

Community Action of Southeast Iowa History

Passage of the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964 began the “War on Poverty” and led to the formation of Community Action Agencies in Iowa and across the United States. Soon after the federal government adopted its policy of working toward eliminating poverty, groups of concerned individuals in this area began meeting to decide how best to fight poverty. They established goals and priorities and sought funding from the Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO).

Early on, these people recognized that our “rural” counties did not have large enough population bases to form their Community Action Agencies. Therefore, the counties joined together. Initially, the Lee and Henry County groups joined forces and began their quest to become a private, non-profit corporation to help the low-income and otherwise disadvantaged. Soon, they were joined by Des Moines and Washington Counties. Corporate status was granted in November of 1965, and Southeast Iowa Community Action (now Community Action of Southeast Iowa) applied for funding through OEO.

Funds were granted in early 1966, and Violet Lundquist was named the agency’s first Executive Director. On July 1, 1966, Lundquist and a secretary opened the first Community Action office in Burlington in what was once the Old Territorial Jail at 601 North Main Street. The first funding was \$14,386 for six months.

The agency began to receive funding for specific programs the following year, such as Neighborhood Youth Corps, One to One High School Completion Program, Homemaker Home Health Aide Program, and Family Planning. Head Start was the first program to be funded agency-wide in 1967. The first Neighborhood Centers were established in Burlington, Ft. Madison, and Washington. A year later, Mt. Pleasant and Keokuk both opened Neighborhood Centers.

Over the years, Community Action has received funding for many new programs and initiatives. The agency has seen some programs evolve into agencies such as the Area Agency on Aging, Family Planning (now Planned Parenthood), and the Homemaker Home Health Aide Program.

Louisa County joined Community Action in 1973, and Washington County left in 1983, leaving the four counties—Des Moines, Henry, Lee, and Louisa—that comprise the agency today.

Violet Lundquist served as the Executive Director until her retirement in 1974, and Lois Eichacker was appointed the second Executive Director. Lois retired in 1989, and Sharon Ford was named the agency's third executive director, serving through 2017. Sharon was the Head Start Director for about 20 years before becoming the Executive Director. In 2018, Sheri Wilson was named Executive Director of the agency. Sheri had served as the Deputy Director for over 20 years.

Organizational Structure

Community Action's activities are governed by a 12-member Board of Directors, which is made up of equal numbers of members (one-third each): appointed by public officials (public), elected people with low incomes (representatives of the low-income), and selected from groups and organizations in the private sector (private).

The Board of Directors has many responsibilities, including appointing and evaluating the Executive Director; determining central personnel, fiscal and program priorities and policies; approving program proposals and budgets; overseeing the extent and quality of the participation of clients in agency programs; selecting and evaluating the agency's Equal Opportunity Officer; and monitoring and ensuring compliance with all conditions of grants and contracts.

Under the Board of Directors, the Executive Director guides the agency's everyday operation and administration. The Executive Director and the Management Team develop and implement policies, procedures, and strategies to improve the agency's delivery of beneficial programs and services to the communities. We are part of a national network of over 1,000 Community Action Agencies.

Agency Mission and Purpose

Although Community Action provides many programs and services with different eligibility guidelines and objectives, its goal is to "help people help themselves" toward self-sufficiency.

Our mission: Community Action of Southeast Iowa is dedicated to alleviating the conditions and causes of poverty by building partnerships and strengthening people through quality services.

The agency's purpose is to advocate for the poor and elderly on matters of public policy affecting their status and promote institutional change. In addition, its purposes are to:

- Provide a broadened resource base of programs to eliminate poverty.
- Ensure the maximum feasible participation of the poor and the elderly in developing and implementing all programs and projects designed to serve them.
- Mobilize public and private resources in support of its programs and purposes.
- Provision of decent, safe, and sanitary housing affordable to low- and moderate-income persons.

Every employee, as a member of the Community Action team, plays a vital role in helping the agency achieve its mission and goals.