

The First 50 Years: Couleecap's History of Anti-Poverty Work **Part 1 of 2**

The history of Couleecap is the story of people, from diverse backgrounds and varied political affiliations, working together to help meet the needs of low-income people in western Wisconsin. 2016 will mark Couleecap's 50th anniversary, 50 years of people *helping* people. This anniversary is truly a milestone and one that attests to the agency's ability to innovate, change, and adapt to the challenges and needs of our communities. To celebrate five decades of local people, local control, and programs that address local needs we are sharing how Couleecap came to be and evolved through the years.

Couleecap was created as part of a nationwide anti-poverty strategy. In 1964, the "War on Poverty" was launched by the federal government under the leadership of President Lyndon Johnson. On January 8, 1964 in his State of the Union address President Johnson declared "This administration today... here and now... declares an unconditional war on poverty in America." A few weeks later in March of 1964, planners proposed that 1% of the federal budget be allocated to the "war" effort. In August of 1964, Congress passed the Economic Opportunity Act.

Community action was based on the founding principles of the Economic Opportunity Act: local initiative and maximum feasible participation gave local agencies responsibility for planning, implementing, operating, and evaluating programs based on the needs in their community.

Creating Change

The mid-1960's were a difficult time for the Coulee Region. Depressed economically, farm prices were low and money was scarce. The public social service system was just a seed in the county welfare departments with scarce resources. Programs that people rely on today, such as the FoodShare program didn't exist. Instead the welfare departments distributed food vouchers to needy families, and the federal government shipped in surplus food commodities. As one early Board member Charles Kozelka remembered "the trucks would roll in full of food. Many people met the trucks and lived on the food sent out. We went through a lot in those days."

With the War on Poverty came change. As money flowed from the federal government to the states, local people began to organize. Initially, the Couleecap area affiliated with a Minnesota Community Action Program based in Rushford, joining forces to obtain a rural health program grant that served seven counties, three in Minnesota, four in Wisconsin. Eventually this affiliation ended when the two agencies separated and continued to develop as independent agencies.



By 1965 a group of concerned citizens held an initial meeting in Viroqua. Articles of Incorporation were filed with the State of Wisconsin on February 24, 1966 for the Wisconsin Coulee Region Opportunity Council, Inc. (Couleecap, Inc.). This non-profit organization's mission was to respond to the needs and desires of low-income people in such a way as to promote self-sufficiency.

Community action was a pioneering movement. Couleecap was a new agency with a difficult mission. It took quite a while to establish and empower the agency. Many people looked with suspicion at the new organization, and early supporters fought for the successes that have made Community Action a powerful force for over 50 years.



Programming in the 1960's

Couleecap's first program funding came in 1967 with a single work experience program (Neighborhood Youth Corps), which provided work training experience for youth from low-income families. Working closely with CESA (Cooperative Education Services Agency) Couleecap designed a tutoring program. In the summer Couleecap hired students as tutors for younger children. During the school year they worked with area colleges and arranged for college credit for tutors. Early dedicated Board members wrote grants and raised funds to provide operating resources for the agency.

Board and staff worked diligently to develop programs and projects that helped people improve their lives. The primary role of Community Action was to link low-income people with existing resources. To do this effectively contact and cooperation with existing social service agencies and local governments was critical to Couleecap's success.

The 1970's



Program innovation was driven by the needs of the local community. Head Start, created by the Economic Opportunity Act was operated by Couleecap. Family Planning was also an early Couleecap program addressing the health needs of the local community. In 1972 The Wisconsin Informational Service in the Coulee Region was a general information center which had 600 agencies on file. Couleecap outreach workers provided food stamp outreach, Social Security outreach, transportation, and direct health-related assistance to people in need. The rural health program sponsored clothing centers in LaFarge, Hillsboro, Bell Center, Prairie du Chien, Warrens, and

Viroqua. The Emergency Food/Medical Services Program provided canning supplies, gardening assistance, and a limited number of food vouchers. Couleecap was instrumental in helping to start area senior transportation services, nutrition sites, and Meals on Wheels programs.

Couleecap's weatherization program helped address the energy crisis of the 1970's. Home winterization as it was called concentrated on reducing fuel bills for low-income people and those on fixed incomes through the conservation of heat energy.

Couleecap was dedicated to efforts in employment and training. In 1974-75, Couleecap enrolled people in three counties, with 520 youth participating, in the summer work experience program. These young people worked at area parks, playgrounds, hospitals, offices, nursing homes, and county township sites, gaining skills and proving to be valuable resources at the sites at which they were employed.



The 1980's

In 1980 Couleecap's focus was on job training and development, Head Start, job placement, and weatherization programs. The agency employed a full time staff of 120 people. Couleecap's innovation was also recognized. In 1981 the agency received the Governor's Award for the Best Program Idea. The award was given for the Sparta Youth Job Bank, a program in Monroe County that linked youth with people who wanted to hire them, usually for small jobs.

Employment and training was a major focus for the agency. In the mid-eighties, Couleecap's employment services programs focused attention on three interrelated objectives: to prepare individuals for work, to involve employers in job training opportunities for low-income people, and to match appropriate job-seekers with employers to provide stable employment.

The success of the agency's employment and training programs was credited to the partnership of federal money and private employers offering practical and realistic job training to individuals. The success rate in 1985 was good, 75% of adults were able to find permanent work.

However, changes were on the horizon and Couleecap would adapt to those changes and continue to thrive. The very focus of the agency was turning more and more to consideration of the entire family when looking at the issues of poverty. In our next community concerns paper we will examine how Couleecap transitioned from job training and development into housing and efforts to combat the growing needs of homeless families in our area.

You Can Help, Too

Each of us has the power to help people find a way out of poverty. Here are some ways you can get involved:

- Educate yourself about poverty issues. Visit your local library or websites on the Internet. Some good websites are Wisconsin Community Action Program (WISCAP) – www.wiscap.org; Couleecap – www.couleecap.org; Institute for Research on Poverty – www.ssc.wisc.edu/irp.
- Support and vote for local elected officials who care about hunger and poverty issues.
- Support your local food pantries all year round.
- Make a donation to Couleecap's People Helping People initiative. Your donation will be used to help our program participants with unmet needs. Contact Kadie.Brueggen@couleecap.org

Couleecap, Inc. is a private non-profit 501(c)3 charitable organization created in 1966. Our mission is to fight poverty and promote self-sufficiency, economic development, and social justice. We are People Helping People, and every day our actions make a difference in the lives of people and families throughout the Coulee Region. We currently implement more than 50 contracts in the areas of housing, emergency assistance, child and family development, business, employment, transportation, and health. Each year, Couleecap helps more than 30,918 people work towards self-sufficiency. Visit our website at www.couleecap.org or like us on Facebook.

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References:

¹ Wisconsin Coulee Region Community Action Program, Inc. Twenty-five Years of service to our community
Compiled by Kate Walter. 1991.

² Couleecap 2011 Annual Report : Celebrating 45 Years of service to the community

³ In the Arena: The Story of Community Action in Wisconsin

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