



THE ANTI-POVERTY SOLDIER



Community **Action**

By Clarence Hightower, Ph.D.

Building a better future for ourselves, our families, and our communities. New agency program helps residents “get ahead”

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I was raised to believe that we all have a civic duty and a responsibility as Americans to improve our neighborhoods and our nation.

- Paul Cook

Civic education and civic responsibility should be taught in elementary school.

- Donna Brazile

Among the characteristics that make the Community Action movement unique is the role that low-income individuals and families play in its mission to reduce poverty. At Community Action Partnership of Ramsey & Washington Counties, as well as other CAP agencies, this includes equal representation from the low-income community on our Board of Directors. Other strategies designed to advance community participation include our comprehensive Community Needs Assessment, client surveys, direct outreach, and events such as the C.h.a.t. (Community Health Action Talks) series.

Community Action also has a long-standing tradition of community engagement and self-sufficiency strategies, some of which were born out of the 2004 Community Blueprint to End Poverty. And, in the spirit of a Northwest Area

Foundation study that affirmed “the belief that directly engaging the poor was paramount in the effort to reduce poverty,” Community Action established L.I.F.T. (Low-Income Fellows Together to End Poverty). L.I.F.T. evolved into another engagement program known as You Be the Change. Alumni from both programs have become actively engaged in civic life. Among their many activities, graduates have been seated on local nonprofit boards, run for elected office, worked directly with the Minnesota Legislative Commission to End Poverty, have participated in poverty-related conferences across the nation, and even formed their own nonprofit agencies.

In an effort to advance such programs even further, while employing best practices and the latest research, Community Action introduced a new program in 2016 called Getting Ahead. Utilizing a curriculum developed by Philip E. DeVol, the co-author of 1999’s *Bridges Out of Poverty* with Ruby Payne and Terie Dreussi Smith, Getting Ahead provides low-income residents the means to thoroughly investigate the impact that poverty has on themselves, their families, and the larger community.

Getting Ahead, which consists of sixteen intense classroom sessions and more than 50 hours of classroom time, employs a series of comprehensive educational modules. These modules are designed specifically to take co-investigators (as program participants are known) on a journey of empowerment that begins with a current self-assessment and concludes with the creation of, and the action plan to fulfil a “future

story” for themselves, their family, and their community. Among the themes that are covered in between are the “rich/poor” gap, theories of change, the causes of poverty, the importance and concepts of language, assessing and developing resources, the “hidden rules” of class, and identifying barriers to overcoming poverty and implementing solutions to those barriers.

“One of the first things that we do as a group,” says program coordinator, Damon Drake, “is to shatter one of the prevailing myths of poverty, which is that people choose to be poor.” Co-investigators share their stories up front with the class, which according to Drake more often than not are “literally heart wrenching.” He adds that people coming in to the program are trying not only to escape poverty, but also “homelessness, domestic abuse, addiction, mental illness, violence, battles with child protective services, and a multitude of other obstacles that are not only related to poverty, but that can be life-threatening.”

The ultimate purpose of Getting Ahead, however, is to be life-changing. With that in mind, the co-investigators are asked to establish their own “mental model” of poverty and its effect on their

individual lives and the lives of those around them. In this exercise, co-investigators cast aside their pain and anxieties into what the program identifies as the “graveyard of fears.” Some of the fears that have been expressed by co-investigators include hunger, drugs, homelessness, debt, crime, prison, and death. Graduates of Getting Ahead also participate in a follow-up course that further focuses on leadership development, civic engagement, and community empowerment.

Programs like Getting Ahead are essential to the mission of Community Action. As American poet and historian Aberjhani states, “Discourse and critical thinking are essential tools when it comes to securing progress in a democratic society. But in the end, unity and engaged participation are what make it happen.”

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