

# Podcast\_Episode\_1

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## SPEAKERS

Diane Hewitt-Johnso, COI, Heidi Barcomb, NYSCAA, Greg Richards, CAPCO, Renee Hungerford, CAOG

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### H Heidi Barcomb, NYSCAA 00:15

Hello and Welcome to Lights, Camera, Community Action, a podcast brought to you by The New York State Community Action Association, or NYSCAA for short. My name is Heidi Barcomb, Program and Communications Director for NYSCAA. NYSCAA is the State Association for New York's Community Action Agencies, commonly known as CAA's. NYSCAA's mission is to strengthen the capacity of the Community Action Network to address the causes and conditions of poverty. NYSCAA was created in 1987 to provide CAAs in New York with professional development opportunities, training, and technical assistance. NYSCAA is the hub that brings together Community Action agencies in New York to network share successes and challenges and strategizes to meet the needs of vulnerable New Yorkers. A Community Action agency or CAA is a local organization with the mission of reducing poverty through locally designed and delivered programs and services targeted to the specific needs of their community. The 47 CAAs in New York form a statewide service delivery system that connects individuals and families to the services they need to achieve economic status. When it comes to moving folks from poverty to self-sufficiency, Community Action agencies know what works. For our inaugural episode, we are joined today by three of New York's Community Action agencies' executive directors who also serve as members of NYSCAA's board of directors. Let's now introduce our guests, starting with Greg Richards.

### G Greg Richards, CAPCO 01:44

Yes, thank you for having me, Heidi. My name is Greg Richards. I am from Cortland County, the Cortland County Community Action program, a bit of a mouthful, so we refer to ourselves as CAPCO. That is what we are known as in our community. We obviously have the Community Action agency serving all of Cortland county with some services that we also offer in Tompkins County. And I've been with the agency Community Action really my entire career since I left college, so over the last eight years, and I have been the Executive Director, just started my second year of that.

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Heidi Barcomb, NYSCAA 02:16

Great thanks. And Renee, can you introduce yourself?

R

Renee Hungerford, CAOG 02:19

Yes. Hi, Heidi. My name is Renee Hungerford. I am from Community Action of Orleans and Genesee. I started with the agency in October of 2020. So I've been here for about almost two and a half years, I actually came in as the CEO and before that was not very familiar with Community Action, other than I've brought a few donations over the years, but I was quite surprised at the diverse number of programs that we have and all that we do for the community. So I came in through it's kind of my third incarnation as a career. I started in banking for about 30 years and then was a medical informaticist. And so came into this too, with really looking to address social determinants of health. And I know we do a lot of good in that area.

H

Heidi Barcomb, NYSCAA 03:03

And thank you and Diane, can you introduce yourself?

D

Diane Hewitt-Johnso, COI 03:06

Absolutely. Thank you for having me, Heidi. I am Diane Hewitt-Johnson, and I am the CEO at Chautauqua County, well in Chautauqua County, it is Chautauqua Opportunities, Inc. And so we serve Chautauqua County, which is the furthest County West in New York State. We border Pennsylvania and we're close to Ohio. We also provide some services in Kent County and Southeastern Erie County. And so, I've worked in Community Action and at Chautauqua Opportunities for the last 20 years. I started out as a frontline staff person, and then I worked my way up, and I've been the CEO for the last five years.

H

Heidi Barcomb, NYSCAA 03:45

Excellent. Thank you all so much for joining us. And I just, I guess I want to I'm curious, because I'm pretty new to the world of Community Action, also. And before I came here, I really didn't know anything about it. And I'm wondering if you guys had that same experience where you can tell me what you did know about community action before you joined us.

G

Greg Richards, CAPCO 04:09

So I knew absolutely nothing about Community Action and didn't even know the phrase, or what it meant. I grew up in Cortland County. I've been here my whole life. I grew up in a little town called Homer, New York right in Cortland county here, and have driven past the building that I'm sitting in right now most of my life, and I'm going, to be honest with you, I probably shouldn't admit this on a podcast. But I thought that this was a manufacturing place. I had no idea, most of my childhood, and young adult life, what CAPCO was. So when I got a phone call,

right after I graduated college from a connection, who worked here about a job opportunity, I thought, no, no, no, I'm an HR. I don't want to work for a manufacturing place. So they said that's not a manufacturing place. That's a not-for-profit, which of course was super interesting to me because I had done all of my internships, and all of my young adult life had been working in programs at other nonprofits and towns such as Catholic Charities and a few others. So that was really, really interesting to me. But no, I did not know what community action was, which is really interesting to think about now; you know, eight years is not that long of a timespan, and it feels like it's ingrained in every piece of my life now, but to think before that, having no clue what it was at all is just really interesting to think about.

**D** Diane Hewitt-Johnso, COI 05:24

Yeah, and I'm gonna follow up with what Greg said. This is Diane. Before I worked in Community Action, I had no idea what Community Action was. And the most shocking part is I grew up in poverty, and I should have known what it was, but my mother was a proud woman, and she would not seek assistance. And so she would struggle through and not seek any assistance. So, Community Action, yeah, 20 years in Community Action, really getting the word out into the community, so those that need the services feel comfortable approaching us really is one of the goals of mine.

**R** Renee Hungerford, CAOG 06:03

Yep, same here for me. I actually am originally from Buffalo. So I moved here, probably in the mid-90s. And strangely, in my first house here, I literally drove past the Community Action building every single day. And all I knew was there was some kind of program that had to do with children. So the bank I worked at, we did a lot of community service. So we would bring donations and I just pictured it was like a daycare or something like that. Had no idea until this job opening came in, and I started doing a little research. And I thought, wow, it's almost overwhelming how many different things we do and how many programs we manage. But that was kind of going along in the community without me having any awareness whatsoever.

**H** Heidi Barcomb, NYSCAA 06:41

So I guess one of the questions that I have then, or I'm curious about is, when you didn't know anything about Community Action, what is the thing that now stands out to you the most? Or what is the thing you would most say to somebody who doesn't who's in the same situation you were in before you came here?

**R** Renee Hungerford, CAOG 07:02

I think for me, the fact that we do a needs assessment, and we stay very current on what you know what the needs are in the community and kind of change what our programs are and adjust. I think that's really important for people to know we're not, I think it's easy to think that we're just someplace where people come for handouts of food or clothing or things like that. But it is so much more complicated. We actually go in, and we get the numbers, and we find out what the best use of resources is. And we're really about helping people to help themselves

and become self-sufficient. And I think that's important to make sure that people understand that mission and understand the work that we do is, you know, it's easy to dismiss it, but there's a lot more to it.

D

Diane Hewitt-Johnso, COI 07:46

Great, and a follow-up on what Renee just said, Community Action really focuses on changing people's lives and improving the whole community that we live in. And so that is our sole mission. And with that community's assessment, all of us complete that every three years. And the needs change. Every year, we're looking at different needs throughout our communities. And so we develop services that fall within our mission but also address the needs that we see.

H

Heidi Barcomb, NYSCAA 08:18

So, Diane, you mentioned earlier, I want to go back that you were a family that would have benefited from Community Action services. So when we're talking about the community needs assessment and how your family would have benefited from it. What do you think, could be done more or differently to engage families who are maybe in that same situation and get them to take advantage of the services?

D

Diane Hewitt-Johnso, COI 08:47

Well, I think one thing is to do some outreach in the community. A lot of individuals unless they've been in our services before, they are not familiar with the services. We do partner with a lot of different agencies so that we can send referrals back and forth. And so that helps to get the word out into the community. We have our website, we do social media posts, and we're constantly trying to get the word out. So, individuals are comfortable with us, they're familiar with our names, and they know what we do. For instance, we run a fatherhood program, we're on the radio all the time. We also have advertising where it flashes our phone number when you're driving down the road, the fatherhood program with the phone number, and so really letting the community know what we do, getting them comfortable with us, and getting them engaged. We also have a community council meeting where all of them are free to come every quarter and talk about any topic they want plus get information from us about our services or just talk about anything that's going on in the community so that engages people and makes them more comfortable with us as an agency

G

Greg Richards, CAPCO 10:00

Yeah, and I think to add to what Diane is saying, it's really interesting to think about this question, Heidi, in terms of, you know, what, what our familiarity was prior. And now kind of how we would, how we would better communicate our services and make sure that people that need it the most are we are reaching those folks. And it's, it's, I always think about the social service industry, social service programs that we all run in Community Action agencies. It's a tangled web, right? And if you're suffering in poverty, and it's truly a suffering situation, you're generally living in the tyranny of the moment. And when you think about the web of what a family could qualify for, versus what they wouldn't versus what programs are appropriate. And

there are all these nuances to all of this, even for the professionals that work in the industry. It's a tangled web that we have to sort out and figure out. And so for Community Action, what we try to be here in Cortland County, and I'm thinking every Community Action agency really represents this, we are that hub, you know, we don't do everything we do a lot of great services, we have some intricate things that we do for our community that if we weren't here, that would be a significant issue. But we cannot do it all. So it's important to us that we have relationships and collaborations with other local, regional state organizations so that we can wrap our arms around a family, and get them all the services they need, and not just get them the services they need, but help them understand the services that they're receiving understand the services that they qualify for. Because living in poverty and trying to navigate the system, which in many respects is a broken system, it's kind of the nature of the system that we're in; it's almost impossible for somebody to navigate that without some help and without some guidance. And that's what we try to be here at CAPCO not just for our own programs, but for other programs that we don't offer to make sure that our community is getting the services they need. And I really like what Renee said a couple of questions ago about we're not just providing programs and providing handouts, sure that some of what we do, and it's vital that we do that, but it's more about addressing the systemic issues. So we're more than just, you know, come to CAPCO if you are in an emergency situation, and you need diapers, well, yes, come to CAPCO. But we do more than that. We do community education, we do poverty simulations, we are certified and ACEs and trauma-informed care, and all of those great things that is the whole other side to Community Action that's really addressing systemic issues. Because the idea right is that one day, we don't need to exist. And I think we've got a long way to go before we get there. But a big part of that is really educating the community, individually and then also, collectively, nationally, regionally statewide, on what these issues are surrounding poverty and in all of our communities.

R

Renee Hungerford, CAOG 12:48

One of the things that we do in Genesee and Orleans, just to kind of get people to know what we do, is a lot of involvement with partners. We, you know, I'm personally in a rotary and alliance club, a couple of my directors and actually some staff are members of our leadership Orleans program, which is this big countywide Leadership Program, which is very active, we have different calls with partners with United Way. So we really just tried to get involved with so many different partners so that we could kind of tell everybody our mission, tell everybody, they're there so that our message gets carried on by other organizations that we partner with.

D

Diane Hewitt-Johnso, COI 13:26

And just to follow up on that, I just wanted to say, when we do our community needs assessment, and this is true for all Community Action agencies, you look at what your community has available, you look at what the needs are, and then you make recommendations on what the community needs. And it doesn't mean that the Community Action agency is going to address all those needs. We rely on all of those partnerships. And so we don't duplicate services, but we augment our services with other partnerships in the community to help address those needs.

H

Heidi Barcomb, NYSCAA 13:57

So you all mentioned community needs assessments. Can you talk to us a little bit more about those, the purpose of them and how they fit into our communities, and how they help?

**D** Diane Hewitt-Johnso, COI 14:11

Sure, this is Diane; I'll address that. And then. So, the community needs assessments and were required to do them every three years. But even though we're required to do them, it's best practice to make sure that you do that so that you're offering services to the community that they actually need. And so the community needs assessment to look at the causes and conditions of poverty in our area that we serve because every area is different. And so, we also look at the latest data on the population in our area. We are known for losing individuals. Unfortunately, we have a declining population in our area. We also look at various conditions such as housing, homelessness, health, healthcare, employment, and so on. When we look at all of the information, we look at our strengths, we look at the resources available, we look at what services are currently being provided, and what we can do as an agency versus what is already being done or what can be made better. And so if you don't do a community needs assessment, you really don't have your finger on the pulse of what's going on in your community. And as time goes on, if you see something big happen, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, you can do an amendment and say, Okay, that was our community last year, but we have this big issue that we need to address so let's look at the area and make adjustments to our community needs assessment and address whatever services are going to be needed to address, you know, what's going on in the community.

**R** Renee Hungerford, CAOG 15:48

Yeah, I think you make a good point about how things change, and that we have to be able to respond quickly. When I came into the agency, I think there was a lot of comfort that developed with the programs, and they kind of stayed static over time. And it's easy to get comfortable with what you're doing. But if the needs of the community change, you have to be ready, to respond to that and change things. And change is sometimes hard. And you know, you disrupt people. And you really have to look at what's needed. You know, and sometimes you have to look at, you know, even though it's needed, are there resources for it. In our case, transportation is a really difficult thing in Orleans County. But we have difficulty finding funding. So then you have to work with partners and other things to see if there's a solution outside of the agency that can fill that need.

**G** Greg Richards, CAPCO 16:37

Yeah, and I think to add to Renee, and Diane, I think that is really interesting to think about because one of the things that we had talked about that makes Community Action unique is that we tailor our programs and services to our community's unique needs. You know, while we're all Community Action agencies across the country and the New York State Network, my agency is different than Diane's is different than Renee's, and vice versa. We don't offer all the same programming. And even when we do offer similar programs, like such as Headstart or weatherization, they look a little different in different agencies in different communities. Now, we all have standards we have to adhere to, and we all have to, you know, meet the same performance standards and reporting and all of that. But what is really neat about Community

Action, what sets us apart really from other funded, federally funded, not-for-profits and programs, is we're able to tailor our programs to our needs. I'm in Cortland county right in the center of the state. Tompkins County is right below us; We could not be more different of counties. And then when you're looking at Onondaga county, where Syracuse's right above us completely different, what their needs look like and what the challenges that they see based on their size and everything like that. So it makes it supercritical to do that community needs assessment, because that's what drives really your strategic plan, which really is what drives your programming that you offer to your community. Actually, NYSCAA helped CAPCO this past year, redo our strategic plan; every agency has to do that, minimally every five years, but barely before you can do that you have to have a rope pretty robust community needs assessment to really drive where you're gonna go with that strategic plan. If we had not had the community needs assessment that we had done, we just redid ours at the end of 2021, the experience for our strategic plan, which again drives really all of our agencies decisions would not have been as impactful would not have been as meaningful because we're not identifying what the needs are in our community. And that means we're not really doing our jobs that as a Community Action Agency, so that community needs assessment from where I sit, drives everything, that's where everything really starts and stops with the programming that we offer in each of our counties in each of the service areas that we cover.

R

Renee Hungerford, CAOG 18:51

So, Greg makes a really good point about counties being very different. So with an agency where we have two counties, Orleans and Genesee, there are a lot of similarities, but because Genesee County has, has the city of Batavia in the middle of it, there are some big differences. So the programs that are appropriate in Orleans may not be the same as Genesee, so that needs assessment helps me, to know where to direct resources, which programs to put where,

H

Heidi Barcomb, NYSCAA 19:16

and what tools and resources do you use when you're pulling in this community needs assessment together?

R

Renee Hungerford, CAOG 19:23

I use the NYSCAA tools.

H

Heidi Barcomb, NYSCAA 19:26

Oh, I love that answer.

R

Renee Hungerford, CAOG 19:29

So, my background again, I say, you know, medical informatics is that's a lot of data. So, I love my data. And so when I saw that NYSCAA tool, I can tell you from what I used to have to do in the healthcare space where I had to go to the Census dated all these different resources to

have a tool that pulls everything together. That is, it is just an amazing tool. I go to it frequently way beyond way more than the three-year thing and go in there just kind of see where things are because it makes it so easy.

H

Heidi Barcomb, NYSCAA 19:56

For people who are listening the NYSCAA tool that Renee is referring to is the data hub. If you're a NYSCAA member, then you have access to the data hub. And I was just looking at it the other day, and boy, it's a rabbit hole, you can just get, it's so fun to just kind of dig in there and look at all the differences and start to assess things.

G

Greg Richards, CAPCO 20:18

Yeah, and for us, you know, making sure we're hearing the voices of a wide array of folks. And it kind of represents our board structure and all of that. But, we here at CAPCO, we do a lot with surveys, when it's when we're kind of building up to do another community needs assessment. Of course, we'll get other data from other sources about county-wide data, and statewide data, but actually hearing from the voices of the people that we serve. So we actually do three or four different surveys that are tailored to different groups of folks in our community. One of them is first and foremost for our participants. So folks that are receiving services through one or more of our programs, hearing their voice, first and foremost, because there they are the population that is receiving services that we are here to serve. But also, we engage with our staff. We have a special survey, we send out to all staff to get their perspective on some of the community's issues, challenges, and strengths. And then we have a special one that we do for our board and Head Start policy council. And then we have a more generalized survey that we put out for the broader community, that might not be overly familiar with Community Action or might not know exactly what all the issues are. But still, their impression and their perception of what they are seeing in the community in which they live is really important to us, as we're developing that community needs assessment. One of the things I think every Community Action agency probably struggles with is meeting people where they are, you know, it's one thing to send out an email blast with a survey to, you know, local professionals that you sit on other boards with, it's another thing to try to reach the participants that are in your programs. Because of the barriers and the challenges that they experience every day, there are a few things with that the way in which you deliver and try to get that information from participants is not going to be a one size fits all. And that makes that sometimes a tricky thing to make sure you're hearing everyone's voice. And then there's also the stigma piece with it, you know, oftentimes, people will come into our agency for services and they don't want to be a part of a survey like that. Because it's, it's divulging that they're here getting services. And so trying to break down those barriers to hear from the folks that are receiving services. So we can enhance that and make sure we're meeting people where they are is so critical. And if we don't do that step, our community needs assessment will not be as accurate as it needs to be, which will mean our strategic plans that which means our really our operations are missing the mark. So that whole process of building up to a community needs assessment, I think is just as critical as the final outcome of the community needs assessment.

D

Diane Hewitt-Johnso, COI 22:50

And just a follow-up to what Greg and Renee had said, in Chautauqua Opportunities, we also



use our community council meetings, to have the community join us. We have set questions that we asked them, and then we have brainstorming sessions. And so the input that we received from the customers and the community at those meetings helps us to develop our programs. Also.

R

Renee Hungerford, CAOG 23:19

Sometimes I get some of the best feedback, just by going to one of our events. Just a couple of weeks ago, we had a program called Stone soup, and we had our first graduating class. And I attended this, and just people approached me with just ideas, things they want to see one was as simple as one lady approached me, and she said, there's a church in Batavia that gives away seedlings, so people can grow their own food. And I thought, Wow, what a simple little thing we could do that we can get some seeds and plant them and, and do too. And we're going to do that actually wrote to two different seed companies for donations and, right away, they said yes. So they're on the way and easy enough to plan on getting started. And if it helps somebody that doesn't have transportation and wants to grow some tomatoes or peppers, what an easy, simple program to put together.

H

Heidi Barcomb, NYSCAA 24:06

Wow. What a great example of meeting community needs in a very specific way for your community. I love it. Can you guys talk a little bit about how you have seen the needs in your community change over the years and what has stayed consistent, if anything has?

D

Diane Hewitt-Johnso, COI 24:30

So this is Diane, I'll take that question first since I've been here the longest. And so when I started in Community Action, we were more of a handout service. And so as time has gone by, we have now implemented where we do assessments and we're more of a hand up not a handout. We're teaching individuals how to become self-sufficient. Yes, there are some services that are giveaway services, but it's helping them in coming to the agency, getting referrals for other services that they may qualify for, and helping them through that process of becoming more self-sufficient and empowering them. And it's amazing to see some of the successes of individuals who come in for one service, but then they realize, oh, I qualify for these other things. And they're, you know, we're giving them hope, and giving them a path to take to build, you know, their lives.

G

Greg Richards, CAPCO 25:30

I like what Diane was saying there. And I really liked this question, Heidi, because it really gets you thinking. And I totally agree, I think community I mean, I've been here, probably the least amount of time of everybody on the podcast right now, in terms of in this role, but I think that the needs in terms of what we're seeing in our community, it's really interesting to think about this, especially coming out of the pandemic. I certainly feel as though the needs have been pretty stagnant in terms of the kind of big needs that we have in our communities, such as transportation and childcare and, you know, addiction issues, mental health, the things that

you really hear as the big items, really, in every community across the State in the country, what I have seen through the pandemic is just how those issues have changed, and how they've really become magnified, especially coming out of the pandemic, when you think about mental health. And you think about, you know, just the challenges around childcare and transportation, everything feels it felt pretty catastrophic prior to the pandemic, I think that it is at a completely new level now coming out of the pandemic, almost incomprehensible. And it really paralyzes some folks at times. Where do we start with this, you know, we're seeing in the Cortland community, a homelessness crisis that we have not seen, I don't think ever, at this level, certainly not this visible. And I think that speaks to the issues that were always there. But they are becoming much more visible, they're hitting families in much harder ways. And perhaps hitting families that before the pandemic, those families weren't affected by some of those challenges. So that's, that's really interesting. And to balance that with what Diane is saying, you know, our role as Community Action is to address the causes and causes and effects of poverty somewhat, in a nutshell, is really a lot of all of our programming does. And some of that is a handout. And I don't think that there should be a stigma associated with that phrase, because sometimes people need a handout, a hand up, as Diane said because that's, that's they're living in the tyranny of the moment and we can address the systemic issues all day long. But if their basic needs aren't being met, right now, addressing the overarching systemic root causes of things isn't going to mean anything if they don't have a roof over their heads and diapers for their babies or transportation to and from work. Um, so I think it's a, it's a really interesting balance that community action has of providing that hand up providing resources in emergency situations, so families can meet their basic needs, while also addressing the systemic issues. And in the eight years, I've been a part of community action, I've sort of seen that in that microcosm, as well as really that evolution of being more of that, you know, hand up and providing resources and services and maintaining that while also addressing the trauma and the other systemic issues that are the root causes of why folks are living in poverty in our community. And there's a lot to that it's there's a lot of root causes that are associated with that. Some of those are systemic. Some of those are family situations. But we're really tasked with both and it's not just a handout or a hand-up; it's that plus addressing the root causes so folks can reach a point of self-reliance. And I think that that is sometimes that's a year-long relationship. Sometimes that's a 20-year-long relationship with a family. It's not a one shoe fits all. And I think it puts us in an industry that is really one of the most tricky, tricky and intricate industries to work with him because you're dealing with people, and you're dealing with families, and there's not a one shoe fits all solution when you're dealing with that industry.

R

Renee Hungerford, CAOG 29:05

So, what I'm seeing, it almost seems counterintuitive, because I came into Community Action in the middle of the pandemic. And when I came in, there was CARES funding, people were free with donations, there was a lot of different support things going on to help people, and so now as we're technically ending the public health emergency, a lot of those services and resources are going away. Medicaid, SNAP, rental assistance, and so the need is greater, but the world has changed. And so now we are having children come into our Headstart classes that they're it's a different situation. They grew up in a pandemic, their situation may have been very different. They may not have been outside of the house. People were in quarantine. So we're seeing children that may not come in with the same skill set. So needing things like Headstart even more so but At the same time, the minimum wage is going up, eligibility doesn't change, and fewer and fewer families are able to take advantage of our services when the need seems to be greater than ever. So to me, the kind of the end of the pandemic, or at least, what we're

calling the technical end seems to be where the real troubles are starting. And that concerns me because resources are starting to dry up. Because, you know, COVID, kind of put it in everybody's face. But that's kind of moving away now.

H

Heidi Barcomb, NYSCAA 30:28

Thanks for all of that. That insight, that's actually helpful. And, you know, we talk about how Community Action is supporting families and helping families. And NYSCAA's role is really to support your Community Action agencies as you're doing your jobs. So I'm wondering if you can talk with me a little bit about the relationship? And, Diane, this might be a great question for you, because you've been here for a while, you know, the relationship that you have with New York City Community Action Association, and then over the years, what do you find most helpful from the Association? And what do you wish we did more of? I'm curious about that.

D

Diane Hewitt-Johnso, COI 31:11

Okay. Well, the first 15 years that I worked here, I had very limited connection to NYSCAA. Over the last five years, though, I became an active member. And I find that the partnership, the membership with NYSCAA, is very valuable. It allows me to stay connected to other agencies, and their CEOs, and their staff, we can brainstorm and bounce ideas off one another. We're not just a single agency providing services on our own, NYSCAA ensures that we have a unified approach to addressing problems that arise. And you know, there are regions connection to information, professional development, and technical assistance. And so I find that they're a very valuable resource. And it is unfortunate that it's only been for the last five years, even though I've been here 20 years. Currently, you know, we have bi-weekly meetings where all of the CEOs discuss any issues that we see arise, we come we brainstorm, we, you know, on bigger results can be had with more participation. And so, NYSCAA also has affinity groups and what that means is that groups of employees who work in respective fields have a support group. And so for instance, there's an HR affinity group or a headstart affinity group. And so once again, I have my CEO group, but all of the staff have the opportunity to be part of these affinity groups and have the support group and bounce ideas also. NYSCAA provides a variety of training and I utilize that for my board and for my staff. And so as far as what do, I think that you should provide more of, I think, really focusing on what you're doing, and then providing more training, because that is a real, valuable asset to me and my agency.

R

Renee Hungerford, CAOG 33:12

So, for me, the training, obviously, is very important. But the CEO group was, was critical for me, because when I came into the agency, and again, not really knowing much about Community Action, there was no CEO, and no CFO, my predecessor, was gone for the better part of a year. And I had to come in having no one to ask questions or figure things out, no one to kind of, you know, tell me how the ropes go. And so these weekly meetings back then they were weekly, were a lifesaver for me because I had this whole group, this whole network that I could ask questions, and, and people are taking the time to sit down and talk with me and explain kind of, you know, best practices. And, you know, we have so many regulations and reporting and so many things to learn. And when you didn't have somebody to kind of show you figuring it out takes a long time. So, I'm very grateful for NYSCAA. Both the partnership and

the training, because, you know, before I even started the week before I started, I took all the ROMA classes, and you know, what is Community Action, and I came in at least with a good idea of what my objectives were.

G

Greg Richards, CAPCO 34:15

Yeah. And that's, that's really interesting, too. And I was lucky enough to be hired into an agency with my predecessor who was heavily involved in the NYSCAA network. So I feel like I grew up at the agency and I grew up knowing that NYSCAA is going to be ingrained in everything that we do as a Community Action agency. So I was very, very fortunate to come in and work underneath somebody who was heavily involved in the network. And that's really instilled that in me and our agency, and I can't imagine how we would operate the way at the level that we do without that relationship. And Renee and Diane are spot on. When I started at the beginning of 2022. We were still in the middle of a pandemic. There were variants going nuts. I'd been with the agency but more on the business administration side. So the programming side was a newer side to me in terms of being a leader on that side. And I will say, and I think I have set it to the NYSCAA CEO group, I don't know that I would have been able to survive with some of the challenges that I had walked into, if I didn't have that network to lean on. And it's not even just to get all the answers. It's just to say, oh, okay, so you all are struggling with this, too. I'm not the only one that's struggling with this, that there's just, there's such a comfort in that. And you can send an email. In fact, I did just a little bit ago asking for some information. And, my email is closed right now. But I guarantee when I open it, I'm going to have like 50 responses of what system they're using for whatever question I'd ask. And that's just invaluable. You know, you're not recreating the wheel, you see what has worked for others, and you share resources, that has honestly helped us get through so many things here at CAPCO in terms of regulation changes, HR changes, financial things that we need to be looking out for. It's just, it's invaluable. And, without the network, I can speak for myself and I connected with a few other CEOs that are newer, either last year or this year. And I know the sentiment is felt that if we didn't have this network, there's a few of us that kind of feel like we might not be in the positions we're in today without that support. So I can't thank NYSCAA enough for that for coordinating that. But really, it's the other CEOs across the state, and their willingness to share and to help, you know, looking at this call, Renee and I are newer, but I know I could call Diane and Diane doesn't know me well, but she would probably tell me anything I needed to know or help me answer any question that I had, or point me in the right direction if she didn't know. And when I asked the question, you know, where does this network exist in the world? And the answer is, it really doesn't, you know, NYSCAA has something very special and unique that probably a lot of other associations should probably take notes and follow along with. I know we are; we're connected with other State associations across the country, and not all of them have the same level of engagement that we have. And I think that is just so critical to all of our operations.

H

Heidi Barcomb, NYSCAA 37:07

Which sort of leads me to the question, Diane, you had mentioned that in the first 15 years, you didn't really have a connection with NYSCAA. And I'm wondering, were there barriers that were preventing that? Were you not aware of it? Like, can you just kind of speak a little bit about that more, maybe just so we know?

D

Diane Hewitt-Johnso, COI 37:26

Sure. Absolutely. I was fully aware of NYSCAA, but I was not aware of what they offered. And it was the executive director was about the only contact with NYSCAA. And so it was just the culture of the agency. And so it was more of the executive director who had that contact with NYSCAA. And the rest of us just relied on her to relay the information.

H

Heidi Barcomb, NYSCAA 37:55

Gotcha.

D

Diane Hewitt-Johnso, COI 37:58

Which is never a good way to get information, really, you need to hear it firsthand or see it firsthand.

G

Greg Richards, CAPCO 38:06

And I think to add to that, Diane's point about the affinity groups, I started as the HR director here at CAPCO and that affinity group. You know, I talked about the CEO group helping me when I first started the affinity group for HR. That's the point, you know, it's not just the CEO, we think there's an IT affinity group, there's an HR, there's a headstart. So now broader staff at all levels, whether their leadership or not, are engaging with NYSCAA on a regular basis. And that is huge. And I think a lot of that actually started before the pandemic, but really enhanced through the pandemic, because that was really the way that everybody could stay in touch with one another. And all the different, you know, regulations and things that we were muddling through it, you know, at the height of the pandemic, and not understanding the fact that it wasn't just the CEO group, it was the HR group, I think it was a finance group, that all of those groups were talking and we were ensuring that Community Action as a whole is going to not just survive the pandemic, but thrive and be really the leader of providing services and keeping our doors open. A lot of that was because of those affinity groups and people at all levels of the agency being engaged with NYSCAA, not just the CEO. So I think Diane's point is really critical there of how things have progressed, probably over the last five to 10 years, but certainly since the start of the pandemic as well.

H

Heidi Barcomb, NYSCAA 39:22

So, we talked a little bit about Community Action agencies' connection with their community members, and with NYSCAA. And Greg, you mentioned earlier about board membership and participation. And I know that Community Action Agency boards are a unique entity. So will you share with us a little bit about the board makeup, and how that makes you stronger in your community?

G

Greg Richards, CAPCO 39:53

Yeah, so every Community Action agency in New York State and from coast to coast in the United States has the same board structure, board size, and things like that. Different procedures change a little bit based on your agency, but every Community Action Agency is set up as what we call a tripartite board. So, really there's three different segments. So if I referenced CAPCO, it's the best way I can explain it; we have a 15-person board member. So, five, five, and five is how we split that up into thirds. And the first third is the consumer sector, which used to be kind of known as the low-income sector; we tried to change that language a bit to the consumer, and those are folks that are either service recipients or program recipients or they are democratically elected to serve or to represent the consumer sector. So, we have five of our board members who are either program recipients, program participants that are income eligible to receive our services, or elected by individuals to represent the consumer sector. The other third is publicly elected officials and that's usually local elected officials, for the most part with local agencies. So, we have a mayor on our board, we have two county legislators on our board and then we have a few other folks that have been appointed by an elected official to serve on our board. So oftentimes, elected officials don't have the capacity right to serve on a monthly meeting or monthly committee meeting. So they themselves are actually on the board, but they appoint somebody to represent them at our board meetings at our committee meetings. So that is the second third. And then the last third is what we call the private sector. And that's really where we get into some of our specializations. So private sector, you know, you don't necessarily fit into the consumer sector, you don't necessarily fit into the publicly elected sector. But perhaps you're an accountant with a financial background, who's really interested in being involved in a community board. That individual would be considered part of our private sector. And we try to have specialization there. So we have an attorney on our board with a legal background. We've got our actually our board president is a former elementary school principal, so we have the Early Childhood perspective because Head Start and Early Headstart is our largest program that we offer here at CAPCO. We've got somebody with healthcare experience, elder care experience. So the private sector that last third, if you will, is really those folks that don't fit into the other two categories. And we try to make sure we've got specialization across our entire board. And then, you know, we meet once a month. We do at least 10 meetings a year. So two months of the year we take off, but through the pandemic, we've been able to really get better board engagement, believe it or not through the pandemic because of the virtual option because of the hybrid option. And, sure, there are challenges with that, because there's nothing like an in-person meeting. But being able to have board members engaged and showing up, the pandemic has helped with that. And then we have different committees that meet prior to the board meeting that streamlines board, and board member business. So, we have a finance committee, and a program planning and evaluation committee. And we also have a board development committee, where we look at board trainings. We work a lot with NYSCAA on that and look at board seats that we need to fill. And then, of course, we have our executive committee that represents our officers and doubles as our personnel committee. The committee structure can be kind of unique to different Community Action agencies. So CAPCO's committee structure that I just read off, probably Renee and Diane will tell you there's a little bit different. But what is always the same is that tripartite board structure with a third being the consumer sector, a third publicly elected, and a third the private sector.

H

Heidi Barcomb, NYSCAA 43:33

Do you find that tripartite structure to make you a stronger board and stronger in your community?

G

Greg Richards, CAPCO 43:41

Oh, definitely. I think that that's, that's really the intention of it, right? I mean, if we had everybody on our board, who also, you know, worked at the same factory and did the same thing, we wouldn't get the perspective that we need to make the decisions that we need to make to serve our community. We're in the business of serving people and serving those that are most vulnerable. Well, you can't do that effectively, unless you have a diverse group of folks on your board that truly understand the needs and have areas of expertise to address those needs. You know, I think about the consumer sector, I think that's what makes Community Action so cool, is that it's a mandate, you know, we would want to do this anyway but we don't have a choice. And we're going to have participants in our program on our board on our Head Start policy council, which is a whole other thing, but that connects to our board of directors. You need that perspective because I can sit here and tell you all day long what the challenges of somebody living in low-income in our community are. But unless I'm living that life and I'm able to speak from it from a firsthand perspective, it's really you're not really getting the true nature of what the challenges are and what the solutions need to be. So it certainly makes you stronger because you get the perspectives of the folks that you are serving, and then you have a specialization, to make sure that you're carrying out your mission in an effective way.

H

Heidi Barcomb, NYSCAA 44:57

Thanks for that explanation about boards because I think for people not in Community Action, the tripartite board is a little bit confusing to really wrap your head around. So, I appreciate that. That explanation. So we have talked about the community needs assessment, and really being able to dig in and meet the needs of your community. And we've talked about board participation and the relationship with NYSCAA. So as we're wrapping up, I'd love to leave on a positive note on a high. And I guess I would love to ask each of you if you can share with us a success story or really fond memory from your time working in Community Action.

R

Renee Hungerford, CAOG 45:44

So, there are a lot of stories. I don't know if I could really choose one. But I think I'd like to talk about what I guess I would call a success attribute. One of the things that's my biggest takeaway is not only from my own agency, but I see this when I speak with people from other agencies. We have employees of all levels that came from the same struggles as the people that you know, the customers that we serve. I have staff that has suffered; they've been through poverty, there's been abuse, and we have people who were Headstart parents once, and now they're managers and directors. And I think if anything can talk about success, that saying what we do works. We're not only helping people become self-sufficient and get jobs, but we're bringing them into the agency. And the thing that makes it so special and unique is when someone comes to us on their darkest day, and they feel there's no hope. They can actually say to our staff, you don't know what I'm going through. The fact that they can say I do know it, and I've gotten out of there can give people hope. And to me, that's the greatest success, we could have.



**D** Diane Hewitt-Johnso, COI 46:52

That is well said, Renee. I don't think I could say it any better. I wanted to talk about a couple of success stories. Every month, I have each division write a success story because that's what the board wants to hear. They want to see that we're making a difference in the community. And so sometimes their short time, short-term successes, sometimes they took a little longer. And so one of the examples of an individual who came to us, she had children in the Headstart program, she grew up in the Headstart program, she was working, she's renting a place for them to live and she took some budgeting classes with us and asset development and homeownership classes. And it took her three years. But as she was working to clean up her credit, she was able to start saving money and eventually purchased her own home. And now she's paying less for her mortgage and taxes than she was when she was renting that home. And so now she's an active member in our community council as well in the community. And so I've been watching her grow over the years and it's just amazing to see that transformation. So that was more of a holistic look out over a long term. But an example of a shorter-term success story, is we have a fatherhood program where we're teaching fathers to be better dads. And so we're just giving them more tools so that they can become, you know, a great father. And so one particular person, his name is Michael, he came through our program, he graduated, just in time to welcome his brand new baby daughter, just two weeks after he finished the program. He has reached out to staff to let us know how much the program really helped him and prepared him for the first couple of months with his daughter. And he's always telling us he's becoming a pro with diaper changing, feeding even giving baths and getting his daughter dressed. He's just a proud father. And so that connection, he has now coming back to every single fatherhood class that we have. And he's acting as a mentor to the other fathers so that they can see, hey, he's been through this. He knows what he's talking about. And they can connect with him. And so it's been two years and he still continues to come back. And he talks to me, he talks to the program staff, and then also to the dads and so he really is a success out there. And it's just heartwarming to see the difference that we can make in individual's lives.

**H** Heidi Barcomb, NYSCAA 49:31

Those are great stories.

**G** Greg Richards, CAPCO 49:33

.Yeah, I love that story Diane, both stories. This is a tough question. Right? I'm with I'm kind of with Renee. I feel like how the heck am I going to choose? You know, one success story. So, I think I have a specific one that's a little different right than just serve, you know what we've seen, like a success story coming in and out of our agency. We also talked about how Community Action does more, you know, regionally statewide, systemically as well. And one of the I think a really kind of microcosm example of that is the current obviously devastation that's going on in Ukraine. CAPCO has been involved with, a group here in Cortland called Cortland uniting for Ukraine that actually has brought an entire family over from Ukraine to Cortland County and got them out of a pretty devastating situation. And CAPCO played a pretty big role in that as the Community Action agency. We were the 501 C three were donations, we worked with our auditors on everything, donations come through us, and helping bring that individual here because we have that Community Action designation, that carried a little bit of clout in the whole process of getting the individual here. And because they had all the support



and resources of Community Action behind the group, it really expedited that process, whereas, at the beginning of February, we have an entire Ukrainian family who escaped some pretty big devastation. There are several young children that are coming into our Headstart program, everyone from grandparents to young children were able to get here in that family. So that's just there's a lot to that story. But for the sake of time, that's just, that's just one example of how Community Action, to Renee and Diane's point, you know, we meet people where they are in our community and those stories that Diane and Renee mentioned, they happen every day. In fact, while we're on this podcast, something like that is happening and one of our agencies right now, but to also think differently about the bigger support that CAPCO, Community Action rather supports our country and our region and bigger issues in the world, such as the Ukrainian crisis, we all play a role in that on the local level as well. And I always like to kind of end with this question about really about myself, you know, I'm very fortunate, I did not grow up in poverty. But when I joined CAPCO, I can tell you that my life has completely changed from the person that I was when I walked in the door, back in 2014, the acceptance of Community Action, the trauma-informed care piece to that, meeting people where they are, and caring about the person, first and foremost, has totally changed my perspective on a lot of things. And I can say that I would not be the person that I am today, without Community Action without the network without the national network. And of course, without my agency CAPCO. I would not be who I am. And I certainly probably wouldn't have not have been invigorated to be in the position I'm in without really those principles of Community Action being instilled within me. So I'd love to give you like 30 stories that I can think of off the top of my head right now but I like to kind of end with those overarching stories, right? That kind of just drives home the point of what community action does. It's not just one thing. It's not just on the local level. It's frankly, it can be on the global level, with the impact that we have. And I think that our story really, really speaks to that impact

H

Heidi Barcomb, NYSCAA 52:53

Thank you so much. And on that note, we really can't outdo everything Greg, Renee and Diane just said. So we're going to thank them all for joining us, Greg, Renee and Diane, thank you so much for giving us an hour of your time. We truly appreciate it. Have a great day.

D

Diane Hewitt-Johnso, COI 53:11

Thanks for having us.