

A conversation with Community Action's new executive director, Renée Bruce

1. You assumed the Executive Director position on Nov. 1st, 2015. What are your first priorities?

My first priority will be to ensure a smooth Executive Director transition for all. My role in the transition is going to be key in maintaining a positive environment for the board, staff, funders and the community. A positive environment will allow us to continue to provide our best to the community and those we serve.

As for my second priority, the national Community Action network is currently facing many exciting changes. There are new organizational standards and rules to understand and implement coming from our network and many of our current funders. We are well positioned to be able to meet the new standards and implement the new rules. I am prepared to lead the agency in the implementation of these new and exciting changes. These changes will help to ensure that we continue moving forward with our vision to increase our services so that we can better support those we serve in achieving economic security.

Priority three will be the work that I lead with the Board and Staff as we begin to develop our next 3-5 year strategic plan. I am very excited about this opportunity! Our past strategic plans have been key in helping us to achieve our mission and vision. We have been working internally on becoming a Community Action agency of "Excellence" and we have learned a lot about how to improve on our strategic planning process. I can't wait to start working on it.

2. How does Community Action's work make a difference in Washington County?

With the array of services and support that we provide to the low-income community we are making a difference each day with many of the people we serve. For example, our Energy & Emergency Rent program makes a difference by assisting people with their energy bill or rent which keeps them in their homes. When people are evicted from their homes it is very costly to the family, their landlord and to the community. Our Head Start program works with children and their families providing them with rich experiences so that they are prepared for success in school and in life! What we do best, however, is listen to those we serve and offer them support and hope for the future.

3. What are some of the principal challenges you see Community Action encountering in the near future?

Working to fully fund the services we provide is an on-going challenge. But, having said that, I feel that our principal challenge will be to really challenge ourselves to listen carefully to those struggling to make ends meet and truly understand what kind of support and services are needed to make a difference in their lives. Then it will be our work to fund the services identified.

4. What are the most important issues affecting low-income people today?

The people we serve are telling us: not enough job opportunities; low wage jobs with no benefits or consistent work schedule; inability to find reliable, high quality, affordable child care for their children so that parents can work; a lack of safe, affordable housing.

Housing is a big challenge for many in our county, but the effect it has on individuals and families getting by on poverty-level wages is even greater. Housing is expensive and our vacancy rate is low, so the people we are working with are struggling to find housing they can afford. If you don't have housing or you are always in the position that you may lose your housing it is hard to focus on or benefit from the supportive services being offered.

4. Community Action already offers a wide range of programs. Would you like to add any new ones in particular?

We are always looking to offer programs needed by the people we serve, so first we need to understand their needs and the support they are looking for. This could mean improving current services or developing new ones.

We are a mission- driven agency, so we are very careful to not add programs that do not help us achieve our mission, which is – “Community Action leads the way to eliminate conditions of poverty and create opportunities for people and communities to thrive.”

5. What can Washington County residents do to help support positive changes for those living in poverty in our community?

I have lived and worked in Washington County for 26 years. The first thing we need to do is acknowledge that many of our residents are living in poverty and struggling to make ends meet. Then we need to understand the many issues of poverty and the situations many of our neighbors and friends are dealing with on a day-to-day basis. This will open our eyes to a variety of ways that we can support positive changes for those struggling in our county. We can support building more affordable housing, securing the funding needed so all eligible children can attend Head Start, and job training and education so people can make a living wage.