



**'POVERTY MATTERS'**  
**LOW-INCOME CITIZENS**  
**SPEAK TO COMMUNITY ACTION in WISCONSIN**

**Over 8,600 low-income people participate in Community Needs Assessments**

Wisconsin's Community Action Agencies (CAAs) help low-income households become economically self-sufficient and, in the process, help local communities grow and nurture their economic health. Community Action Agencies give direct voice to their low-income customers. Low-income representatives make up 1/3 of CAA agency Boards of Directors. Low-income households participate in identifying priorities, service design and provision, and evaluation of program operations.

In addition, every three years, the 16 Community Action Agencies in Wisconsin conduct a "community needs assessment" to identify the needs and barriers to addressing poverty directly from low-income households. When 'poverty matters', the voice of low-income households matters above all else.

Over 8,600 low-income households participated and provided information on critical needs as a part of the community needs assessments conducted by Community Action Agencies in 2010.

In their reports of the needs assessments in their communities, a number of agencies have commented on the complex nature of poverty and the interrelated needs and barriers faced by many low-income people. The recession exacerbated these problems for the poor and added significantly to the number of families and individuals asking for help. Economic conditions created a major increase in unemployment and, in turn, the level of poverty.

The areas of need that were reported most frequently were:

- **Employment:** Half of all CAAs reported jobs and employment as the number one concern based on the community needs assessments. Many workers are unable to find full-time work while others struggle in low-paying jobs.
- **Education & training:** Closely related employment- these issues were highly ranked in virtually all of the local assessments. Many workers want to obtain additional education or training, but cost and other barriers make it difficult.

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- **Housing and homelessness:** These areas were also very highly ranked in most assessments. The most common concerns are:
  - Help with heating and other utility bills; Need for home weatherization and energy efficiency
  - Help with rent or mortgage to prevent eviction, foreclosure and homelessness
  - Home repairs
  - Help purchasing a home
  - Need for transitional housing and support services to address homelessness
  
- **Health care:** An array of issues were frequently reported as top concerns, including:
  - The cost of health care/dental care and/or the lack of or cost of health insurance
  - A severe lack of dentists that accept Medical assistance as payment
  - Availability of health care providers, especially in rural areas
  - Cost of prescription drugs
  - Abuse of drugs and alcohol in communities
  - Increase in anxiety, stress and depression
  
- **Transportation:** The costs of obtaining and maintaining a reliable vehicle to get to work, school and other daily destinations were major barriers for many respondents. Transportation options for seniors and persons with disabilities were also common, especially in rural areas.
  
- **Economic Security:**
  - Money management- a large number of households reported needing help improving credit rating or learning budgeting skills. Most low-income people have very low, if any, savings to serve as a buffer against crises.
  - Issues facing children and families- the cost and availability of quality child care were commonly cited as concerns.
  - Food security- the recession caused a large increase in the number of families and individuals in need of food assistance. Many reported cutting back on food expenditures to pay other expenses and deal with loss of income.
  - Emergency needs- most agencies reported a significant increase in the number of households seeking emergency help.

**Emerging trends reported in many parts of the state:**

- Due to economic conditions, agencies are serving more households that have not sought help in the past
- There is an increasing need for workers with knowledge and technology skills and a reduced demand for laborers
- Demographic changes, such as
  - Increase in number of seniors needing help to remain in their homes
  - Continued growth of diversity throughout the state
- Housing costs remain unaffordable for a large percentage of low-income households
- Respondents living in rural areas more frequently reported a lack of access to health care and transportation barriers
- Homelessness continues to be a major concern