

The First 50 Years: Couleecap's History of Anti-Poverty Work **Part 2 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 1964, planners proposed that 1% of the federal budget be allocated to the “war” effort. In August 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. In Couleecap's June 2016 community concerns paper, we took a look at Couleecap's early years from the 1960's-1980's. This paper will focus on Couleecap's more recent work from the 1990's to today.

In the late 1980's, changes were on the horizon and Couleecap adapted to those changes and continued to thrive. While Couleecap continued to provide rental housing, home weatherization, home buyer assistance, employment and training assistance, food pantries, and clothing centers, new initiatives were also implemented. The focus of the agency turned more and more to consideration of the entire family when looking at the issues of poverty.

Programming in the 1990's

We greatly increased our collaborative efforts and became a United Way member agency. We became a CHDO (Community Housing Development Organization). We also developed the Lender's Consortium, a consortium of bankers involved with our home buyer program. We began operating the Elderly Benefits Specialist program in Vernon County. We were also part of a three state Rural Health Outreach Project.

We increased our homeless services and transitional housing helped more homeless families by providing housing, case management, and supportive services. We also began providing homeless prevention services to individuals and families in our area.

Our efforts with youth grew as well, with initiatives like One By One, the Community Youth Initiative, and the La Crosse Skate Park in La Crosse. Alcohol and other drug prevention programming was developed through our partnerships with the Crawford Abuse Resistance Effort Council and the Vernon County Partnership Council. We created the Families First Resource Center in Viroqua.



As the operator of the JOBS (Job Opportunities and Basic Skills) program, we had some of the highest achievement in the state. The program helped hundreds of people attend school and find better jobs. W-2 replaced the JOBS program, and we continued operating this program in our area. We also began our Job & Business Development loan program for low-income entrepreneurs.

The 2000's

Our agency name was officially changed to Couleecap, Inc. and we started the Coulee Housing Development Corporation (CHDC) and the La Crosse Community Housing Development Organization (LCHDO). We established the People Helping People Initiative to help raise funds for client needs. We also greatly increased our community education efforts about poverty and poverty-related issues.



Our collaboration with the Wisconsin Council of Churches led to a community forum that resulted in the creation of the La Crosse County Housing Commission. The Coulee Community Land Trust was created through the efforts of the La Crosse County Housing Commission and is sponsored and supported by Couleecap and the CHDC.

We constructed two new homes in La Crosse, as part of an award winning New Housing Construction Program. We developed two additional programs to provide services to homeless individuals and families, New Hope and Tenant Based Rental Assistance. We constructed 10 units of affordable senior housing in West Salem called Whispering Pines, in partnership with the La Crosse County Housing Authority.

We developed an Individual Development Accounts (IDA) Program to encourage personal savings, began operating the Skills Enhancement Program, the Work N Wheels Program, and the Crawford Markets Care Program. We also implemented the Public Benefits Program, which greatly helped to expand our Weatherization services.

Youth efforts continued to grow through our assistance with the development of the Teen Court in Vernon County and helping youth aging out of foster care through our Independent Living Program. We implemented a Youth Employment and Training Program in all four counties. We also coordinated a Restorative Justice Program in Crawford County, and a Mentoring Program, Youth Violence Prevention Project, annual Martin Luther King Teach-In, and Diversity Days in La Crosse County.



The 2010's

To respond to people's needs brought on by the Great Recession, Couleecap was able to deliver a massive increase in services during 2010 and helped more people than ever in our area with food, transportation, employment and training services, rental assistance, and foreclosure assistance.

We greatly increased our efforts to serve homeless individual and families, serving 90 homeless households in our area with housing and support at any given time. We expanded our housing development and home rehabilitation efforts. We constructed 17 units of affordable rental housing in Gays Mills as part of the community's relocation efforts after the floods of 2007 and 2008. We now have 20 homes in the Coulee Community Land Trust and provide home rehabilitation services to more than 100 households each year.

We partnered with the Monroe County Safe Community Coalition and together we coordinate a Drug Free Communities program to reduce youth substance use in Monroe County. We also partnered with La Crosse County Human Services and The Hunger Task Force of La Crosse on a FoodShare Outreach Project in La Crosse County.



We created a variety of microenterprise development initiatives, including the City Microenterprise Program and CouleeCO., which involves the Co.Mill, Co.Starters, and Co.Mentors, to help entrepreneurs turn business ideas into action and develop their businesses. More than 75 people have participated in these initiatives since their inception.

Couleecap Today and in the Future

“Who knows where the outward moving ripples of compassionate action end?” (quote from Jonathan Bader, WISCAP’s Community Action Programs Manager). The image created by this question is symbolic of the work at Couleecap. We believe that the outward moving ripples are endless, and that our work makes a difference in profound and lasting ways in the lives of people, communities, and our country.

Today, Couleecap continues to serve its original four counties and has an office in each of the counties. The agency is governed by a 24-member Board of Directors – a group of highly dedicated people who care deeply about people in the Coulee Region. We carry on our mission of fighting poverty and promoting self-sufficiency for people in our area.

More than 30,000 people benefit from Couleecap’s services each year. We currently operate more than 50 contracts in five major services areas:

- **Housing** includes transitional housing for homeless families; permanent housing for homeless people with disabilities; weatherization; affordable housing development, construction, and rehabilitation; and homeownership counseling and home purchase assistance.
- **Emergency Assistance** includes food pantries; clothing centers; utility and rental assistance; emergency shelter; and information and referral.
- **Business Development, Employment, and Transportation** includes training, technical assistance, and loans for business start-up and expansion; employment and training assistance; and transportation assistance.
- **Child and Family Development** includes programs to prevent alcohol, tobacco, and drug abuse.
- **Health** includes activities to improve public safety and health.



So what will the next 50 years look like for Couleecap? We will continue to fight poverty and promote self-sufficiency for people in our area. We will continue to empower people to achieve their full potential, promote social and economic justice, serve as a catalyst for change, and strengthen families and communities. We will continue to join hands with other people and organizations to improve life for everyone in our area.

You Can Help Fight Poverty 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 care about 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 for more information.

To celebrate Couleecap’s first 50 years of working together to help meet the needs of low-income people in western Wisconsin, we are hosting a 50th anniversary event on Thursday, October 20, 2016 from 5pm-9pm at the Radisson Center in La Crosse. David Bradley, National Community Action Foundation’s Chief Executive Officer, will serve as the keynote speaker. If you are interested in attending this event, please contact Kadie Brueggen, Couleecap’s Marketing Coordinator at 608-634-7363 or Kadie.Brueggen@couleecap.org.

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References: Couleecap, Inc. Annual Reports, 1990-2014 and 40th Anniversary Report written by Grace Jones (1966-2006), 2006.

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