

## Criteria for Selecting Highlighted Initiatives

The tables below list criteria to be used as initiatives are being considered for selection as “highlighted” initiatives by the Center of Excellence at the National Community Action Partnership. The COE’s purpose is to identify the most high-impact, transformational work in the Community Action network, disseminate it throughout the network and then strengthen state, regional and national TTA relationships to support capacity building across the network to implement more initiatives like these.

Each state is asked to provide at least ONE initiative and each region to provide no MORE than 15 across the region. ALL highlighted initiatives must meet the criteria in the first section of the table (“Required Characteristics to Include”); additionally, states and RPICs are strongly encouraged to use additional criteria (“Optional Characteristics”) to help prioritize and diversify initiatives for selection – recognizing that many more initiatives may meet the required criteria than can be selected. Eventually, we expect to lift any limits on number of initiatives to ensure all new, emerging initiatives can be added to the roster of highlighted initiatives.

Following the list of criteria and indicators is a more detailed description of each to help guide CAA’s, State Associations and State CSBG offices as they consider initiatives to be highlighted.

**Note: An agency must demonstrate that it meets at least 90% of the Organizational Standards in order to submit an initiative for consideration as a highlighted initiative.**

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**The following characteristics are required of all highlighted initiatives:**

Required Characteristics to Include	Specific Criteria/Indicators – must meet at least 1 of the provided criteria for each required characteristic
<p><b>Local need identified</b> The highlighted initiative has clearly identified the local need it addresses.</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Community or individual/family need related to the initiative was identified in most recent community needs assessment</li> <li>2. Agency need was identified during most recent strategic planning process (or similar planning process)</li> </ol>
<p><b>Clear role of CSBG funds</b> CSBG funds have clearly been used for some purpose, at some point, in the implementation of the initiative.</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. CSBG provided <b>funding</b> to one or more of the following related to the initiative: initiative planning, early implementation, staffing, needs assessment support, strategic planning support, data support, evaluation, or other allowable use of CSBG funds</li> </ol>
<p><b>Transformative impact</b> The initiative has a transformative impact related to the causes and/or conditions of poverty at a community level.</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. If the initiative’s primary focus is community-level needs, it has the following characteristics: (1) designed to create measurable community-wide improvement (2) affecting one or more cause or condition of poverty (3) within a defined geographic area; (4) has clearly defined and measurable goals and (5) one or more strategic activities designed to achieve that goal; (6) CAA must be an active participant in the initiative with a clearly defined role in it.</li> <li>2. If the initiative’s primary focus is family- or agency-level needs, it must provide a statement describing how the initiative’s implementation informs community transformation and/or systems change.</li> </ol>
<p><b>Replicable</b> Other agencies with similarly-identified needs and resources could replicate the initiative and expect to have similar results.</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. The initiative has a documented implementation plan that can be publicly shared.</li> <li>2. The initiative provides a statement attesting to the fact that it can be replicated in communities with similar needs and similar commonly-available resources.</li> </ol>
<p><b>Evidence-based/data-driven</b> The initiative is clearly based on data/evidence that demonstrate its impact.</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. The initiative has quantitative/qualitative data that clearly establish its impact (as described above in “Transformative impact.”</li> <li>2. If the initiative has not yet developed an evidence base, there are measures currently being developed or implemented that will establish this evidence base.</li> </ol>

<p><b>Equity lens</b>  <b>The initiative addresses equity issues of particular relevance to the community because equity is relevant to all communities.</b></p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. The initiative has, and achieves, a specific goal of achieving greater racial/ethnic equity in the community</li> <li>2. The initiative collects data by different demographic groups that permit the analysis of its impact on different racial/ethnic groups in the community.</li> </ol>
<p><b>Customer voice</b>  <b>The initiative includes the voice or leadership of individuals with lived experience with poverty in the community</b></p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. The initiative includes an advisory group with significant resident leadership/ participation.</li> <li>2. The initiative uses a specific customer satisfaction/ community input mechanism to ensure customer voice.</li> <li>3. The initiative uses some other process that demonstrates residents’ lived experience influences the implementation and/or evaluation of the initiative’s impact.</li> </ol>

**The following “optional” characteristics are recommended, but not required.**

Optional Characteristics – RPICs may to decide to require or award extra points for	Specific Criteria/Indicators – must meet at least 1 of the provided criteria for each selected optional characteristic
<p><b>Partnerships</b>                      The initiative demonstrates effective, efficient use of community partnerships to leverage resources and maximize impact</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. The initiative demonstrates that its implementation leverages resources (financial, in-kind or other) from partnerships with community organizations.</li> <li>2. The initiative demonstrates that it achieves greater impact through partnerships with community organizations.</li> <li>3. The initiative demonstrates an effort to engage community partners that represent the diversity of the community.</li> </ol>
<p><b>Scalable</b>                      The initiative can be implemented on a smaller scale and then “scaled up” for broader impact as resources increase.</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. The initiative can clearly describe different implementation phases/scenarios whereby it can be implemented at different levels depending on available resources.</li> </ol>
<p><b>Sustainable</b>                      The initiative demonstrates a history of attracting resources and/or a high-likelihood of doing so in the future</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Reports regarding resources needed to implement the initiative demonstrate a history of increasing resources and/or long-term commitments by funders.</li> <li>2. The initiative can demonstrate evidence that there is a high likelihood of attracting increased resources in the future (eg. Through a calculated return-on-investment, significant interest from funders or other agencies, etc.)</li> </ol>
<p><b>Funding diversity</b>                      The initiative relies on a diverse set of resources, allowing it to be independent of any one funder/sponsor.</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. The initiative demonstrates that its support resources (funding as well as in-kind support) do not depend significantly on a single funder or resource.</li> </ol>

## Examples/Detailed Descriptions of the Required Criteria

Recognizing the diversity of the Community Action network, the highlighted initiative criteria are intended to be detailed enough to provide some consistency across the network but also flexible enough to recognize that every innovative, high-impact initiative will have its own unique characteristics.

***The descriptions and examples below are designed to assist in clarifying how the criteria should be applied to initiatives. All examples are fictitious, for illustrative purposes only.***

### **Local Need**

Because CAA's uniformly use ROMA as a planning tool, all highlighted initiatives should be rooted in a clearly-identified local need. Needs should be identified in either the agency's Community Needs Assessment, or occasionally, in its Strategic Plan (or documents from its strategic planning process).

*Examples:*

Initiative description	How need might be identified
Initiative integrates agency services through a "no-wrong door" approach and requires partnering organizations to integrate their services into the same approach	Customer satisfaction data used to inform the agency's Strategic Plan showed frustration with siloed services; agency's Strategic Plan identified the need for streamlined access to services, both within the agency and with partnering service providers
Initiative involves a partnership among CAA, probation/parole office, local hospital, community college and WIOA One-Stop to promote successful re-entry of persons who had been incarcerated	Community Needs Assessment data show that approximately 1,000 individuals re-enter the service area each year; of that population, greater than 50% do not have a HS diploma and 30% do not have a medical home

### **Role of CSBG funding**

Although CSBG funds are often not the largest source of CAA funding, they are a critical funding stream that allow CAA's to have a unique ability to innovate, partner and pilot strategies to address the causes and conditions of poverty. Highlighted initiatives must showcase this unique resource and how central it is to the community change work of Community Action.

*Examples:*

Initiative description	How CSBG funding was involved
Initiative provides a peer-led, whole family approach to service provision by supporting former customers (through stipends) to provide peer support and mentoring to families moving toward greater self-sufficiency	CSBG funds provided initial support to pilot the initiative with a small cohort of 5 former customers and 5 current customers. After one year of successful results, additional funding was obtained from the county and from a local foundation. CSBG funding was leveraged into additional resources that allowed the program to serve 100 families in its most recent year and led to a local partnership with County DHS to revisit how TANF supports are provided

CAA expanded its health outreach with county public health department to provide COVID-19 Contact tracing and related supports	The CAA’s supplemental CARES CSBG funding provided an opportunity to update the Community Needs Assessment which showed that there would be significant need to support low-income families who might be required to self- quarantine due to COVID-19 exposure
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### ***Transformative Impact***

The COE highlights initiatives that operate at the family, agency or community level – but what all highlighted initiatives have in common is their ability to **transform community conditions** through their implementation. Some highlighted initiatives (those addressing a community-level need and using a community-level strategy) will naturally result in community transformation – that is precisely their objective. But it is also important to note that highlighted initiatives that address family- or agency-level needs through appropriate strategies can still have a transformative impact on the community.

*Examples:*

Initiative description	How the initiative is “transformative”
<p><i>Community-level initiative:</i> Initiative uses a collective-impact approach to promote school success through 3<sup>rd</sup> grade (measured by improved reading proficiency) by engaging CAA, school district and other organizations</p>	<p>Because this particular initiative uses a collective impact framework, it has clear roles for organizations and clear success measures. The initiative can point to its transformative impact because the past three years’ worth of data show reading proficiency has increased from 56% of children reading at grade-level to 63% at grade level.</p> <p><u>Note:</u> a properly-implemented collective impact initiative would meet all 6 elements of community transformation (as described in the criteria), however the 6 elements can be achieved in initiatives operating with different models.</p>
<p><i>Family-level initiative:</i> Initiative uses the concepts of ACEs (Adverse Childhood Experiences) and the Search Institute’s 40 Developmental Assets to support at-risk youth to build stronger home and school relationships to promote school success</p>	<p>After operating the initiative at one school in the service area, serving 20 youth, the CAA has partnered with three local school districts to promote the program’s practices more widely. Although the CAA does not directly provide the services in each school, the program has been replicated across those three districts and now reaches 250 youth.</p>
<p><i>Agency-level initiative:</i> In response to a particularly high number of opioid deaths locally, initiative trains staff on the use of Naloxone, equips all office locations with it and provides all customers with an opioid risk screening tool</p>	<p>Data from the agency’s first two years of the initiative showed that 3 customers’ lives were saved through Naloxone use and the CAA connected 68% more customers with treatment services that in prior years. As a result, 8 other service providers, including the local DSS have invited the CAA to assist in implementing the same program in their organizations.</p>

## **Replicability**

The purpose of identifying and highlighting successful initiatives through the COE is to replicate those best-practices more widely across the Community Action network. A highlighted initiative cannot be one that has simply had good fortune; it must clearly demonstrate that its operation was responsible for the transformative impact and that a similar impact could be achieved by implementing the initiative in a comparable community.

*Examples:*

<b>Initiative description</b>	<b>How the initiative is replicable</b>
Initiative partners the CAA's Head Start program with the local school district to promote engagement of fathers in children's education. It has resulted in measurable increases in school success for children and positive outcomes for fathers.	After a one-year pilot, the CAA and the school district developed a program manual to ensure consistency across organizations and schools. The program manual describes staff training, a schedule of activities and tools to assess both process and impact outcomes are being met.
Initiative promotes reduced domestic violence by equipping informal community leaders (residents with strong, local social networks) to promote information and resources to communities throughout the service area.	The initiative does not have a formal implementation plan or program manual. However, it has a logic model, measurement indicators and various program narratives that clearly document how the initiative has been implemented.

## **Evidence-base/Use of Data**

Highlighted initiatives will be shared among the 1,000+ CAA's across the country and will likely be scrutinized by researchers, funders, public officials and the media. The Community Action network wants each of these initiatives to stand up to scrutiny, effectively demonstrating, **through data**, the transformational impact that our initiatives have. Effective use of data will not only make the case that these initiatives are transforming local communities, but will also be critical to other communities understanding what results to expect when they replicate these initiatives in their own community.

*Examples:*

<b>Initiative description</b>	<b>How the initiative's data demonstrate impact</b>
Initiative partners with a local business that uses an "Open Hiring" model: anyone who wants to work is automatically hired on a provisional basis; the CAA provides coaching and support to assist the employee maintain employment.	Over three years, the initiative collected data about the income, education and assets of all customers. Those participating in the Open Hiring program increased their income 28 % and their assets 41% more than other customers in the CAA's traditional employment programs. Additionally, the Open Hiring model is employed in other communities where data validate its impact.

Initiative partners with local internet service provider and healthcare system to provide internet-enabled devices and internet service to low-income households to promote remote education, healthcare and social services during the COVID-19 pandemic.	Due to the relatively recent implementation of the initiative, it does not have an established data record. However the initiative has several measures it is observing to determine its impact, including health and education outcomes as well as survey data regarding impact on household function (satisfaction with remote services, etc).
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### **Equity Lens**

Because the Promise of Community Action states that “we care about the entire community”, we must ensure that equity is central to our work. **No community in America is homogeneous, therefore all communities are, in fact, communities of communities.** Highlighted initiatives will ensure that this reality is acknowledged by promoting equity and by ensuring that our most effective, transformative initiatives can demonstrate their contribution to reversing structural racism and other forms of structural bias that disproportionately affect individuals with low incomes.

*Examples:*

<b>Initiative description</b>	<b>How the initiative’s data demonstrate impact on equity</b>
Initiative partners CAA with local Commissioner of Jurors and County Court system to recruit people of color to participate in jury system and to build ongoing relationships with communities of color to reduce local conviction and sentencing inequities.	Because this community had already begun tracking data regarding convictions and sentencing, it already had a well-established baseline demonstrating racial bias. Within five years of the initiative’s operation, data showed a consistent trend showing reduced disparities in conviction rates and sentences.
Initiative partners CAA’s weatherization program with a local solar energy company to install solar panels that reduce energy costs, improve neighborhood property values and reduce local carbon footprint.	The initiative does not have improved equity as its intended outcome, however the initiative does document the racial composition of households and neighborhoods served to ensure it is actively serving all residents and that it can monitor data to ensure this community’s historical residential segregation is not further exacerbated by program implementation.

### **Customer Voice**

Community Action requires community leadership. Highlighted initiatives must demonstrate this key, distinguishing characteristic of our network: “**maximum feasible participation.**” This participation can take any number of forms; all forms should have the same fundamental purpose: the authentic voice of customers/residents is given greater agency to transform their own community in the ways that they feel are most beneficial to them.

Examples:

Initiative description	How the initiative is directed/influenced by residents
Initiative promotes greater resident mobility in a rural community through a local public-private “rideshare” program collaborative managed by the local CAA.	The rideshare collaborative is overseen by a Steering Committee consisting of seven members of the communities served, three public officials and three private sector representatives. The Steering Committee sets program policy and essentially serves as a governing Board of Directors.
Initiative engages in food distribution (through home delivery) that is designed to better meet family’s nutritional needs as well as being culturally responsive and person-centered in its implementation.	The initiative partners with local wholesalers, farmers and suppliers to ensure that a wide range of food is available, including options that are responsive to the community’s several cultures, food allergies and healthy options for individuals. The initiative uses a phone app, website and other collection instruments to collect and act on the specific needs of families.
Initiative focuses on building social capital of seniors by partnering retirees with residents who are new to the workforce (regardless of age) to serve as mentors, supporters and coaches.	The agency holds an annual gathering/networking event for seniors to inform them of agency services and build relationships. At that event, the initiative is presented and attendees provide insight into what they feel are strengths or areas of improvement.

## Optional Criteria

Because the optional criteria are not required, and are intended to promote diversity among the highlighted initiatives, State Associations/Offices and RPICs should develop a consensus around how the optional criteria are applied to initiatives. In order to ensure some commonality across regions, the following recommendations should be considered:

### **Partnerships**

The three potential indicators do not ALL need to be met, however it is strongly encouraged that highlighted initiatives demonstrate the important role of partnerships in Community Action. Because it is unlikely that community transformation would occur solely through the independent activity of a CAA, it is important that the highlighted initiatives showcase the broad and deep range of partnerships CAA’s support to drive transformation.

### **Scalable**

This characteristic is optional because it may be the case that some initiatives simply are not “scalable” – they only operate at one scale. However, it is critical to remember that the diversity of communities in our network and the uneven distribution of resources will mean that some communities may need to “start small”. If there are initiatives that can be tailored to different contexts (city block, neighborhood, city/town, county, regional) these initiatives will be more easily adopted across the network.

## ***Sustainable***

“Sustainability” is dependent on so many different variables that State Associations/Offices and RPICs should maintain a broad understanding of what makes an initiative sustainable. The most valuable initiatives will be ones that have a proven track record over time and are not overly-dependent on a “magic moment” that makes them successful. Preference should go to initiatives that have a strong planning foundation, committed long-term partners and that do not depend too heavily on a particular person or organization to sustain them. In short, the most valuable initiatives will be ones that a community has “institutionalized” – it has succeeded in changing the day-to-day way the community interacts in a way that builds human capacity for all residents, rather than being a special, concerted effort to do so.

## ***Funding diversity***

This criterion should be used with an important caveat: it is not necessarily the case that a larger variety of funders means the initiative has a stronger funding/support base. To the contrary, an initiative could be so dependent on EACH individual funder, that it is actually highly vulnerable to stopping operations if just one funder pulls out. This criterion should emphasize funding diversity in the sense that the initiative is *attractive* to a range of stakeholders and precisely because of its attractiveness (impact) it receives support from many sectors.