



Southwest Michigan Community Action Agency

SERVING BERRIEN, CASS, AND VAN BUREN COUNTIES

Helping People. Changing Lives.



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Southwest Michigan Community Action Agency Earns National Award in New York City

The National Community Action Partnership recognized SMCAA with the Promise in Action Award at a gala in NYC on September 1, 2022.

Southwest Michigan Community Action Agency (SMCAA) is a private, nonprofit organization that has served Berrien, Cass, and Van Buren Counties since 1982. A little known fact: SMCAA is part of a national network of over 1,000 Community Action agencies. Once a year all these agencies come together for a National Convention hosted by the National Community Action Partnership (NCAP).

Last week, NCAP's National Convention took place in the heart of New York City. The convention is designed to provide agency professionals and board members the latest policy and programmatic updates as well as management and governance tools. Special emphasis is placed on effective strategies for transforming communities and changing the lives of Community Action clients. The week's events come to a close with an Awards Gala, which placed SMCAA in the spotlight for a couple of minutes.

At the gala, SMCAA was awarded the Promise in Action Award. This award recognizes Community Action agencies that have been diligently caring for the entire community and remain dedicated to helping people help themselves and each other amidst catastrophe. These agencies work to build resilient communities that are not only more sustainable, but also transformative and just. Denise Harlow, Chief Executive Officer of NCAP, stated, "NCAP believes SMCAA is the personification of this award."

Harlow continued to read key factors mentioned by SMCAA's nominator that earned the Agency this award. "SMCAA has been an integral part of the Southwest Michigan community's continued growth and success over the past 40 years. Prior to 2020, they serviced about 5,000 individuals, but in 2022 have serviced over 7,100. All of this work is done by a variety of programs and through the hard work and dedication of under 25 employees. Some of their services include emergency utility assistance, rent or mortgage assistance, food commodities and pantries, a family homeless shelter, supportive housing, and weatherization and housing rehabilitation."

"In February 2018, SMCAA was the first agency onsite of the Berrien Springs' River Springs Estates following a devastating flood. Due to a failed dam and crested river, 32 homes were destroyed, 60 homes needed repair, and over 200 individuals were evacuated, the majority of whom were low-income families. SMCAA set up a temporary office out of the park manager's dining room to assist residents with relocation, food products, utility assistance, and home repairs."



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“Almost two year later, the entire world experienced the unprecedented times of the coronavirus pandemic outbreak. SMCAA continued to work for the vulnerable populations of Southwest Michigan by identifying the top community need as access to nutritious food. Between the months of April to December 2020, SMCAA serviced 54,634 in-need households with food and personal hygiene products, distributed 16,936 masks to vulnerable populations and assisted 351 households with emergency utility assistance. Additionally, specific COVID-relief funding allowed the Agency to offer 181 migrant families stipends for losing income following positive COVID-19 tests, provide 1,413 low-income households with water and wastewater arrearage payments, and help more than 3,500 households avoid eviction or avoid utility shutoff.”

“Most recently, SMCAA was called-to-action to help provide clean drinking water to the residents in the City of Benton Harbor. City residents were subjected to levels of lead contamination from the public water system resulting in imminent and substantial endangerment to their health. SMCAA was the first organization to provide clean drinking water to City residents. They continue to distribute cases of water to residents, as well as act as the main storage facility for incoming cases from the State of Michigan. To-date, SMCAA and its community partners have distributed over 733,000 cases of bottled water.”

Through its years of experience, SMCAA has learned a catastrophe should always be expected. “It is Community Action’s mission to be the first-line of support in such community emergencies. Staff has worked hard to assist the community and we have proven time and time again that we are Community Action Strong.” Ashley Slack, SMCAA Operations Manager, explains, “However, we do not only pride ourselves on our resilience in the face of crisis, but also for our diligent care for the communities we service through day-to-day programming.”

SMCAA’s Executive Director, Kim Smith Oldham says it takes an army to do the work necessary to help the thousands of individuals and families assisted by Community Action each year. Specifically, she said, “Through the hard work, dedication, and passionate hearts of our Agency’s administration team, staff member, and Board of Directors, SMCAA has diligently cared for our community to help people and change lives. Three years ago, our staff was focused on serving the community through 17 federal, state, and local programs. This year, our 21 employees have served 42 programs with stellar expertise.”

Smith Oldham also thanked SMCAA’s community partners for their collaboration on projects over the years. Partnerships with entities such as the United Way of Southwest Michigan, Whirlpool Corporation, and the City of Benton Harbor have led to new funding opportunities, volunteer involvement, capacity building, and other critical resources necessary to help people and change lives in Southwest Michigan.

Accepting the Promise in Action Award, Smith Oldham ended her speech saying, “I could not be more proud of my Agency, its staff, and the work that we do. It is with great pride that I say: we are Community Action strong!”

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The Southwest Michigan Community Action Agency (SMCAA) is a private, non-profit Community Action Agency - part of a state and national network. SMCAA brings together federal and state grants funds and donated dollars from local, private, and public sources. These resources are then directed into a number of core and special programs and service which aid the low income, vulnerable, and otherwise disadvantaged individuals and households residing in Southwest Michigan.



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SMCAA is dedicated to empowering diverse people in need and supporting their journey towards economic security. Our vision is to be a beacon of support in a strong, thriving community by helping people and changing lives.

Learn more about SMCAA at www.smcaa.com.



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