



For Immediate Release

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COULEECAP DELIVERS OVER \$8.6 MILLION IN EMERGENCY RENTAL AND ENERGY ASSISTANCE PAYMENTS TO LOW INCOME HOUSEHOLDS AFFECTED BY COVID IN THE COULEE REGION

(Westby) - The Wisconsin Emergency Rental Assistance Program, or WERA, was launched in February 2021 to help households experiencing a financial hardship and housing insecurity due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Couleecap, the local poverty-fighting community action agency serving Crawford, La Crosse, Monroe, and Vernon Counties, launched the program after successfully operating a similar program in 2020. Like the earlier program, WERA is made possible through partnership with the Wisconsin Department of Administration (DOA) and the Wisconsin Community Action Program (WISCAP).

As of January 14, 2022, Couleecap has served 1,735 households and delivered \$8,645,151 in emergency rental and utility assistance to help people avoid eviction and homelessness. The WERA program continues to receive a high volume of applications – more than 100 – each week.

“WERA has grown into a much bigger program than anticipated and the needs of the community are always changing,” says Dana Casberg, Couleecap WERA Program Manager. “We have had to pivot several times to continue to meet the demand so people can stay housed.”

While the issues of housing insecurity and a general lack of affordable housing were not new to Couleecap, an organization that has been operating supportive housing and rental programs for more than 35 years, aspects of the current crisis have been especially challenging.

“We are seeing a heavy over-reliance on properties typically meant for short-term stays, like motels, due to the lack of affordable housing in our region,” says Hetti Brown, Couleecap Executive Director. “This type of housing is usually more expensive, lacks proper kitchen facilities, and does not offer long-term leases, making a housing situation extremely unstable for a family.



“Much of the public attention, deservedly so, has been given to people living outdoors. We also have a large group of people on the verge of homelessness who are invisible – people living in short-term motel stays,” says Casberg. Casberg explains that in addition to a general lack of affordable housing, a client’s poor rental history, criminal background, or lack of steady employment due to the pandemic can make it difficult for them to compete for the housing that is available.

To meet the need, Couleecap has a team of intake assistants, case managers, and other support personnel in place. For example, in 2021, Couleecap initiated a Housing Navigator position to help people in motels search for permanent housing. The WERA team also includes a case manager who solely works with households facing eviction to ensure those cases are prioritized.

Even with these supports, Couleecap explains that those applying to WERA should do so as soon as they think they will be late on rent. Because of the high volume of applications received each week, it can take two–four weeks for applications to be fully processed.

Landlords are another group who have been impacted by tenants’ inability to pay rent and other related expenses. The WERA program not only helps to stabilize housing for the tenant but works collaboratively with landlords and makes payments directly to them. This helps to ensure landlords can make mortgage, property tax, and other necessary maintenance payments on the property. “We need landlords for this program to be successful and to ensure there is enough housing in our community. They are a very important part of the equation for our community’s success,” says Casberg.

The WERA program is available by visiting www.Couleecap.org or by calling 844-267-0033. Online, phone, and in-person resources are available in Spanish, Hmong, and other languages. WERA provides up to 18 months of financial assistance for current and overdue payments of rent, utilities, water, and internet. Eligible applicants include Wisconsin residents who demonstrate a risk of experiencing housing instability, have seen their income impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, and earn a household income at or below 80 percent of the county median income. Rental and utility assistance payments are made directly to the landlord or utility provider on behalf of the tenant.

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About Couleecap

Couleecap, Inc. is a private non-profit 501c3 charitable organization. Couleecap helps people in need with housing food, transportation, and more. Created in 1966, we are a community action program that fights poverty and promotes self-sufficiency in Crawford, La Crosse, Monroe, and Vernon counties. Couleecap is a member of the Community Action Network, originally created in 1964. Learn more at couleecap.org.

