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“Community Action Recognizes Innovative Programs Responding to Skyrocketing Community Needs”

*Minnesota Community Action Partnership
and partners co-sponsor Eighth Annual “Best Practice Awards”*

Saint Paul (February 16, 2012) -- Minnesota’s Community Action Agencies are responding to budget cuts by developing new and innovative ways to assist the state’s burgeoning population of low-income people. Eight agencies were recognized for those innovations at Minnesota Community Action Partnership’s eighth annual Best Practices Awards Event in St. Paul yesterday afternoon.

From 2000 to 2010, the number of Minnesotans living in poverty increased 77%, with nearly 600,000 state residents (one in nine people) struggling below the poverty line by the end of the decade. At the same time, state and federal funding for Community Action Agencies decreased 20-25%, on a per capita basis. Minnesota’s Community Action Agencies, Minnesota’s largest statewide social services network, have worked to bridge the gap in funding by creating new ways to help struggling families work their way out of poverty.

Senator Bill Ingebrigtsen, Senate Assistant Majority Leader, and Representative Erin Murphy, Assistant Minority Leader, gave keynote speeches to celebrate this year’s honorees. **Representative Paul Marquart** offered his appreciation to the honorees for their innovative, efficient and collaborative work in communities throughout the state.

The Minnesota Community Action Partnership (MinnCAP) collaborates with the University of Minnesota, College of Human Education and Human Development and the Minnesota Department of Human Services, Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO) to design and administer the Best Practices Awards event. This event honors Community Action Agencies for programs that are uniquely innovative and effective in ending poverty within their communities.

This year’s award-winning programs highlight issues facing communities around Minnesota, including job training, financial planning, food support, and energy efficiency. The 2012 winners, identified as exemplary in meeting one out of six goals, are: **Anoka Community**

Action Program, Inc., Community Action Duluth, Community Action Partnership of Ramsey and Washington Counties, Lakes and Prairies Community Action Partnership, Mahube Community Council, Inc., Minnesota Valley Action Council, Otter Tail-Wadena Community Action Council, West Central Minnesota Communities Action, and Western Community Action, Inc. *(Attached are descriptions of the award-winning projects.)*

This Minnesota-based competition is a model for other states seeking to coordinate community-based anti-poverty efforts and university systems. Catherine A. Solheim, Ph.D., Associate Professor in Family Social Science at the University of Minnesota College of Human Education and Human Development, stated,

“The hallmark of these programs are the tangible outcomes that demonstrate how people living in poverty are improving their lives. These awards recognize the extremely effective family-strengthening work of Community Action Agencies statewide. I am excited to use these programs as examples in my classroom to train the next generation of professionals in social work, family science, and policy.”

The judges for this year’s awards reviewed nominations based on documented outcomes, innovation, and replicability. With special emphasis paid to partnerships, bonus points were awarded to projects involving community collaborations.

Community Action Agencies are locally controlled, private, non-profit organizations designed to improve communities by helping low-income families and individuals leave poverty. President Lyndon B. Johnson launched Community Action Agencies when he signed the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964 which was the beginning of his historic “War on Poverty.”

According to Joe Pederson, Executive Director of the Lakes and Prairies Community Action Partnership, and Board Chair of the statewide Minnesota Community Action Partnership,

“This event showcases the innovative work that Community Action Agencies are doing throughout Minnesota to improve the economic stability of their communities. While our communities are struggling to respond to increased demand for services from an ever increasing number of families in need, these programs are crucial. The range and depth of the programs reflect the diverse needs of today’s society.”

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**MINNESOTA COMMUNITY ACTION PARTNERSHIP
2011 BEST PRACTICES AWARD WINNERS**

Outstanding achievement in partnerships among supporters and providers of services to low-income people.

Recipient: Anoka Community Action Program, Inc.

Visions Implementation — Best Practice

The Practice: After identifying the need for a more effective data system, Anoka County Community Action Program (ACCAP) implemented Visions, which provides the agency a cost effective and more comprehensive client database. This system accurately tracks client demographics, program enrollment, case management, outcomes, and staff activities. The benefits of Visions includes the merging of multiple databases, effectively streamlining data entry, an increase in staff productivity, a significant reduction of staff time required for reporting (on both program and agency levels), and the ongoing annual savings with the elimination of the data entry specialist. The implementation of Visions has made a substantial contribution to the agency's ability and capacity to track clients, monitor progress, evaluate programs, and achieve results.

Outstanding achievement in partnerships among supporters and providers of services to low-income people.

Recipient: Minnesota Valley Action Council

Producing Social Impact through Social Enterprise — Best Practice

The Practice: Embracing an agency-wide philosophy of fostering social impact through self-sustaining social enterprises. In 2004, Minnesota experienced a huge budget deficit, resulting in multiple cuts to social programs, including core funding for Community Action. Since then, demand for services have grown steadily, rather than declined. Recognizing the need for innovative programming and funding of social initiatives, MVAC launched its first social enterprise. Since then, four other social enterprises have been launched. Combined, these initiatives have created 7.6 full time jobs and generated cumulative revenue of nearly \$3.4 million.

Outstanding achievement in partnerships among supporters and providers of services to low-income people.

Recipient: West Central Minnesota Communities Action

Progressive Food Support Outreach — Best Practice

The Practice: West Central Minnesota Communities Action has partnered with the University of Minnesota Extension, United Way, Salvation Army, Head Start and the area Faith Community to increase the participation in the Food Support Programs as well as to provide education around maximizing food support dollars and while still preparing healthy family meals. Families learned about the Food Support program, how to complete an application and how to use any funds received in the most economical methods. Overall, this was a 56% increase in the number of households enrolled in the Food Support program across the five counties.

Outstanding achievement in increasing stake and ownership by low-income people in their community.

Recipients:

**West Central Minnesota Communities Action
Lakes and Prairies Community Action Partnership
Mahube Community Council
Otter Tail-Wadena Community Action Council**

The Leadership Academy — Best Practice

The Practice: Too often, the full potential of leaders goes untapped. The Leadership Academy helps previously undiscovered, low income leaders realize their power and take more active roles in building their communities' future. The Academy provides a space and structure for people to acquire and practice competencies that result in becoming more effective leaders. Preliminary results are promising, indicating that participants have become more involved in their communities, are accepting formal or informal leadership positions and have become more effective community advocates.

Outstanding achievement in partnerships among supporters and providers of services to low-income people.

Recipient: Community Action Duluth

Financial Opportunity Center: A Framework for Doing Good Business — Promising Practice

The Practice: Community Action Duluth (CAD) spent the last year integrating into a Financial Opportunity Center (FOC). This bundled approach to providing services allowed our program participants to ultimately have better outcomes. The main services coordinated under the FOC are employment services and coaching, financial services and coaching, income supports and community engagement. Now the goal for participants when they enter CAD is to be provided with as many holistic, comprehensive and coordinated services as possible and to track outcomes in a cohesive unified way through the agency – unlike the previous siloed programs participants used to enroll in. Transforming our agency took vision, leadership, willingness to change, ability to evaluate and respond and perseverance to the cause. Since much of the work of personal transformation takes a long time and much of our work with participants is long-term, it's exciting that early outcomes are a testament to the power of bundled services, demonstrating that participants involved in multiple programs are truly showing better results in the areas of increasing income, improving credit score and increasing net worth. We are only more excited to report back on another year of agency integration, coordinated services and positive participant outcomes!

Outstanding achievement in partnerships among supporters and providers of services to low-income people.

Recipient: Community Action Partnership of Ramsey and Washington Counties

Just-In-Time Weatherization Process — Promising Practice

The Practice: Community Action Partnership of Ramsey & Washington Counties' Just-In-Time (JIT) weatherization process shortened home weatherization job timeframes from an average 149 days to 47 days. We analyzed each process step to determine how hours and days could be cut from home weatherization projects. We created a high level of communication between a centralized scheduler and the various teams working a job (auditor, mechanical contractor, electrician, appliance vendor, weatherization crew and inspector). The result was a switch from 78% of jobs being outside the 90-day benchmark to 78% of jobs being completed under 90 days. Additional benefits included the reduction of backlogged homes waiting for weatherization and better service to participants.

Outstanding achievement in improving the conditions in which low-income people live.

Recipient: Lakes and Prairies Community Action Partnership

“Banking the Unbanked” through our VITA Tax Site — Promising Practice

The Practice: Lakes & Prairies Community Action Partnership has incorporated pre-paid debit card services as a method to provide low-cost banking services to the previously unbanked. Households utilizing VITA Tax Site services were offered the opportunity to sign up for a pre-paid debit card to deposit their refund. The pre-paid debit card provides the households the ability to build savings, avoid predatory lending practices, and work toward financial security.

Outstanding achievement in partnerships among supporters strengthening family and other supportive systems to support low-income people, especially vulnerable populations, to meet their potential.

Recipient: Western Community Action, Inc.

Community Blooms — Promising Practice

The Practice: Community Blooms is a transformative model of community gardening started by Western Community Action in 2011 to address hunger and increase household funds for meeting basic needs among low-income families. Community Blooms provided nutritious food to 69 participating families, equipped participants with valuable knowledge about gardening and marketing food for resale, gave back to the community by providing 1000 pounds of surplus produce to the local food shelf, generated revenue to sustain the garden by selling a portion of the surplus produce at the local farmer's market, and created community among the 69 adults and 29 children.

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