

Collaborative on Economic Mobility

INNOVATION IN ACTION

Profiles of Agencies Creating Change





Innovation is at the root of Community Action. When resources are limited, innovation becomes a necessary response to the real-life challenges families are facing. Each day, in communities across America, Community Action Agencies are identifying, and implementing, innovative solutions to effectively meet the needs of individuals and families in local communities. Community Action Agencies not only listen to the needs of the local community, but they also integrate the lived experience of community members into their decision-making and program design processes. Community Action Agencies can create the conditions to implement successful innovative approaches by

establishing innovation as a core value within their organizations, forming strategic partnerships, and aligning resources for maximum community impact. Innovation is at the root of Community Action. When resources are limited, innovation becomes a necessary response to the real-life challenges families are facing. Each day, in communities across America, Community Action Agencies are identifying, and implementing innovative solutions to effectively meet the needs of individuals. This case study is designed to highlight emerging and promising practices in economic mobility across the areas of housing, transportation, and healthcare.

These are cross-cutting areas that impact the success of economic mobility initiatives in key areas such as Workforce Development, High-Quality Education, Community-Asset Building, and Whole Family Approaches. These initiatives provide wraparound supports to help prepare families for success in school and in the workplace. The innovative programs and organizations represented in this case study are meeting specific needs within their local community, but they also offer practical solutions that other Community Action Agencies may be able to replicate within the context of their local community to address similar challenges.



HOUSING



Safe, affordable, and stable housing is necessary to improve economic mobility outcomes. Housing impacts all stages of an individual's life – from school readiness and success in elementary and middle school, to high school graduation and the completion of post-secondary education and training, to the ability to maintain employment in adulthood. The current housing crisis requires innovation to think outside of the box and reimagine what is possible. These solutions may include creating affordable housing, increasing the overall housing supply, improving access to housing, preventing displacement, and helping maintain safe and healthy housing.

In America, housing is a driving factor for economic mobility because it plays a key role in connecting individuals and families to thriving communities, neighborhoods, and asset-building opportunities. This case study takes a closer look at Community Action Agencies who are innovatively addressing housing challenges by integrating housing solutions into workforce development initiatives, community-asset building initiatives, and whole family approach initiatives.

East Missouri Action Agency

 Park Hills, MS

 eastmoaa.org

Agency Context

 Mission	East Missouri Action Agency (EMAA) cultivates communities of opportunity and supports people in reaching their highest potential.
 Operations	The agency operates with a \$17 million budget and has 225 full and part-time employees.
 Population Served	EMAA provides services for over 22,000 individuals and 11,000 households across eight counties in southeast Missouri including Bollinger, Cape Girardeau, Iron, Madison, Perry, St. Francois, Ste. Genevieve, and Washington.
 Community Needs	Top community needs include affordable housing, utility assistance, quality childcare, living wage job opportunities, transportation, and educational support.
 Services Provided	Key services include Head Start, Weatherization, Section 8 Housing, Workforce Development, Southeast Economic Development Fund, Inc. (SEED\$), Emergency Food & Rental Assistance, Summer Food Service Program, Low-Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP).



Implementation Context

- EMAA created New Foundations Construction using \$325,000 in Community Economic Development (CED) grant funding and a \$75,000 investment.
- The goal of New Foundations is to give new life to neglected and derelict houses and help beautify neighborhoods while also increasing the quantity and quality of employment opportunities, increasing the development of affordable housing, improving the quality of housing stock, and linking the production of affordable housing with economic development activities that create new jobs.
- New Foundations employs six people full-time, with benefits, including a fully licensed and bonded Program Manager or Contractor with over 20 years of experience and a part-time Administrative Assistant.
- Training is provided in partnership with industry leaders, higher education institutions, and workforce development organizations to equip participants with both pre-employment soft skills and specialized occupational training tailored to the construction industry.
- Classroom instruction is combined with hands-on training. It incorporates Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) safety standards and other nationally recognized credentials, including the Building Contractor Certification A and the OSHA Confined Spaces Certification.
- Upon completion of training, participants transition to on-the-job work experience and gain access to employment opportunities.



Successes

- 8 New Builds Completed
- 2 Renovations Completed
- 1 New Foundation Laid
- 2 New Lots Purchased
- Expanded to become a contractor for Weatherization program's Housing Preservation Grant.
- Expanded to bidding on private residential jobs.



Challenges

- Extensive and competitive grant application process.
- Unexpected events delayed progress at times, including staffing transitions, a housing market crash, and equipment repairs.



Lessons Learned

- Know the service area demographics and barriers.
- Hire an experienced and qualified grant writer.
- Develop a business plan.
- Listen to feedback and be willing to adapt as needed.

Success Story

A married couple became familiar with EMAA when their children were attending Head Start. The wife started working with EMAA as a Head Start cook and later became a teacher assistant. She then turned to the SkillUp program to receive her Child Development Associate (CDA) credential and gain full-time employment. She is now working at EMAA as a Community Services Representative and Building Manager. Her husband also received training through the SkillUp program for Heating, Ventilation, and Air Conditioning (HVAC) certification. He is now also employed at EMAA as part of the New Foundations construction crew.

Over the course of the past seven years, both parents have gained full-time employment, increasing their household income from single-income household to a two-income household. Beyond the financial impact, both parents are also now working in a field where they can give back to the community by contributing their newly acquired skills to the same programs and services that helped them. They were also able to complete their goal of purchasing a home for their family. To bring their story full circle, this new home was built by the New Foundations construction team.



People Inc.



Abingdon, VA



peopleinc.net



Agency Context



Mission

People Inc.'s mission is to provide opportunities for economically disadvantaged people to reach their goals in order to enhance their lives, their families, and their communities.



Operations

The agency operates with an annual budget of \$34 million and over 270 employees.



Population Served

People Inc. provides services to over 7,500 individuals and 4,800 households each year across 17 cities and counties in Virginia.



Community Needs

Top community needs in the service area include affordable housing, quality jobs, mental health and substance abuse recovery services.



Services Provided

Services are based on key strategic pathways including Workforce Development, Community Economic Development, Housing, Child and Family Development, and Community Services.

Implementation Context

- People Inc. creates, maintains, and ensures access to affordable, high-quality housing through a variety of programs and services, including affordable housing development and maintenance. The Low-Income Housing Tax Credit has helped support new construction and rehabilitation projects, including the development of multi-family rental units. People, Inc. manages over 1,100 units across 32 apartment communities in 21 counties across Virginia and Tennessee. The agency employs a team of 16 property managers, 21 maintenance staff, and eight administrative staff to manage and maintain the properties.
- People, Inc. also provides housing services to help families obtain and maintain stable housing. This includes homeownership counseling, housing choice vouchers, weatherization, permanent supportive housing, and housing services for victims of domestic violence.
- In Fiscal Year (FY) 2023, the Office of Community Services (OCS) launched a new Affordable Housing and Supportive Services Demonstration (AHSSD) grant program. The program was designed to support CAAs and tribes that own their own affordable housing units in strengthening, expanding, and enhancing wraparound services for affordable housing residents. As part of this project, People Inc. established a “Resident Services” program for those living in five apartment complexes in the North Central regional community. The project has helped identify resident needs and connect them to supports available through other People, Inc. programs and services. The project has also helped build and strengthen relationships with community partners in an effort to offer programs and services directly on-site at the apartment communities. As a result of the success of this pilot, People Inc. is now exploring additional funding strategies to continue programming operations and expand to other apartment communities.

Successes

- 31 Properties Owned
- 1,067 Units Owned
- 24 Acquisition or Rehab Properties
- 4 New Construction Properties
- 3 Adaptive Reuse Properties
- 243 People Temporarily Sheltered
- 41 People Permanently Housed

Challenges

- Building trust with partners and residents requires a significant investment of time.
- Flexible funding opportunities are needed to sustain and expand innovative housing solutions.

Lessons Learned

- Build relationships with community partners who can offer programs and supportive services directly at apartment communities to reduce barriers for residents.
- Integrate property management with other CAA services to better identify and meet the needs of residents.



TRANSPORTATION

INNOVATIVE PROGRAMS AND ORGANIZATIONS

Transportation is frequently identified in Community Needs Assessments as a major barrier to economic mobility. Limited public transit and the high cost of owning a vehicle can prevent individuals and families from accessing education, employment, childcare, and medical care. Community Action Agencies help bridge these gaps by connecting people to the places they need to go. Across the country, agencies are responding to local transportation challenges with innovative strategies. Some rural agencies bring services directly to families through mobile units, while others purchase buses or vans and provide transportation services through local government and employer partnerships. Many also build on community strengths by offering Volunteer Driver Programs or Friends and Family Driver Programs. When purchasing a bus, van, or recreational vehicle is not feasible, agencies may help families pay for vehicle repairs or purchase a personal vehicle. With support from donors and community partners, some agencies have also provided donated vehicles to program participants. By tailoring these approaches to local needs and assets, Community Action Agencies can strengthen economic mobility outcomes for the individuals and families they serve.

West Central Missouri Community Action Agency

 Appleton, MS

 wcmcaa.org

Agency Context	
 Mission	West Central's mission is to help people and communities reach their fullest potential by cultivating and coordinating resources, building partnerships, and advocating for change.
 Operations	The agency operates with an annual budget of \$18.5 million. It is governed by an 18-person tripartite Board of Directors, and a 10-person leadership team.
 Population Served	The service area includes 10 rural counties south of Kansas City, including Bates, Benton, Cass, Cedar, Henry, Hickory, Jackson, Morgan, St. Clair, and Vernon counties.
 Community Needs	Top community needs include employment, housing, childcare, transportation, income and asset building, health and wellness, civic engagement and community involvement, and education.
 Services Provided	Key services include food pantry and resources, community services, workforce development, housing and utility assistance, multi-family housing, weatherization, and transportation.

Implementation Context

- New Growth Transit, an affiliate of West Central Missouri Community Action Agency, was established through the Community Development Corporation to support rides for residents through volunteer driver network.
- Rides are provided within a 200-mile radius for essential trips such as medical appointments, therapy, pharmacy, work, groceries, and banking.
- Ride requests must be submitted at least 48 hours in advance.
- Drivers use their own vehicles and receive reimbursement twice per month based on the current IRS mileage reimbursement rate (70 cents per mile).
- Screening of drivers includes a 20-year background check and state driving record.
- Drivers are trained and insured (minimum of \$300,000) through CIMA Volunteer Insurance once certified.
- Vehicles are inspected two times per year.
- Training includes certification for a technology program that is used to schedule, track, and log completed miles. Drivers are provided with tablets to access the technology platform. Tablets are purchased for \$1 through a partnership with Verizon.

Successes

- Completed over 571,469 miles across 14 counties.
- Provided rides to 1,534 unique riders.
- Supported 53 volunteer drivers with 12,699 hours of service.

Challenges

- Insurance is a high expense with this model, but not as expensive as owning and maintaining a fleet of vehicles.
- The average age of volunteer drivers is 55 years old. As capacity expands, there is an intentional effort to recruit younger drivers who are more available to provide rides at night and on weekends.

Lessons Learned

- Intentionally recruit drivers from existing networks. For example: active volunteers, seasonal workers, and retired employees from helping professions such as social workers, teachers, nurses, law enforcement, and caregivers.
- Leverage social media to promote and increase awareness of services.
- Embrace and invest in technology to improve efficiency and expand capacity.
- Establish strong partnerships with local, regional, state, and private foundations to acquire funding for long-term sustainability.
- Implement an Ambassador Program to allow drivers the opportunity to advocate for one another and participate in recruitment events such as job fairs.

Panhandle Community Services

 Amarillo, TX

 pcsvcs.org

Agency Context

Mission

Panhandle Community Services' mission is to work as a community leader and partner to change the lives of individuals and families in the Texas Panhandle by bridging the gap from poverty to stability.

Operations

The agency operates with a budget of \$32 million with 89% going directly to client services. The work is led by an 8-person leadership team and governed by a 15-person Board of Directors.

Population Served

The service area includes 26 counties across 26,000 square miles in the northern region of Texas.

Community Needs

The top community needs include affordable and accessible healthcare, safe and affordable housing, employment and economic opportunities, adequate and affordable transportation, and food security.

Services Provided

Key programs and services include Family Development Program, Housing Assistance, Panhandle Transit, Retired & Seniors Volunteer Program (RSVP), Tax Preparation, Utility Assistance, Veteran's Assistance, Weatherization, and Poverty Simulations.

Implementation Context

- Panhandle Community Services started providing transportation services over 22 years ago through the Job Access and Reverse Commute (JARC) program.
- The agency initially received a \$750,000 grant which was used to purchase four buses with the capacity for 29 to 40 passengers. As the program has expanded, they are now operating 14 buses.
- The program is now funded through 5311 funding for Rural Areas.
- Panhandle Community Services partners with three of the largest packing plants in the area, including Cargill, Tyson, and JBS, to provide employees with transportation to work. This partnership started by providing services for 1st shift and eventually expanded to offer 2nd shift as well.
- Once the initial funding for the program ended, the employers continued with the partnership because they recognized the effectiveness of the service in helping to reduce turnover.
- Each employer partnership is different. One employer pays half the transportation service while employees pay the other half, and other employers pay the full cost of the transportation service.

Successes

- In 2025, over 250,000 rides were completed with over 85,000 being specifically for work trips. Other trips included public transportation for healthcare appointments, job interviews, and other important errands.
- Employer partners have reported reduction in number of vacancies, reduction in tardiness, and reduced call-ins.

Challenges

- Staffing of the program can be challenging in the recruitment of qualified drivers with a Commercial Driver's License (CDL).
- The cost of the program can be a challenge. It does not generate income, but it is sustainable.

Lessons Learned

- Establish strong working relationships with local employers. This not only benefits the employers who need reliable employees, but also the individuals who need reliable transportation to maintain employment.
- Start where you are with what you have. For example, one bus or van, one employer, and one shift. Use this data to demonstrate the need and benefit. Build capacity to expand as needed with increased funding, staffing, and resources.
- Maintain consistent communication with employer partners to share outcome data, evaluate needs, and adjust as needed.

Success Story

New Growth Transit's volunteer driver model offers an innovative, community-based response to rural transportation challenges by building a network of neighbors helping neighbors. In one example of the model's success, a man with limited vision found himself no longer able to drive. With no family living close by, and friends not always available to help during the day, it became difficult to get to doctor appointments and other places for essential needs. With limited vision, his needs often extended beyond transportation. At times, it also required needing help to navigate large medical facilities and find the correct entrance. Volunteer drivers have the flexibility to provide this added support. He shared that his driver not only drives safely and assists him in many ways but also stops for food he can eat when he returns home after a long day of appointments. This small act is something many people take for granted, but it is another example of flexibility that is not available through other public transportation models. The personal care and consideration of volunteer drivers is central to the model's effectiveness. It is not just the helping hand, but the heart behind it. This model provides a system of support that reduces stress and isolation and helps maintain a high-quality of life both for riders and drivers.





HEALTH

The health of individuals and families is another key driver of economic mobility. Access to quality healthcare improves physical and mental well-being, reduces financial strain, and enables people to maintain steady employment and pursue educational opportunities. Healthy communities also strengthen local businesses by increasing participation in the workforce and improving productivity.

Community Action Agencies play a vital role in expanding opportunities to improve health outcomes by supporting the ability for individuals and families to access nutritious food, preventative care, medical appointments, and other health-related services. Addressing the conditions that shape health and well-being establishes a strong foundation for long-term economic growth.

Community Action Marin

 Novato, CA

 camarin.org

Agency Context

 Mission	The mission of Community Action Marin is to make it possible for people in Marin to achieve well-being by providing the vital services they need.
 Operations	The agency is led by a 17-person leadership team and over 225 staff. The annual budget is \$34 million and includes funding from federal, state, and county sources as well as private foundations and other funding sources.
 Population Served	Community Action Marin provides services to over 3,800 people annually. The service area of Marin County in California is one of the wealthiest counties in the United States, yet experiences one of the widest gaps between the rich and the poor, with 14% of residents living in poverty and struggling to secure food, housing, and other basic necessities.
 Community Needs	The top identified community needs include housing, health, safety, employment, and education.
 Services	Community Action Marin provides wraparound services to support the whole family. Services include early childhood education, housing, workforce and small business development, financial well-being, and food and nutrition.

Implementation Context

- Community Action Marin offers a Medi-Cal Peer Support Specialist Program to equip participants with the skills needed for certification and careers in the mental health field.
- The program focuses on 17 core behavioral health skills aligned with Peer Specialist competencies identified by the Department of Health Care Services (DHCS) and approved by the California Mental Health Services Authority (CalMHSA).
- Participants are expected to complete 80 hours of state-approved training through a 12-week cohort-based program. This training combines online and in-person learning.



Successes

- In 2025, over 2,500 people receiving services from Community Action Marin increased stability in housing, income, and other indicators.
- The Peer Support Specialist training program professionalizes peer work, expands workforce development opportunities, and strengthens peers' ability to contribute effectively to multidisciplinary care teams.
- The Peer Support Specialist training program provides the opportunity for people with experience in the process of recovering from mental illness or substance use disorder to build on that experience and help others in similar situations. This lived experience is a valuable asset to build trust, improve service delivery, and improve outcomes.

Challenges

- Behavioral health is important, but the pay for Peer Support Specialists does not often provide a living wage. Efforts are in process to expand into other healthcare positions with the potential for higher rates of pay.

Lessons Learned

- The implementation of a cohort model for job training programs helps participants stay engaged and committed through peer-to-peer learning and mentorship opportunities.
- Building and strengthening strategic partnerships with local employers, educational institutions, and other organizations is a key component of success.
- Leveraging funding sources for wraparound supportive services helps with the long-term sustainability of training programs.
- Incorporating soft skills and digital literacy training in job training programs helps participants build essential skills for success in the workplace.

Action for a Better Community (ABC)

 Rochester, NY

 abcinfo.org

Agency Context

 Mission	Action for a Better Community (ABC) promotes and provides opportunities for low-income individuals and families to become self-sufficient.
 Operations	The annual budget is over \$24 million with the majority of funding directed towards Early Childhood, Weatherization, and Community-Based Services. The agency is governed by an 18-person Board of Directors. The leadership team includes seven executive leaders and 18 operational leaders.
 Population Served	ABC serves over 3,000 individuals from over 2,000 households each year across Monroe and Ontario counties in New York.
 Community Needs	The top community needs include safety and violence prevention, affordable housing, employment and job training, quality education, affordable childcare, accessible transportation, food security, and mental health services.
 Services	The key areas of service include youth and community services, early childhood services, and energy conservation. Programs across these areas are designed to address health and safety, education and career readiness, family support, leadership development, and financial empowerment.

Implementation Context

- In 2016, ABC implemented the Strengthening Working Families Initiative (SWFI) to provide parents with the opportunity to obtain employment or advance their career in health care, advanced manufacturing, and information technology fields. These fields were identified as high-demand or growing industries in the community. The initiative helped address barriers related to accessing training and employment.
- The services were provided in collaboration with Rochester Rehabilitation Center and the Child Care Council.
- SWFI was initially funded through a four-year \$4 million grant from the U.S. Department of Labor, which was then extended for another year during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- During the initial implementation of the initiative, a significant amount of time was spent establishing and strengthening strategic partnerships with key stakeholders and building a cohesive and aligned network.

Successes

- By the conclusion of the initiative in 2021, a total of 591 individuals were served and 254 successfully completed education or job training programs and earned credentials that enabled them to secure employment or advance in their careers.
- At a time when the healthcare industry was facing critical staffing shortages, SWFI helped fill vacancies by equipping community members with skills to become Certified Nursing Assistants (CNAs), Licensed Practical Nurses (LPNs), and Registered Nurses (RNs).

Challenges

- Although federal funding for the initiative ended in 2021, many of the components that were established have continued through funding from the United Way of Greater Rochester, including the establishment of a Trainers Network.
- Staff turnover was a challenge at times, but during the transition and onboarding process, other team members helped to bridge gaps and provide knowledge to ensure services were not disrupted.
- During the COVID-19 pandemic, adjustments were made to transition the instruction from an in-person to a remote and hybrid format to ensure participants were able to continue completing their training.

Lessons Learned

- Build strong and collaborative cross-sector partnerships to coordinate services and effectively respond to complex challenges.
- Define and clarify the roles of all collaborative partners.
- Maintain consistent communication with partners for accountability and coordination.
- Establish an advisory committee to identify and address emerging needs in real time.

Success Story

The success of ABC's Strengthening Working Families Initiative (SWFI) is demonstrated by the story of a nursing student who was referred to the program by her college. Through SWFI's case management services she was able to receive assistance with childcare, transportation, the purchase of textbooks, and examination fees. With this support, she was able to graduate with an associate's degree in nursing and register for the RN-NCLEX exam. She is now employed at a local hospital and, after passing the exam, will be able to advance from her current position as a Licensed Practical Nurse (LPN) to a Registered Nurse (RN). This growth represents the interconnection of healthcare, education, employment, and economic mobility. Her story of success not only impacts her and her family's economic well-being, but it also helps meet the need for qualified healthcare professionals in the community.



CONCLUSION



Innovative approaches help Community Action Agencies respond effectively when unexpected challenges arise. They also strengthen the knowledge, skills, resources, and partnerships needed for lasting transformation. Agencies can build their capacity for innovation by learning from one another's successes and challenges, listening to community needs, aligning programs and services, and deepening collaborative partnerships. The work of practice transformation requires an ongoing investment of time and resources into learning. This investment builds the knowledge and capacity for change – both for those receiving services, and for those providing services.

By listening to and incorporating community voices, agencies gain valuable insight into local barriers and strengths. With this understanding, they can build trusted relationships, maintain clear and consistent communication, and engage community members in planning and decision-making. Housing, transportation, and health are all critical and cross-cutting drivers of economic mobility because they directly influence an individual's ability to access education, employment, and other opportunities for financial stability. Safe and affordable housing provides a solid foundation for families to build their futures. Reliable transportation connects families to

the resources they need to achieve their goals. Quality healthcare services support the physical and mental wellness of families which enables them to be ready, willing, and able to work towards the completion of their goals. Addressing challenges in each of these interconnected areas requires innovative, community-centered, and data-driven strategies. Implementing creative approaches that are tailored to local needs helps reduce barriers, expand opportunities, and create pathways to long-term economic mobility for families and communities.



THE COLLABORATIVE ON ECONOMIC MOBILITY

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