

# **A conversation with Community Action's outgoing executive director, Jerralynn Ness**

A lot can change in 50 years. For nearly 43 of Community Action's 50 years of service to Washington County, Jerralynn Ness has been a driving force at the organization. After 32 years as executive director, she will relinquish that role on Nov. 1, 2015 and retire on Jan 1, 2016.

## **Why did you decide to step down as executive director of Community Action?**

Community Action is strong and well positioned to ensure that Washington County has a sustainable response to poverty reduction for years to come. Our board and staff directors are well equipped to successfully lead this organization through any challenge that may surface. We have strong public, private and non-profit sector partners committed to our mission. And we are commemorating our fiftieth anniversary this year, a perfect time to pass the torch on to our next Executive Director, Renee Bruce.

## **How has poverty in Washington County changed during your tenure with Community Action?**

The major change is that we have almost eliminated "generational poverty" in Washington County; poverty that is a result of families, over the generations, lacking the opportunities needed to break out of cycles of poverty. The opportunities created by Community Action's work have made this possible. Now, poverty is situational, a transitional experience for most. Poverty can strike anyone when you experience the loss of a job, the loss of a breadwinner, or illness. By ensuring that the right services are there and at the right time, families can regain economic stability and find a pathway out of poverty. The community, however, is key to this equation by producing living wage jobs and affordable housing.

## **How has Community Action adjusted its programs to deal with changing conditions?**

Annually we assess emerging issues of poverty and the needs residents are seeking our help for. We then work to grow those services most needed and create new services where there are gaps. During the great recession there was a tremendous need for emergency rent assistance to prevent homelessness, so we focused on that. As families become more gainfully employed, we connect more of them with quality affordable child care, as well as financial literacy services and matched savings accounts. Head Start continues to be an effective two generational approach to breaking cycles of poverty while providing opportunities for children to succeed in school and in life, so we continue to expand that service.

## **What do you consider your major accomplishments at Community Action?**

Establishing Community Action as a trusted organization and partner that can be relied upon to effectively steward resources and deliver impactful services. And to be known for a deep commitment to and respect for the families that turn to us for help and hope in their darkest hour of need.

## **You have spent most of your working life at Community Action. Have your views of the world shifted over that time?**

Yes, I felt that our world was very divided by our views about why poverty exists and what should be done about it. In Washington County many in our community had biases about people in poverty and if felt like it would be impossible to find common ground and work on solutions together. My whole journey in Community Action was to achieve an understanding of other's views, their values, where our values crossed. It was at that crossing point that I found we had beliefs in common that we could unite around, that we all want to live in communities where families and children have the opportunities to succeed in life. Over and over again I watched as hearts and minds changed towards people experiencing poverty.

## **Looking forward, what are the principal challenges facing organizations trying to help people find a path out of poverty?**

Organizations can have effective health, education, training and social services in place for families and children, but if the community isn't creating enough living wage jobs and affordable housing, little progress can be made in reducing poverty. The second challenge is ensuring that these effective services are adequately invested in so that they can be scaled to meet the need.

## **With retirement looming at the end of the year, what's next for you?**

I am looking forward to living freely and having more time with my friends, family and personal interests. My husband and I plan to travel a lot and are looking forward to completing home and garden projects at our properties here and in eastern Oregon. Staying physically active and in good health is a priority. And I will stay on two national Community Action Boards for the first few years.

I have been blessed to have had Community Action as my life-long work, and I am grateful for that and all of the people who have been a part of this amazing journey. I am approaching this next chapter of life filled with great joy and excitement, and humility to have this privilege.