



# MISSOURI VALLEY COMMUNITY ACTION AGENCY MARSHALL, MISSOURI

*A Case Study*





## 1. Key Program Distinctions

Missouri Valley Community Action Agency (MVCAA) was selected as a community-based organization that serves low-income individuals and families in seven counties throughout rural Missouri. MVCAA's approach to providing employment supports demonstrates how flexible funding can help TANF clients fulfill a wide range of work requirements. By partnering with local organizations ranging from local businesses to county Workforce Development Boards, MVCAA collaborates with a wide range of rural organizations to help clients overcome barriers such as transportation needs and basic job-training skills. Today, MVCAA serves more than 8,000 individuals throughout 19 locations in Missouri Valley, and its wide-ranging programs—including Head Start, a Community Work Support initiative, and summer youth programs—serve primarily TANF recipients or TANF-eligible individuals. A list of site visit participants consulted in developing this report is included as an appendix.

## 2. Missouri's Demographics

MVCAA is a community-based organization serving impoverished individuals and families in Ray, Carroll, Chariton, Lafayette, Saline, Johnson, and Pettis counties. In 2007, Missouri had a population of 5,834,644, of which 697,839 families had children younger than age 18.

The major economic industries in Missouri include agriculture, manufacturing, aerospace, and tourism. In 2007, Missouri had a median income of \$44,545 and an unemployment rate of 4.2 percent.

In 2008, an average of 86,647 recipients—including 35,921 families and 60,314 children—were receiving TANF benefits in Missouri. More information regarding Missouri's demographics is presented in Exhibit 1.

## 3. Missouri Valley's Historical Background and Development

MVCAA was established under Lyndon B. Johnson's Economic Opportunity Act of 1964 to fight America's War on Poverty. The goal of Community Action Agencies is to help individuals and

<b>Exhibit 1: Demographic Information for Missouri<sup>a</sup></b>	
<b>Population</b>	
2007	5,834,644
<b>Ethnicity (2007)</b>	
White	84.0%
African-American	11.3%
Asian or Pacific Islander	1.5%
Hispanic or Latino origin <sup>b</sup>	2.9%
<b>Age Composition (2007)</b>	
0-19	1,586,483
20-24	400,822
25-44	1,572,629
45-64	1,494,581
65 +	780,129
Median Age	37.3
<b>Gender Composition (2007)</b>	
Male	2,846,615
Female	2,988,029
<b>Median Income (2007)</b>	
per household	\$44,545
<b>Unemployment Rate</b>	
2007	4.2%
<b>Missouri TANF Indicators (FY 2008)</b>	
Recipients (average)	86,647
Families (average)	35,921
Children (average)	60,314
<small><sup>a</sup> Source: U.S. Census Bureau. (2007). <i>American Community Survey 2005-2007</i>. Retrieved September 2009 from <a href="http://factfinder.census.gov/servlet/DatasetMainPageServlet?_program=ACS&amp;_submenuId=&amp;_lang=en&amp;_ts=">http://factfinder.census.gov/servlet/DatasetMainPageServlet?_program=ACS&amp;_submenuId=&amp;_lang=en&amp;_ts=</a>            U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families. (2008). <i>TANF Caseload Data</i>. Retrieved September 2009, from <a href="http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/ofa/data-reports/caseload/caseload_recent.html#2008">http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/ofa/data-reports/caseload/caseload_recent.html#2008</a>  <sup>b</sup> Hispanics may be of any race, so also are included in applicable race categories.</small>	

families break the cycle of poverty and attain self-sufficiency. MVCAA is one of more than 900 Community Action Agencies in the United States, 19 of which are spread throughout the State of Missouri.



With an initial \$50,000 grant, MVCAA was founded to operate three community centers serving approximately 60 children. Within a year, MVCAA had expanded its services by opening a Head Start program. Today, the organization's \$9.7 million budget funds programs serving more than 8,000 adults, youths, and children at 19 sites across the Missouri Valley Region. The majority of individuals and families served by MVCAA are TANF-eligible.

#### 4. Programmatic Information

MVCAA provides holistic and comprehensive services to meet the needs of community members in the areas of housing, weatherization, energy assistance, case management, and community service. MVCAA's Community Work Support grant, its Circles Initiative, its Head Start program, and its summer youth work all support low-income clients, many of whom are TANF recipients or TANF-eligible.

MVCAA's Community Work Support Grant, is funded through the Missouri Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS). It provides discretionary funding to address employment barriers faced by TANF recipients who are sanctioned or dangerously close to being sanctioned (i.e., individuals whose TANF benefits have been reduced due to the imposition of a sanction for failing to comply with TANF program rules). Through this pilot project, MVCAA addresses both hard- and soft-skill barriers to employment by responding to individual requests for assistance. Examples of such requests include funding for a car inspection, the registration fee for a certification course, or supplying participants with appropriate business attire.

An example of these partnerships is MVCAA's collaboration with local banks and car detailers, who can secure low-interest car loans for those in need of transportation assistance. Through the Community Work Supports Project, MVCAA has served 49 individuals—over half of whom have had their sanction successfully removed. (Another quarter of these individuals have had their sanctions removed but then reinstated.)

The Community Work Supports Project is supported by MVCAA's Circles Initiative. This initiative provides training and education to individuals who are actively trying to get out of poverty. In weekly meetings held at local churches, individuals receive support and education on finance and budgeting issues. Additionally, Circles participants are matched with long-term volunteer mentors, referred to as allies, who provide individual guidance. This initiative, which currently operates in two counties, has served approximately 135 individuals.

***According to one MVCAA partner, "The program is one of the greatest things ever designed. It gives people like me the opportunity to make life better, with some support. But it's not a free ride; if they don't want to put out the effort, they don't get the end result."***

Additionally, MVCAA's Head Start program provides parents receiving TANF benefits with an opportunity to volunteer in their children's Head Start centers, thereby fulfilling their TANF work requirements. When discussing the importance of this opportunity, one partner commented, "You can't put a dollar value on this. For a lot of these kids, this is as good as it gets. The children are so happy. The staff is wonderful with them and they get the families involved. It's a Head Start for the families as well as the kids." Its 2007 Head Start TANF pilot project allowed MVCAA to meet its Head Start non-Federal match requirements through the volunteer efforts of these Head Start parents receiving TANF support. While the pilot project is now coming to its conclusion, MVCAA continues to provide volunteer opportunities for Head Start parents.

In 2009, MVCAA was awarded a contract from the Workforce Development Board to administer a summer youth program as part of the Workforce Investment Act. This program was operated through funding from the Recovery Act and served disconnected youth ages 16–24.



## 5. Partnerships and Community Engagement

MVCAA has a long history of partnering with community organizations and government entities. In part because MVCAA is located in a rural community, the staff and nearby organizations rely on each other to meet the multiple needs of their low-income clients. When asked to explain the interconnectedness of the social service agencies in Marshall, one partnering organization noted, “None of us get enough funding to do the whole job. So [collaborating] starts out as a necessity. We understand it and quickly learn to enjoy working with our partners.”

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Not only are fiscal resources limited, human capital is as well. Active community members are involved in and sit on the boards of multiple social service agencies. With limited resources inherently encouraging collaboration, MVCAA and its partners strive to establish both informal and formal partnerships that advance and support one another’s missions.

MVCAA has partnered with the Workforce Development Board for 20 of the past 26 years. Throughout the years, MVCAA has held contracts with the Workforce Development Board for adult, dislocated worker, and youth programs. The organizations also cross-refer individuals to each other’s programs; MVCAA refers low-income individuals to the Workforce Development Board’s Career Center, and the Workforce Development Board refers people to MVCAA’s weatherization and Summer Youth programs.

Beyond referrals to help low-income individuals find employment, MVCAA and the Workforce Development Board

occasionally convene joint trainings for their staff members. Staff members are paid to participate in approved seminars and conferences, and receive outside training so that frontline staff and supervisors can better serve clients. In addition to the benefits of this on- and off-site training and technical assistance, MVCAA receives access to *Tool Box*, an online data-tracking program, as part of its Workforce Development Board contract. According to staff members at MVCAA, this data-tracking program greatly facilitates information-sharing and data tracking between the Workforce Development Board and MVCAA, enhancing each organization’s ability to better serve low-income individuals.

In 2011, the Workforce Development Board anticipates a significant structural change, which will require representatives from different grantee agencies to be housed under one roof. The board’s hope is that this will lead to increased cross-agency collaboration and facilitate service delivery to low-income community members.

In addition to partnering with the Workforce Development Board, MVCAA also works with other community-based organizations. University Extensions, for example, has formally collaborated with MVCAA since 1985, offering family financial education to low-income individuals. Through this partnership, University Extensions evaluates MVCAA’s Tackling the Tough Skills course; it also utilizes MVCAA to pilot urban models to explore what potential they might have in different rural settings. Over the years, the two organizations have worked collaboratively on a number of grants. As one member from University Extensions commented, “It became clear to me that to get the community-based work done [which was a required part of the grant], I needed to work with MVCAA.”

MVCAA also has a strong partnership with the Marshall-Saline Development Council, a nonprofit organization focused on business development and client traction. Co-located with local government officials, the Marshall-Saline Development



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Council is able to informally meet with government officials and discuss matters pertaining to its partnership with MVCAA. Though now a positive working relationship, the Marshall-Saline Development Council initially encountered some challenges in forging a partnership with MVCAA. Lack of communication and confidence between MVCAA and local business leaders resulted in difficulties in providing job opportunities to MVCAA clients. Six years ago, a change in MVCAA’s leadership opened the door for Marshall-Saline Development Council to discuss these issues and develop trust, by initiating practices such as only placing clients with good employment skills in available positions. According to one key stakeholder, Marshall-Saline Development Council and MVCAA “now work together on things that go way outside of our mandated boundaries. I don’t know anyone who is a bigger partner.”

In contrast to local community-based organizations, members of the faith-based community in Missouri Valley have historically provided social services and support on an individual basis, and with minimal outside collaboration. Lamenting the collective contribution these entities could make, one partner commented, “We have such a great faith-based community in the area. I’d like to see them pull together a little more—because if we did, I’m sure we could accomplish more.” Elaborating on this idea, another partner noted, “Our churches are generally pretty independent in spirit ... if one church builds a gym, the neighboring church will build an identical gym; yet in the end, all the children will still want to use the YMCA because that is where their friends play.”

Despite this observation, local churches have augmented some of the services MVCAA provides to TANF recipients. Local

churches refer individuals to MVCAA, which in turn refers some individuals to faith-based programs. The Ministerial Alliance, a coalition of religious organizations whose main activity includes planning a local holiday service event, is one avenue through which MVCAA and the faith-based community share programmatic information.

The faith-based community also supports MVCAA by sending volunteers, who help with its programs. For example, volunteers supply Circles Initiatives participants with meals, and a few even serve as mentors in the program. The faith-based community also encourages group involvement in this program, although many parishioners choose to give their time and services on an individual basis. MVCAA also actively recruits volunteers from the local Kiwanis and Rotary service groups, and from sports teams at the local university, Missouri Valley College.

Finally, several for-profit entities partner with MVCAA to enhance its service delivery to TANF recipients. For example, MVCAA subsidizes the cost of child care for low-income parents at a local daycare center. This partnership has been mutually beneficial, as MVCAA was responsible for boosting the daycare center’s attendance when the recession resulted in many families having to remove their children from the facility for financial reasons. MVCAA’s clients are also able to volunteer at the daycare center to fulfill their TANF work requirements.

Another for-profit partner is Larry’s Detail Shop, a local auto detailing business that provides TANF youth with work experience. The partnership was initiated by the owner in 2006, and has grown considerably over the years. The owner not only trains youth in specific detailing skill-sets, he also provides informal mentoring in an effort to help them attain self-sufficiency. He informally requires that the youth remain in school with an A or B in all their classes, for as long as they work for him. MVCAA and Larry’s Detail Shop also partner to provide affordable transportation to low-income individuals, and through its Work Supports Grant, MVCAA has subsidized



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car repairs and even car purchases from Larry’s Detail Shop for qualifying, low-income individuals. As transportation is one of the main barriers to employment in Marshall, this partnership has been influential in helping individuals to stay motivated—and ultimately obtain and sustain employment.

When describing the motive for partnering with MVCAA, one partner commented, “I think MVCAA [has] tried to work to keep low-income people working. They try to keep them employed, and since they provide so many services for those in need, I try to help out when I can.” While these partnerships have allowed MVCAA to broaden its services and goods for low-income individuals, stakeholders still recognize that its partnerships could be enhanced if more for-profit partners were provided with basic education about TANF and its requirements, including its work supports for participants.

## 6. Lessons Learned

The most promising lessons learned from MVCAA include:

- **Encouraging employees to network at all levels of the organization builds partnership capacity.** Leaders of the organization may be the most visible, most prominent staff members, but it takes consistent networking by staff members at all levels of the organization to build partnership capacity. Opportunities to partner are only maximized if all staff members collaborate with social service agencies, community-based organizations, faith-based organizations, and for-profit partners.

- **Information-sharing lays the foundation for mutually beneficial partnerships.** Providing information to key stakeholders about programs and services available to low-income individuals generally leads to increased opportunities for partnerships. Doing so also ensures that partners are informed about program changes and updates, which in turn allows them to make appropriate referrals.
- **Discretionary funding enhances service delivery to low-income individuals.** Funding that enables organizations to directly address specific, individualized employment barriers can further advance the ability of low-income individuals to attain self-sufficiency. By contrast, funding that is mandated only for highly regimented activities sometimes runs the risk of omitting the core needs of participants.

## 7. Conclusion

MVCAA’s consistent willingness to collaborate has earned the organization widespread respect from the community it serves. One partner commented that MVCAA “really isn’t turf-oriented, since they realize the job of serving the hardest-to-serve is bigger than what any of us can accomplish.” By working together with local partners throughout all seven counties, MVCAA has forged real community connections that help its staff discern how best to support clients by equipping them for the workforce. Input shared by local partners, who often have different perspectives on MVCAA clients, can be instrumental in helping individuals succeed—or, in some cases, in providing needed accountability.



## List of Site Visit Participants – Missouri Valley Community Action Agency

Pam La Frenz, Executive Director, Missouri Valley Community Action Agency (MVCAA)

Susan Hunter, Program Director, MVCAA

Melanie Corporon, Community Development Director, MVCAA

Debbie Lawson, Director, Head Start Program

*Focus Group* – Case Managers, MVCAA

Cynthia Crawford, Director, University Extension Program

Cheryl Walter, Owner, Corporate Day Care Program

Jackie Grossenberg, Volunteer, MVCAA

Suzanne Richards, Director of Field Services, Workforce Development Board

Debbie Eskew, Case Worker, TANF Program

Connie Latimer, Mayor, City of Marshall

Roy Hunter, Director, Missouri Economic Development Council

TANF FAITH-BASED AND COMMUNITY ORGANIZATIONS INITIATIVE

