

NORTH EAST COMMUNITY ACTION CORPORATION

 Bowling Green, MO

 necac.org



Agency Context

Organizational Capacity

North East Community Action Corporation (NECAC) is a Community Action Agency, a Rural Local Initiatives Support Corporation (Rural LISC) grantee, and a NeighborWorks chartered agency located in Bowling Green, Missouri. The service area spans across 12 counties in Northeast Missouri, including three counties that are part of the metropolitan statistical area adjacent to St. Louis, as well as nine rural counties. The agency's annual budget is approximately \$26 million. This includes over 30 different funding sources, including a mix of both state and federal funding. NECAC is governed by a 36-person volunteer Board of Directors which includes three representatives from each of the 12 counties in the service area. The representatives from each county

include an Elected Official Representative, a Civic Interest Representative, and a Low-Income Representative. The agency has approximately 95 full-time staff and 100 part-time staff. The management team is comprised of 10 individuals including the President/CEO, Deputy Director of Housing Development Programs, Finance Operations Director, Personnel Officer and Assistant Deputy Director, Executive Secretary and Office Manager, Public Relations Officer, Information Technology (IT) Operations Director, Rent Assistance Programs Director, Community Services Block Grant (CSBG) Operations Director, and Weatherization Director.

Service Delivery

NECAC operates over 60 different programs across the areas of Community Service, Housing Development, and Community Health. Programs within the area of Community



Services include energy assistance, housing assistance, family development, poverty simulations, and SkillUP. In Housing Development, the agency works to develop affordable housing, provide Housing and Urban Development (HUD) certified counseling, package United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) 502 direct loans, manage properties, and operate home rehabilitation programs. Community Health includes in-home services and the Woman, Infant, and Children (WIC) program. NECAC has taken an innovative and proactive approach to advancing economic mobility for the next generation through the Reality Enrichment and Life Lessons (REALL) program and the Vocational Opportunities Inspiring Children in Elementary (VOICE) program, both of which are administered through the Community Services department. The REALL program is designed to provide hands-on simulation to challenge youth in high school to think critically about how their decisions in adolescence may have consequences in adulthood. The VOICE program is designed to encourage students in elementary school to explore career paths in Arts and Communication, Business

Management and Technology, Natural Resource and Agriculture, Human Services, Industrial and Engineering Technology, and Health Services.

In addition to providing a wide array of different types of services, NECAC's services also expand across a wide geographic area. To ensure community members can access the services they need, NECAC has a local outreach office located in each of the 12 counties they serve. This is where community members can go to apply for services. The weatherization team is based in Pike County but operates two crews to ensure adequate coverage of the service area. Each team includes three crew members, and a full-time Heating, Ventilation, and Air Conditioning (HVAC) technician is also available on staff. The service area expands across both rural and urban areas, which can also have an impact on the services that are provided. For example, in urban areas, homes tend to be newer and may not require as much extensive work. However, in rural counties, the homes tend to be older and may require more extensive work.

Innovation & Learning

In March 2021, NECAC's weatherization program received additional funding under the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law (BIL) to expand the weatherization program and serve more families. To serve more families, they needed more crew members. However, the agency was struggling to fill positions and retain staff. At the time, there were fast food restaurants paying more than the agency's starting wage. To address this issue, NECAC began by reaching out to the local Workforce Development Board



and asking for help to find potential employees. The Workforce Development Board suggested implementing an apprenticeship program.

As their next step, NECAC contacted their [state representative for the U.S. Department of Labor \(DOL\) Office of Apprenticeship](#) and the [Missouri Department of Higher Education and Workforce Development](#) to learn more about the requirements, and the apprenticeship program started to take shape. As a weatherization grantee, NECAC was already providing training for their employees, and the [Registered Apprenticeship Program](#) simply provided an opportunity to formalize what they were already doing. The process moved quickly, and they received approval within 30 days.

To date, they have trained 14 new staff members through the apprenticeship program. The program is targeted towards unemployed or underemployed workers who may not have a lot of work experience. Some program participants have had previous experience in the building or construction industry. However, through the apprenticeship program, they receive certified training including Building Performance Institute (BPI), Quality Control Inspector (QCI), Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA 10), and Cardiopulmonary Resuscitation (CPR). Once the apprenticeship program is completed, staff continue to receive annual training through the Department of

Natural Resources to maintain safe, efficient, and quality services.

Decision-Making

The decision to move forward with implementing a Registered Apprenticeship Program was made by a core leadership team consisting of the President/CEO, Deputy Director, Financial Director, and two Weatherization Directors. The two Weatherization Directors included both a Technical Director and the Procedural Director to ensure both perspectives were taken into consideration. Although there was no funding attached to the apprenticeship program, the Financial Director was still included in the decision-making process to ensure everyone had the opportunity to provide input and feedback. Once the initial paperwork was received from the state office, the team reviewed the information and recognized that the requirements aligned with the mission and the vision of the work they were already doing. There were no risks involved, which made it easy for the team to agree on the decision to move forward and pursue implementation. The Board of Directors received regular updates regarding the application and implementation process at board meetings. They were aware of the staffing challenges and were willing to support every option to recruit and retain staff and ensure the services reached the community.

Implementation Context

Organizational Change

Once the decision was made to move forward, the leadership team worked alongside the weatherization team to design a curriculum for the apprenticeship program based on the training that was already being provided. The one-year program includes 144 hours of classroom instruction and 2,000 hours of on-the-job training. The training curriculum included topics such as general construction, workplace safety, weatherization, asbestos, and mold. The first apprenticeship that was implemented was a Home Performance Laborer (Residential) which includes the occupation for Weatherization Installers and Technicians. Eventually, they expanded to also offer a second apprenticeship for the occupation of Energy Auditor, creating a pathway for career advancement.

Apprentices are considered full-time employees of NECAC. They were originally offered a 40-hour work week with four 10-hour days and this eventually changed to four 9-hour days with the pay adjusted to remain consistent with 40 hours per week. The starting pay is \$16 per hour with the opportunity for a wage increase after a 90-day probationary period. Merit increases are available each year, as well as an annual cost-of-living adjustment. The agency also provides 100% of the health insurance, as well as dental and vision insurance, and a retirement plan. Each apprentice starts as a crew laborer and can continue training up to an auditor or QCI position.

In preparation for implementation, information regarding the apprenticeship program was shared with the agency's personnel officer who served as a primary champion for advertising and promoting the benefits of the apprenticeship program. The personnel officer incorporated messaging about the apprenticeship program into the interviewing process to let applicants know about the benefits of the program. The primary message to applicants was that this was more than a job; it was an opportunity to build a career. It was also emphasized to applicants that the certification available through the apprenticeship program was nationally recognized and could go with them anywhere in the nation. Once the apprenticeship program was implemented, the agency saw a noticeable increase in the number of applicants showing up for interviews, and continuing to show up after getting hired.



The program was designed in a way that does not require a significant amount of administrative burden. There is one person on staff, the Weatherization Procedural Director, who is responsible for the enrollment of and follow-up with apprentices. When the program was implemented, there were no concerns or pushback from other staff members, as everyone was eager to do what was needed to hire quality employees to help support the workload. Existing employees were also offered the opportunity to enroll in the apprenticeship program as well as well.



Funding

There was no additional funding specifically designated to the apprenticeship program. This program was designed because of increased funding made available from the Department of Energy (DOE) for the weatherization program the need to increase staff capacity to support the expansion of program services. In 2021, the agency's weatherization funds increased from over \$2 million per year to over \$3 million per year. In addition to receiving DOE weatherization funds from the State of Missouri, NECAC also receives funding from local utility providers (including gas and electricity) and from the Low-Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP).



Partnerships

The key partners for NECAC's apprenticeship program have included the U.S. and Missouri Departments of Labor, the Northeast Missouri Workforce Development Board (NEMOWDB), and the Missouri Department of Natural Resources Division of Energy. The Workforce Development Board was the initial thought partner who introduced NECAC to the apprenticeship program. The Workforce Development Board then connected NECAC to the Department of Labor who helped with navigating the application process and continues to support implementation by issuing certifications. The Division of Energy serves as the primary funding partner, and donations are also received from local utility and gas providers.

These partnerships have expanded to help to support other programs and services as well. For example, the Workforce Development Board recently received a Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) grant to work with NECAC and the [Pike-Lincoln Technical Center](#) on the development of a new pre-apprenticeship program. Through this 3-week training program, graduating seniors were taught soft skills for success in the workplace. The partnership had a positive impact on students, and NECAC was even able to hire some of the students upon graduation, helping them to establish a career path. NECAC is always seeking to think outside of the box and develop new partnerships to support the sustainability of the program. Moving forward, they are hoping to continue building on and strengthening local city and county partnerships.

Successes

The first graduation for the Registered Apprenticeship program was held in June 2022 with 9 Weatherization Performance Laborers and 3 Energy Auditors graduating. The graduation ceremony brought together staff, board members, and program participants to celebrate the successful completion of the program. One of the first apprentices to graduate from the program said, “Upon getting hired at NECAC, I wanted to help out in any way that I could, and the apprenticeship program sounded like a really good program, and I can see the many benefits of it.” He went on to say, “It will jump start the necessary skills to perform my job that I didn’t necessarily have before starting in the weatherization program.”

In addition to the skills, work experience, and nationally recognized certification, another benefit of the program is the rewarding nature of the work. The weatherization program helps make homes more comfortable and energy-efficient for families, with some families saving as much as 50% on their utility bills. Apprentices can see the before and after of the work they are doing in a family’s home, hear the words of gratitude directly from the family, and feel the difference they are making for the family’s moving forward.

There were guys with little to no construction experience who told their friends and family about the growth in the industry and what they’ve learned about making homes more energy efficient.



Challenges

The service area for NECAC spans over 12 counties and includes both rural and urban areas, which can present unique challenges. For example, the urban service areas often have newer homes that may not require extensive work, while the rural homes tend to be older and may require more extensive work. To cover this expanse of both the geographic space, and the service needs, the agency operates two crews to ensure full coverage and quality services. The agency also has a full-time HVAC technician on staff, which has been helpful for maintaining staff capacity as well.

Funding has also been a challenge. In 2025, the agency had to make the difficult decision to lay off staff, including two of the new apprentices, because of funding cuts and uncertainty. There continues to be an extensive need, with over 400 people on the waiting list for services. Currently, this waiting period is two years. The agency is actively seeking new funding partners to engage with the apprenticeship program in an effort to address funding challenges and maintain the sustainability of the program.

Lessons Learned

For staff and leadership at NECAC, the advice they would offer to anyone interested in implementing a registered apprenticeship program is simply, “Don’t be afraid to try something new!” The most important lesson NECAC learned throughout this process is that they were already doing much of what was required. Once they took the first step, they learned that it was simply a matter of formalizing the work they were already doing to equip and train staff. Once they had this realization, the process moved quickly and efficiently. The formalization of a registered apprenticeship was a way to recruit and retain qualified team members who were invested in, connected with, and committed to the work of serving their local community. The program not only equipped them with skills and experience, but it also gave them the opportunity to give back and help others.

THE COLLABORATIVE ON ECONOMIC MOBILITY



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This resource is supported by Grant Number 90ET0502 from the ACF Office of Community Services, Community Services Block Grant within the Administration for Children and Families, a division of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Neither the Administration for Children and Families nor any of its components operate, control, are responsible for, or necessarily endorse this resource (including, without limitation, its content, technical infrastructure, and policies, and any services or tools provided). The opinions, findings, conclusions, and recommendations expressed are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Administration for Children and Families and the ACF Office of Community Services, Community Services Block Grant.