

The Importance of Safety Net Programs

In the U.S., more than 47 million people live in poverty and an additional 58 million people are considered to be living in low-income households. A total of 209,084 people live in Couleecap's four-county service area of Crawford, La Crosse, Monroe, and Vernon counties. Of these people, 30,072 of them live in poverty and an additional 37,774 people are considered to be living in low-income households.¹² That's nearly 1 out of every 3 residents in the Coulee Region. Many do not make enough to afford the basic necessities.

More than 30,000 people live at or below the poverty line in Crawford, La Crosse, Monroe, and Vernon counties.

More than 67,000 people struggle to make ends meet in these counties.

In order to survive, many seek assistance from various programs to ensure they can secure safe and affordable housing, access health care, obtain education and training to get a decent job that pays a living wage, get childcare subsidies to help pay for daycare for their children, access public transportation, and feed their families. These programs provide a "safety net" that helps people meet their basic needs, get back on their feet, and improve their overall quality of life.

How Do Safety Net Programs Help People?

In the absence of stronger wage growth for low and middle-income households, safety net programs play an increasingly important role in helping struggling families afford their basic needs. A variety of safety net programs exist in the U.S. Here is just a sampling of them, and how they make a difference in the lives of children and adults:

- **Community Services Block Grant (CSBG)** is a federal, anti-poverty block grant that funds a nationwide network of over 1,000 Community Action Agencies (CAAs), local governments and migrant farm worker organizations. CSBG provides essential support for these agencies' efforts to reduce poverty, revitalize low-income communities, and empower low-income families to become self-sufficient. Most CSBG funding goes to Community Action Agencies - like Couleecap - that were created by the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964. Because CSBG funds the central management and core activities of CAAs, they are able to mobilize additional resources to combat the central causes of poverty.⁶ In fact, over 15 million Americans benefited from CSBG supported programs in 2015.²



The Trump Administration's FY2018 budget proposes to eliminate CSBG funding entirely. Every CAA in the U.S. receives CSBG funds to support their local anti-poverty mission, programs and services. Locally, CSBG is a vital funding source for Couleecap because it helps support all of our programs, our planning activities, and our community collaborations. In 2016, Couleecap received \$308,341 in CSBG funds that provided a core component of our anti-poverty budget.

- **Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) and Child Tax Credit (CTC)** are successful federal tax credits for low- and moderate-income working people that encourage work, help offset the cost of raising children, and lift millions of people out of poverty. Both the EITC and the CTC significantly reduce taxes on low- and middle-income families with children. Recent research suggests that income from these credits leads to benefits at virtually every stage of life, including improved school performance, higher college enrollment, and increased work effort and earnings in adulthood. The EITC and CTC lift more than 9 million people, including 5 million children, out of poverty each year, making them one of the most successful tools in combating poverty.¹

- **Federally Qualified Health Centers (FQHC)** provide comprehensive primary and preventive health care to all individuals, regardless of insurance status or ability to pay. FQHCs target communities with great need, bringing primary healthcare to underserved populations, including the uninsured, underinsured, and impoverished. FQHCs also target special populations, such as veterans, homeless individuals, residents of public housing, and migrant/seasonal farmworkers. FQHCs are also called Community/Migrant Health Centers (C/MHCs), Community Health Centers (CHCs), and 330-Funded Clinics.¹¹

Just over 70% of federal funding for the Health Centers program comes from the Health Centers fund. Without Congressional action, the fund will expire on October 1, 2017, causing an immediate 70% cut to these Centers. The Department of Health and Human Services estimates this would cause more than 9 million patients nationwide to lose access to health care. Locally, Scenic Bluffs Community Health Centers (SBCHC) is the FQHC that serves our area. In 2016, they served more than 7,500 patients. If this cut occurs, 1,200 patients at SBCHC would lose access to health care.⁷

- **Head Start** promotes the school readiness of children from birth to age five from low-income families by enhancing their cognitive, social, and emotional development. Head Start programs provide a learning environment that supports children's growth in many areas such as language, literacy, and social and emotional development. It also emphasizes the role of parents as a child's first and most important teacher. Overall, these programs improve educational outcomes for children — increasing the probability that participants graduate from high school, attend college, and receive a post-secondary degree, license, or certification, and they help build relationships with families that support family well-being, which can last a lifetime.¹⁴



Since its inception in 1965, Head Start has served more than 33 million infants and young children, and their families. In 2015, Head Start served more than one million children and pregnant women in centers, family homes, and in family childcare homes in urban, suburban, and rural communities throughout the nation.⁸ Locally, Head Start Child & Family Development Centers, Inc. provides Head Start services for children and families in La Crosse, Vernon, Monroe, and Crawford counties. In 2015-2016, they served 414 children and their families. Teachers and teacher assistants track the progress of children in eight developmental domains that are key to school readiness. A variety of parent participation activities are held throughout the school year as well.⁴

- **Housing Assistance and Home Rehabilitation Programs** help meet the housing needs of low-income households across the U.S.
 - **Housing Assistance Programs**, such as the Housing Choice Voucher Program (sometimes called Section 8 or Tenant Based Rental Assistance), provide rental assistance to low-income households. The Housing Choice Voucher Program assists more than five million people in 2.2 million low-income households each year. However, demand for housing assistance often exceeds the limited resources available and long waiting periods are common.³
 - **Home Rehabilitation Programs**, such as the Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) and the HOME Investment Partnership programs, help low-income homeowners rehabilitate their homes to make them safe, sanitary, and energy efficient. Locally, these programs make up more than 75% of housing rehabilitation funding that Couleecap uses. Couleecap also uses these funds to leverage additional rehabilitation funds. Under current funding levels, the average wait time for assistance is between 6 and 18 months. However, the Trump Administration's FY2018 budget proposes to eliminate these programs, which would drastically reduce housing rehabilitation services for low-income households in the Coulee Region. Every \$20,000 reduction in CDBG and HOME funding means one less home rehabilitation project we can undertake or two fewer homebuyers we can assist, and the wait time for assistance will increase to more than eight years.⁵

➤ **Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP) and Weatherization Assistance Program (WAP)** help meet the energy needs of eligible low-income households throughout the U.S.

- **LIHEAP** helps low-income households, veterans, and seniors with their energy bills, providing an indispensable lifeline during both the cold winter and hot summer months. In 2014, 6.9 million families received home heating assistance in the U.S. The program helps to ensure that eligible recipients do not have to choose between paying their energy bills and affording other necessities like food and medicine. LIHEAP is a critical safety net program to help vulnerable households afford residential energy. Unfortunately, LIHEAP funding continues to decline while the number of eligible households grows.⁹
- **WAP** provides lasting, cost-effective home energy efficiency improvements for low-income families, seniors, and individuals with disabilities. It increases the energy efficiency of dwellings, reduces residential energy bills, improves the health and safety of our most vulnerable citizens, and helps to lower the need for short-term assistance.⁹ In 2015, WAP upgraded 34,220 homes nationwide.² Wisconsin's State funded Public Benefits program provides 66% of Couleecap's WAP funding. Couleecap's average investment of \$6,460 per home generates an average annual energy savings of \$465. This means a household will save \$10,600 on energy costs over the life span of the work done. Improvements often include measures that make the home a safer and healthier place to live.⁵

The Trump Administration's FY2018 budget proposal eliminates funding for these programs. The loss of LIHEAP would result in a 34% reduction in emergency furnace repairs and replacements. Couleecap repairs or replaces 250 furnaces per year for low-income households in our area – but without LIHEAP we could only repair or replace 165 furnaces. LIHEAP's elimination would also mean families would no longer receive assistance paying for heating costs. The elimination of WAP funding at the federal level would result in a 34% reduction to the home weatherization program in Wisconsin. Locally, this means Couleecap could weatherize only 132 homes, instead of 200 homes, each year. In states that lack a state-funded Public Benefits program, the elimination of WAP funds would kill their low-income weatherization programs.⁵

- **Pell Grants** are essential to college access and affordability. They make college possible for millions of Americans. Over 7.5 million Americans depend on Pell Grants to attend and complete college. Research has shown that need-based grant aid increases college enrollment and completion among low- and moderate-income students. For students of color, Pell Grants are particularly important. More than 60% of African-American undergraduates and half of Hispanic undergraduates rely on Pell Grants to attend school. In 2014-2015, more than 115,000 students received a Pell Grant in Wisconsin.¹⁰



- **Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program (SNAP)** provides nutrition assistance to millions of eligible, low-income individuals and families as well as economic benefits to local communities. SNAP is the nation's largest domestic food assistance program that helps stop hunger by helping people with limited money buy the food they need for good health. Its counter-cyclical design responds to changes in the economy – expanding during recessions and contracting when the economy improves. Many people rely on SNAP each month, including low waged workers, unemployed and under-employed people, and disabled and retired people living on small fixed incomes. In fact, over two-thirds of SNAP recipients in Wisconsin are children, elderly, blind, or disabled individuals. In Wisconsin, SNAP is known as FoodShare. In 2016, more than 967,000 people received FoodShare benefits in Wisconsin worth \$912 million. This includes more than 31,000 people living in Couleecap's four-county service area. Benefits are modest, averaging \$211/month per household or just \$3.50/day per person. However, without this program, many people would be unable to meet their basic food needs.¹³

Congress has recently discussed block granting SNAP – giving states a fixed amount of money to meet low-income families' food needs. But block grants don't expand during economic downturns – and their value steadily erodes from inflation. This would force states to cut food benefits, limit eligibility or create waiting lists, any or all of which would cause real financial and nutritional hardship for families at risk of hunger.

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; Wisconsin Council on Children and Families – www.wccf.org; and Center on Budget Policy & Priorities – www.cbpp.org.
- Support and vote for local, state, and federal elected officials who are committed to ending poverty.
- Tell your elected officials to make funding of safety net programs a priority.
- Increase affordable housing by joining a local housing coalition.
- Support your local food pantries all year round by volunteering, donating food, or contributing funds.
- Advocate for a higher minimum wage, more assistance for childcare, more assistance with healthcare costs, and more assistance with transportation costs, so working families can get out of poverty.
- Make a donation to Couleecap's People Helping People Initiative. Your donation will be used to help our program participants: buy gas to get to work, buy books for school, buy food for their families, etc.



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 27,000 people work towards self-sufficiency. Visit our website at www.couleecap.org or like us on Facebook.

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