

FIGHTING FOR GOOD
**COMMUNITY
ACTION** LEHIGH
VALLEY

STRATEGIC PLAN FYE 2024 - 2026

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



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Community Action Lehigh Valley is the primary anti-poverty organization in our region. As such, our services bridge urgent needs like food access and emergency rental assistance and programs that position clients for greater self-sufficiency such as housing counseling, youth development, job training, and small business start-up loans. We have developed a strong ability to aggregate funders and avenues of partnership and we are particularly effective in our endeavors because of our integration of economic and community development work with direct human services.

Every day, we pursue our mission to improve the quality of life in the Lehigh Valley and surrounding communities by building a community in which all people have access to economic opportunity, the ability to pursue that opportunity, and a voice in the decisions that affect their lives. We do this in ways that reflect our core values:

- We believe in community, empowerment, self-sufficiency, and justice.
- We recognize and affirm the dignity of all people in everything we do.
- We act with passion, integrity, and empathy.

In 2022, Community Action engaged board members, staff, community residents, and partner organizations in an in-depth assessment of community needs to ground our plans for the coming three years in a thorough understanding of the current environment, the pressing needs of our neighbors, and the current state of this organization that is charged with responding to those needs. We learned that:

- Dramatic shifts in the housing landscape (with many rents doubling practically overnight) require new strategies and partnerships to respond.
- Numerous barriers prevent residents from accessing services that can benefit them, and Community Action is uniquely positioned to remove some of those barriers.
- Systemic barriers that keep families in poverty need powerful advocacy strategies to remove them and Community Action has access to valuable data and a unique perspective to effectively advocate for change if we systematize and properly resource our efforts.
- Youth in Allentown are at great risk from gun violence and failure to thrive due to challenges at home, in school, and in the community. They need access to mental health care and after school programs to help them attain positive life outcomes.
- Community Action under new leadership is growing in many beneficial ways, but, like other nonprofits, is challenged in the current economic and workplace environments to attract and retain quality staff. Organizational capacity is stretched thin and needs strategic attention and intervention to improve the health of the organization and enhance its capacity to fully realize the mission.

In the coming three-year period comprised of FYE 2024-2026 and beyond, Community Action will continue to provide the range of services for which it is already well known and will take decided action to implement new and enhanced strategies in five areas to bring about beneficial community impact in the identified areas of greatest need.

1. Community Action will partner with government and nonprofit organizations in creative new ways to preserve and expand quality affordable housing in the region we serve. With input from diverse community members, we will build a solid understanding of the factors underlying the crisis and build and execute a new plan of action to address the crisis. Our approach will include economic and community development strategies, including potential restructuring of the Lehigh Valley Community Land Trust, as well as legislative advocacy strategies to address policies and practices at the local and state levels that contribute to housing instability.
2. Community Action will create interdepartmental mechanisms to enable our numerous programs and service delivery locations to consistently and effectively share information with clients about the other services for which they may be eligible and to help them connect to those services on the spot. In addition to developing a pre-screening tool to identify client needs and link them to other services, Community Action will review and update the print and online materials describing our services to remove language and literacy barriers to access. Finally, recognizing that trusted community organizations are a conduit for better access to services, we will prioritize efforts to help small, grass-roots organizations secure funding and we will design, test, and adapt methods of convening and connecting potential partners to create new routes to service access in the region.
3. Community Action will identify, select, and properly resource a coordinated, organization-wide approach to legislative and policy advocacy that is most likely to result in beneficial systems change at the local and regional levels. By improving organizational capacity to collect, compile, and analyze more inclusive data about the clients and communities we serve, our advocacy efforts will be more powerful and impactful.
4. Community Action will create more safe and accessible opportunities for youth recreation, personal development, and skill building for Allentown youth by partnering to deliver programs that are most likely to engage young people and enable them to thrive. Primary among our strategies to accomplish this is to demonstrate the viability of and attract the resources to acquire, renovate, and equip a youth center and partnering to deliver programs that are most likely to engage young people and enable them to thrive. Beginning in the three-year planning period, this strategy will extend several years beyond before fully coming to fruition.
5. Community Action will invest in its number one resource - its staff - through strategies designed to enhance the culture of the organization, develop, and retain current staff members, attract new, mission-motivated staff, and enhance organizational capacity while reducing burnout. We will focus on and invest in the careers and well-being of current staff, imbue all communication, particularly the hiring process, with our mission

and values, and build public awareness of the beneficial role that Community Action and its team members play in the community.

Community Action volunteer and staff leaders are dedicated to investing the knowledge, creativity, and resources to implement these strategies, learn from these experiences, adjust course as needed, and do all that we can to address the most exciting opportunities and pressing challenges of our region at this moment in time. Together, we believe our efforts over the coming three years and beyond will yield numerous beneficial impacts for our communities, our clients, our partners, and our organization.

INTRODUCTION

Community Action Lehigh Valley is a critical resource for people living in the region that includes Lehigh and Northampton Counties and many surrounding communities. Through a wide variety of programs and initiatives, *Community Action improves the quality of life in the region by building a community in which all people have access to economic opportunity, the ability to pursue that opportunity, and a voice in the decisions that affect their lives.*

Community Action engages clients, neighbors, community-based organizations, government entities, and corporations to help meet a wide range of community needs, including food access, emergency rental assistance, home weatherization, housing counseling, and access to small business start-up loans to name only a few. However, there are many barriers to residents making their way out of poverty. These barriers include lack of availability of affordable quality housing, low awareness of and inability to connect to needed services, government policies that don't do enough to support families trying to get ahead, lack of access to mental health services and safe recreational opportunities for young people, and limited funding for Community Action to appropriately and sustainably staff services needed by the community.

Through several community needs assessment and organization-wide stakeholder engagement activities that preceded the strategic planning exercise, Community Action identified five high priority opportunities and/or challenges for which new strategies are needed: (1) expanding the availability of affordable, quality rental housing, (2) expanding community access to the full range of services provided by Community Action, (3) enhancing effective advocacy for systems change based on high quality, primary source, community needs data; (4) improving positive social, emotional, and behavioral outcomes for youth in Allentown, and (5) enhancing staffing and building the organizational capacity of Community Action Lehigh Valley to carry out its mission.

The strategic planning process yielded new and enhanced strategies to guide Community Action's efforts to better meet the critical, emergent needs of the region and help more families make their way out of poverty. This narrative is followed by action plans providing specific and detailed descriptions of intended courses of action. (See attachments A-E.) It is intended to be a living document that grows and adjusts to incorporate what we learn along the way.

OPPORTUNITY 1: EXPANDING RENTAL HOUSING

The housing situation in the Lehigh Valley and surrounding communities has changed significantly in the past 12-18 months. Rents have skyrocketed as demand for property grew in unprecedented ways. The rental vacancy rate is down to 2% at present compared to a healthy vacancy rate of 6-8%. Families in Allentown have seen their rent practically double overnight and have almost no options to which to turn. The real estate market, while bringing prosperity for some, has priced long-term residents of our region out of their homes. These challenges are clearly beyond the capacity of a single organization to address.

In an effort to preserve and expand housing in our service area without squeezing out our neighbors, Community Action is focused on strategies that enhance partnerships and position the organization to take advantage of new funding opportunities to expand quality affordable rental housing.

Over the course of the three-year planning period, Community Action will:

- Engage community members with diverse knowledge, experience, and perspectives to review the community-specific data that has been amassed and emerging strategies from across the state and nation to understand the factors underlying the rental housing crisis in our region and select the most promising strategies, identify and develop appropriate partnerships, and create and execute a creative plan of action to preserve and expand access to quality, affordable rental housing.
- Develop a legislative advocacy plan to influence key legislation, policies, and practices affecting affordable housing and housing insecurity in the region.
- Based upon careful exploration of options, change the model of the Lehigh Valley Community Land Trust to enable Community Action and collaborating partner organizations to effectively store land for future development and leverage stored land to secure previously inaccessible sources of funding for rental housing development projects.

Through these strategies, we anticipate achieving the following outcomes:

- A working group of 8-10 community members of diverse backgrounds, experiences, and perspectives is established and reviews existing data on the rental housing crisis making recommendations to inform a rental housing plan of action. (June 2024)
- A targeted legislative advocacy plan secures favorable changes to zoning policies and funding structures at the local, state, and federal levels that make affordable quality rental housing more accessible. (July 2024-ongoing)
- Community Action and its partners increase the speed of property acquisition by 10%, the number of partnerships for land storage for future development by 20%,

and access to new sources of funding for project development by 20% annually compared to the level of these activities tracked in FYE 2023.

- By FYE 2025, Community Action and its partners have created ten new affordable rental units and are on a path to increasing this number by 25% each year going forward.

OPPORTUNITY 2: EXPANDING ACCESS TO SERVICES

One source of comparative advantage for Community Action is its presence in many neighborhoods meeting the direct needs of residents. The Second Harvest Food Bank is one of the most significant ways that Community Action reaches into numerous small communities providing emergency food access. This provides the organization with a unique and substantial opportunity to connect individuals and families in need to other services that they may need and for which they may be eligible.

In an effort to leverage the Community Action network of partners and service providers to dramatically expand access to information and services in our service area, Community Action will create tools and update materials to remove barriers to sharing information about services we provide to many more people who come into contact with the agency. While referrals between and among Community Action units already take place to some extent, these strategies are focused on creating interdepartmental mechanisms to consistently and effectively communicate information about all of the services available within Community Action. Over the course of the three-year planning period, Community Action will:

- Create, test, and train staff on a pre-screening tool that staff for all services offered by Community Action can carry with them and use to connect clients to other services they may need and help them sign up for those services on the spot.
- Update digital, print, and training materials of staff, volunteers, and key partners to communicate the range of services to eligible participants in a way that removes barriers due to reading levels and language translation needed and allows people to sign up on the spot.
- Work collectively and collaboratively with other partners to develop, fund, and create/expand/make more accessible services to address needs in the areas we serve.
- Create networking opportunities, such as an annual partnership summit, designed to promote creative partnering between and among Community Action and other organizations operating within the areas we serve.

Through these strategies, we anticipate achieving the following outcomes:

- By FYE2025, 90% of service delivery staff confidently and with cultural competency implement the screening tool with 65% of Community Action clients they see.

- By FYE2024, all materials will be vetted for readability across culture/language groups and materials will be developed to encompass and brand the full suite of Community Action programs.
- By FYE2025, an additional 10% of all submitted grant proposals will include funding directly for community partners, with an emphasis on small organizations led by people who are representative of the people that those organizations serve, to help build capacity in an inclusive and equitable way across the nonprofit sector.
- Each year from FYE2024 forward, four to five new partnership opportunities emerge from the proposed annual summit and are explored, evaluated, and possibly executed to build capacity to meet the needs of the communities we serve.

OPPORTUNITY 3: IMPROVING DATA COLLECTION AND EXPANDING ADVOCACY

Due to the wide range of services provided by Community Action, the large number of clients served, and the partnerships and community relationships we have built, we have access to primary data and first-hand perspectives on poverty in the region that positions us as a trusted advocate on these subjects. That trust can be used to advantage when communicating with decision makers about the challenges impacting the community and potential solutions. Through more consistent and inclusive collection and analysis of community needs data, our advocacy initiatives will have more weight. Community Action needs better systems to gather the data and an organization-wide process, structure, and leadership to coordinate effective advocacy for systems change. To ensure that the concerns of the communities served by Community Action are heard and can effectively influence policy, we will focus our attention on improving the ability of Community Action to collect and understand representative community needs data and use that data to effectively communicate advocacy priorities to policy makers and leaders at the local, state, and national levels.

Over the course of the three-year planning period, Community Action will:

- Develop needed competencies to operationalize more inclusive and effective regular surveying of the communities served by Community Action to better understand their needs and the outcomes of service provided. These data collection and distillation competencies are needed for multiple purposes within Community Action and will be most useful for creating effective advocacy strategies.
- Decide how to structure an advocacy function within Community Action, secure funding for and hire an advocacy leader to establish effectively coordinated, impactful advocacy efforts on behalf of the communities we serve. After onboarding, Community Action will create an organization-wide policy for coordinating advocacy efforts and an advocacy plan and implement that plan for maximum impact.

Through these strategies, we anticipate achieving the following outcomes:

- Increase participation of communities served by Community Action (including increased participation by diverse demographic and economic groups living in the

service area) by 10% (compared to the baseline participation in the FYE2023 community needs assessment) each year through the three years of the strategic planning period (FYE2024- FYE 2026).

- Increase by 5% each year (compared to activity in FYE2024) the ways in which elected and appointed officials and other decision makers with authority in the area we serve demonstrate awareness of the advocacy positions espoused by Community Action - through behaviors like restating our talking points, consulting with Community Action before key votes are taken or decisions are made, inviting Community Action to testify or otherwise participate in meetings where policy options are being considered.
- Increase by 5% each year (compared to activity in FYE2024) the times media outlets pick up the agency's messaging, or publish, air, or televise interviews with agency spokespeople, or publish editorials by the agency.
- Increase by 5% each year (compared to activity in FYE2024) the changes in state or federal laws that are a direct result of advocacy efforts, and the times when community leaders in business and finance provide adequate funding to enact new services to combat issues as a result of our advocacy campaigns.

OPPORTUNITY 4: IMPROVING OUTCOMES FOR YOUTH IN ALLENTOWN

Community Action services address both emergent needs and initiatives that lead to greater self-sufficiency. A focus on improving outcomes for local youth does both. The safety and mental well-being of young people is a critical emergent need, while efforts to provide youth with transferrable skills, inspiration, recreational and learning opportunities increases the likelihood that young people will thrive long-term. At present, there is a critical need and a special opportunity in Allentown to engage the school district, community leaders, and numerous partners to provide what young people in this community need to thrive.

In an effort to create more accessible opportunities for youth development, workforce development, and skill building for young people in Allentown, we will focus our attention on acquiring, fundraising for, building out, and operating a youth center in Allentown. The proposed youth center is a massive undertaking with tremendous potential to change and save young lives.

Over the course of the next five years, Community Action will:

- Identify and secure a location for the youth center close to the youth for whom the need is greatest.
- Engage donors and funding partners in a capital campaign to raise the funds needed to build out and furnish the youth center, as well as an endowment to help fund ongoing operating expenses.

- Build and/or enhance the internal and external capacity of Community Action (working with community stakeholders) to successfully plan for, establish, and support a thriving youth center in Allentown.
- Build out, equip, and furnish the youth center appropriately for its intended uses as outlined by Community Action and its community stakeholders.
- Create new and enhanced existing partnerships with other nonprofit organizations to launch, operate, and deliver programs in the youth center.

Because this set of strategies will take a longer time to carry out, measurable outcomes for youth in Allentown will not be available until after a five-year period at the end of which the youth center will begin to deliver programming. Outcomes are necessarily, then, for this period, limited to realizing time-bound outputs. These outputs include:

- Selecting and securing the physical location for the youth center by October 2023.
- Launching a capital campaign to build out the youth center by January 2024 and completing fundraising for the buildout by June 2026.
- Completing buildout of the youth center by December 2025.
- Launching operations of the youth center by November 2027.

OPPORTUNITY 5: ENHANCING STAFFING AND BUILDING ORGANIZATIONAL CAPACITY

The challenges of the post pandemic working world are well known, including a shift in workforce expectations, higher costs, personnel shortages, and burnout. Community Action has already taken significant action to adjust long suppressed wages to provide more just and competitive compensation for staff. Under new leadership, we are building an organizational culture that will attract and retain mission-motivated team members to do the critical work of Community Action. In an effort to further improve and expand the capacity of Community Action to recruit, develop, and retain experienced, quality people (staff and volunteers), we will focus our attention on several strategies to enhance staff recruitment and retention.

Over the course of the three-year planning period, Community Action will:

- Actively enhance a culture of inclusion and inquiry within Community Action.
- Build mechanisms to ensure consistent and transparent communication of the mission, values, vision, and progress of Community Action to current and prospective team members.
- Execute a public awareness campaign to help recruit and retain qualified, mission-centered team members.

- Create professional development resources to help Community Action employees develop their career path.
- Develop a better understanding of Community Action's current capacity and figuring out how to enhance capacity and reduce burnout.

Through these strategies, we anticipate achieving the following outcomes:

- Improving employee satisfaction by 10% annually.
- Increasing employee participation in a feedback process by 10% annually.
- Decreasing staff turnover rate by 10% or more annually compared to the previous year.
- Increasing applications for open positions by 10% each year compared to the previous year.

CONCLUSION

We at Community Action Lehigh Valley are taking steps to ensure that the organization becomes an even greater resource for residents and stakeholders throughout the region, delivering targeted strategies in direct response to high priority opportunities and challenges of the communities served. Our team of professional and volunteer leaders will work to put these strategies into practice over the coming three-year period (FYE2024-FYE 2026) and beyond, tracking measurable outcomes and adjusting course as we learn which strategies are effective and which need to be adjusted for greater impact. We firmly believe that these actions will contribute to meaningful progress toward our vision of the region served by Community Action as a place where people of every demographic and economic group can live with dignity and equitable opportunity.