



# THE ANTI-POVERTY SOLDIER



Community **Action**

By Clarence Hightower, Ph.D.

## The importance of thought leadership in the age of uncertainty

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Thought leadership should be an entry point to a relationship. Thought leadership should intrigue, challenge, and inspire even people already familiar with a company. It should help start a relationship where none exists, and it should enhance existing relationships.

- Daniel Rasmus

To be a company that exemplifies thought leadership, you need to have an idea engine, a concept forge, AS WELL AS an outward-leaning communication stance combined with a desire to raise the playing field – a capability to not only learn new things, to not only discover them for the first time, but to educate others – selflessly.

- Tom Paul

In the summer of 1964, shortly after the passage of the Economic Opportunity Act, St. Paul Mayor George Vavoulis and United Way Planner William Hoffman traveled to Washington, D.C. to request funds in order to establish the first Community Action Agency in the State of Minnesota. Initially known as the Ramsey County Citizens Committee on Economic Opportunity (RCCCEO), the agency began administering federal funds to local community-based organizations while also receiving federal dollars to offer the newly designed Head Start program for disadvantaged pre-school children.

By 1971, the agency now known as Ramsey Action Programs, Inc. (RAP) was serving nearly 350 children at 11 Head Start Centers. The agency was consistently cited “as one of the best organized and most efficiently run local OEO offices” and began to receive additional funding for more programs. In the mid-1970s, RAP began providing both Energy Assistance and Energy Conservation services. The first self-sufficiency programming began in 1987 and RAP established its Early Head Start program in 1994.

Now, in its 53rd year of existence, Community Action Partnership of Ramsey & Washington Counties remains a leader in providing direct services to the low-income community, including historically underserved populations, impacting the lives of approximately 70,000 individuals each year. Mayor Vavoulis and Bill Hoffman demonstrated tremendous vision and leadership when they gave birth to this agency. And the legacy and tradition they established has continued to this day as Community Action has successfully evolved to identify new and emerging while providing responsive and accessible programming and services to an increasingly diverse population.

Among the ways Community Action has done this is through its position as a thought leader. Defined by CEO of the California-based Thought Leadership Lab Denise Brosseau, thought leaders

are “trusted sources that move and inspire people with innovative ideas, turn ideas into reality, and know how to replicate success.” So how does Community Action embody this? Consider, for example, the tripartite model of our Board of Directors, which requires equal participation from the low-income community, private sector, and elected officials. In return, we are directed by the insight and first-hand experience of those who live in poverty, experts in both the for-profit and non-profit industries, and public servants entrusted to make important decisions that affect all of us.

Community Action also demonstrates its role as a thought leader through our executive administration, senior leadership, and program staff that collectively participate on a multitude of boards, committees, councils, action groups, and professional associations. These memberships position Community Action to influence and educate our peers and the larger community, while also staying abreast of new and innovative ideas, best practices and strategies, the latest trends and developments, and all available resources and opportunities.

Nonetheless, we recognize that there is always room for improvement. And to that end, Community Action made the decision to run our three-year strategic planning process and 2016 Community Needs Assessment simultaneously, so that each exercise could inform and help to guide the other in real time. Among the outcomes from this endeavor were the establishment of our Strategic Initiatives Department and subsequently the development of a new communication and messaging platform.

Community Action’s new messaging platform is based on the three guiding principles of Serve, Educate, and Transform. And these principles are being brought to life in the following ways:

We are providing the building blocks that strengthen stability and success, through programs that serve low-income individuals and families. By serving, Community Action helps people...

- stay warm and meet basic needs.
- prepare young children for success in school.
- achieve economic stability and financial well-being.
- and get the most out of the homes and ensure affordability.

We are amplifying the voices of those living in poverty, which helps to educate the broader community about the support and assistance that is needed. Through education, Community Action draws the public’s attention to...

- specific needs and situations.
- innovative ideas and solutions.
- and opportunities for investment and action.

And finally, we are building alliances that transform systems and remove the barriers that perpetuate poverty. In transforming, Community Action partners with others to...

- identify the barriers that impede success.
- improve how public systems and supports work.
- and ensure equal access to opportunity.

This new messaging platform is designed, in part, to reposition and strengthen Community Action’s status as a thought leader in both our local community and beyond. It is also critical in making the agency increasingly nimble, more creative, and better positioned to reduce racial and economic disparities as we lift low-income residents out of poverty and on a course toward financial empowerment.

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