemic, and its swiftly moving and far-reaching effects on our people, **have left our state systems ... overwhelmed...**[Our partnership] will work to support and enhance the activities and volunteerism that is happening on the local level, guided by the state-level response." - Sue Minter, Executive Director, Capstone Community Action¹*

I. Introduction

When the COVID-19 pandemic struck, Capstone Community Action responded. Knowing that the pandemic would not only have massive impacts on public health, but would also have an impact on vulnerable Vermonters, Capstone immediately collaborated with community providers to implement a coordinated community response. What began as an initial collaboration that piloted its effectiveness assisting homeless residents, quickly developed into a broader, ongoing partnership to support the entire community. What does it take to turn a quickly-planned collaboration into a broad, coordinated, community effort to support vulnerable residents – and accomplish this with only one week of planning? **Community Action.**

II. The Issue

During a crisis, communities often must act quickly to coordinate resources. Communities often need to establish new partnerships or collaborative relationships that did not previously exist. Trying to initiate a partnership in a time of crisis can be extremely difficult if foundational relationships and a positive reputation are not present. This brief describes some of the learnings from Capstone Community Action, and

how their demonstrated record of accountability, impact, and longstanding community relationships gave Capstone Community Action a clear role in convening resources to assist families in crisis.² Equally important, it responded to this unprecedented crisis by laying the groundwork for future community-changing collaborations.

III. Leveraging the Value of Partnerships in Crisis

Collaboration requires a certain level of organizational readiness, which necessitates capacity and investment – often prior to a partnership being established. The return on that investment is clear in a time of crisis. When the COVID-19 pandemic and its economic disruption swept across the nation, Capstone Community Action immediately saw the value it could bring to a local partnership. While this partnership happened almost overnight, the seeds of it had been planted years prior to the formal collaboration. Capstone Community Action had positioned itself as a trusted, effective partner in the community. It had also

demonstrated a record of community impact and effective accountability regarding their use of public resources through modern data systems and sound management policies. Their ability to convert their record of success and local relationships into a major new strategic partnership illustrates some of the most important assets in establishing partnerships during crises:

- **Record of service delivery and impact.** The quality of

a partnership is critical: because the stakes are so high during a crisis like the COVID-19 pandemic, it is important to work with partners who are in the position to have the greatest impact. There is often no time to review an organization's record of outcome delivery or impact. That record needs to be well-established and clearly visible. Capstone Community Action clearly and regularly highlights the impact of its work to stakeholders.³

- **Capacity to deliver value efficiently.** When the COVID-19 pandemic hit, many communities reacted immediately and attempted to navigate the new environment using existing siloed services and systems. Capstone Community Action and its partners in Washington and Orange Counties recognized that collaboration could meet the needs of vulnerable families more effectively and efficiently. When they tested the new collaboration re-locating homeless residents into a safer, more spacious shelter, they realized that the partnership they had formed could provide significantly faster, more responsive and more effective services to the area's vulnerable families. This "command center" model became a well-integrated community service provider consortium known as the Washington and Northern Orange Counties Regional Response Command Center (WNOC-RRCC).
- **Record of community trust/resident relationships.** The COVID-19 pandemic's profound impact has threatened all communities. Each community, however, has its own history, its own leaders, its unique needs and resources.

Effectively serving those local needs requires partners who are part of the community and are trusted by the community. Capstone Community Action, like most local CAAs, has a decades-long reputation in the community it serves. It promotes this history, its community relationships, and its vision for an inclusive, equitable, prosperous community.⁴

- **Alignment of mission.** Many organizations in the human services ecosystem focus on one domain, such as education, health, services for seniors, etc. Those organizations are critical, but their missions and funding sources limit their ability to respond in flexible ways. Community Action is often unique in communities because of its mission to expand opportunity, equity, and community support for all residents through the leveraging of partnerships for both family and community level work. In other words, when a crisis like COVID-19 hit Vermont and affected the health care system, the schools, local businesses, seniors – and disproportionately impacted people of color – there was a clear "go to" organization with the mission alignment to serve as an irreplaceable partner in the response: Community Action. Capstone Community Action easily occupied that space because key stakeholders in the community knew that Capstone Community Action had a mission and vision that aligned with the needs and a presence in all communities across the region.

IV. Conclusion

In a time of crisis, there is not time to make your case to key community stakeholders; **the evidence must be present and irrefutable**. Because Community Action can clearly demonstrate its impact, prove its capacity to be accountable for public resources, build on long-standing relationships, and promote its unique mission, it becomes the clear "go to" network in challenging times. The COVID-19 crisis is serious and unprecedented. It is also the time for Community Action to showcase and leverage the power of partnerships.

V. Resources

A. Partnership Resources

- [Collaboration Check-up: Assessing and Improving Your Community Partnerships](#) This toolkit is directly related to the Community Action National Goal: Partnerships among supporters and providers of services to low-income people are achieved and is meant to help the Community Action Network better understand the functioning of partnerships so they can more effectively develop and nurture those that have a measurable impact in local communities.
- [Community Action Academy eCourse – Understanding Community Level Work](#) Moodle is an online learning platform designed to provide trainers and learners with a single robust, secure, and integrated system to create personalized learning environments. This module includes activities to help a Community Action Agency consider who they may partner with in these efforts, how community efforts will be entwined with the services they provide to individuals and families, what they can reasonably expect to see change, and how they will measure the change.
- [Partner Mapping](#) This module is designed to help a local Community Action Agency consider their role in working on the big issues that face their community. It is intended to encourage open dialogue among agency stakeholders and critical reflection on the agency's understanding of what resources and efforts they should commit to addressing the causes and conditions of poverty.

B. External Resources

- [Kansas University Community Toolbox – Building Capacity for Community and System Change](#) In this section of the Toolbox, Kansas University discusses what it means to build community through a “model of change” or “theory of practice.” The section includes definitions and advantages of collaborative efforts as well as key partners in community efforts. It closes with recommendations for collaborating to help build healthy communities.
- [Collective Impact Forum](#) This organization provides tools, resources, and advice for practicing collective impact. It also serves as a network for individuals and organizations to share experiences and knowledge to move effectiveness and adoption of collective impact forward.

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 “Amid Crisis, Local Service Providers Pool Efforts,” *Barre-Montpelier Times-Argus*, March 29, 2020.

² *Summary of the Washington & Northern Orange Counties Regional Response Command Center (WNOC-RRCC)*, available at <https://www.montpelier-vt.org/DocumentCenter/View/6777/WNOC-RRCC-Summary-One-Pager>.

³ 2019 Annual Impacts, Capstone Community Action, available at <https://capstonevt.org/impact>.

⁴ Why We Do What We Do, Capstone Community Action, available at <https://capstonevt.org/about>.

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