



COMMUNITY ACTION

Cayuga/Seneca Community Action Agency: Core mission the same 50 years later

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“So long as chronic unemployment and underemployment exist among the poor in Cayuga County, with no attempt to create meaningful jobs for the disadvantaged and provide some measure of economic independence ... none of the related supportive social services can ever be anything but palliative.”

— James F. Schmidt, second executive director of Cayuga County Action Program, The Citizen Advertiser, May 9, 1969

This year marks the golden anniversary of Cayuga/Seneca Community Action Agency Inc. (CSCAA), established in 1965 to fight the war against poverty locally. Over the last half century, the agency has grown from an operating committee with no paid staff and limited scope of service to the organization it is today — administering over a dozen anti-poverty and self-sufficiency programs in two counties with over 120 staff and 550 volunteers. We look forward to reflecting on this evolution with you over the coming year.

CSCAA remains resilient in its response to fluctuating community needs among shifting socio-economic and political landscapes. While programs come and go, connecting people in poverty to gainful employment opportunities has been and will always be a key strategy to achieve economic security. Workforce development is deeply rooted in our agency’s anti-poverty culture, as evidenced by some of our earliest programs.

On July 9, 1969, the Cayuga County Action Program inked a contract with Singer Company, formerly located on Columbus Street in Auburn, to participate in what was known as the “Open Door Training and Employment Program” to employ hardcore jobless in Cayuga County. The premise of the program was to supply local businesses with qualified, reliable employees from among the county’s pool of unemployed and underemployed population, including non-skilled individuals and high school dropouts.

Staff provided participants with soft skills training focused on developing healthy work habits, completing job applications and interviewing, personal hygiene, employment responsibilities and employee rights. Staff also provided ongoing case management to assist participants with issues encountered at work or home. During operation, the Open Door Training and Employment Program placed over 150 participants (one-third with no other income other than public welfare) within local industries including Auburn Plastics, Columbian Rope, General Electric, General Products, Singer, Sylvania Electric and Welch Allyn.

The agency has operated many other employment and training programs over the years.

While funding availability has impacted their longevity, the need for these types of programs has never wavered. This need supported development of the Employment Pathways Program, a new initiative that we are excited to launch in January 2015 in partnership with Cayuga County Health and Human Services, Cayuga-Onondaga BOCES, Cayuga Works Career Center and private employers, including TRW Automotive.

Not unlike the Open Door Training and Employment Program of the 1960s, the Employment Pathways Program will connect people in poverty to local employment opportunities within demand occupations including health care, agribusiness, food processing and advanced manufacturing. The agency will provide case management, training and flexible subsidies to help program participants overcome individual barriers to employment. Subsidies will primarily offset the cost to pursue a New York State High School Equivalency Diploma, certificate or degree program offered through Cayuga/Onondaga BOCES and/or Cayuga Community College, but may be used for other ancillary expenses including transportation and/or child care as needed. Subsidies will be utilized as gap financing based on individual need and other available local, state and federal financial aid.

The goals of the Employment Pathways Program are 1) to provide coordinated support services, education and training in order to prepare low-income individuals to obtain and sustain full-time employment within regional demand occupations; and 2) to provide critical skills training (soft skills), including: completing applications, writing a résumé, preparing for an interview, understanding business etiquette and employer expectations, identifying values, building self-confidence, solving problems, maintaining a positive attitude and developing a strong work ethic.

We are currently seeking applicants for the position of Employment Pathways Program Coordinator. The coordinator will be stationed at the Cayuga Works Career Center and will provide case management to low-income individuals seeking employment opportunities, oversee Job Readiness Training and award of educational subsidies, assist participants in accessing and maximizing assistance packages and coordinate with local employers. More information can be found online at www.cscaa.com/employment.html.

To support the Employment Pathways Program, we have been working behind the scenes to resurrect Attire for Hire. This program provides underemployed and unemployed individuals with appropriate attire to attend job interviews and/or work within their chosen field. We are currently seeking donations of gently used professional clothing, dockers, scrubs, dress shoes and other work-appropriate attire as well as clothing racks for Attire for Hire. Please call (315) 255-1703 to make a donation.