

July 14, 2009

NEWS RELEASE

For Immediate Release

OHC's West Elected President of Statewide Community Action Association;
Stresses Agencies Are Stimulus Partners in National Effort to Revive Economy

Al West, executive director of the Office of Human Concern (OHC) in Rogers, has been elected president of the Arkansas Community Action Agencies Association (ACAAA), a network of private, nonprofits that injected more than \$116 million into communities throughout the state last year to help more than 200,000 Arkansans of low and moderate income advance.

The community action agencies, funded by federal, state and local public and private sources, were enabled to be created by landmark national legislation approved in 1964 that sought to "eliminate the paradox of poverty in the midst of plenty." There are 16 agencies in the state, more than 1,000 in the country, governed by boards that represent all sectors of the communities they serve.

West was elected at the agencies' annual conference in Fort Smith in late May; his term is for two years.

OHC, the community action agency for Benton, Carroll, and Madison counties, has a budget of \$3.6 million, has 55 employees, and helped more than 7,600 people in the last year. It helps people gain education, training, and employment, food, emergency shelter, rehabilitated houses, weatherization and utility assistance, and scholarships (for single parents) for higher education. It also works with banks to help people develop assets, operates centers for seniors, and provides opportunities for retired and older people to volunteer.

There are 12 members on the board, and the president is Lee House of Siloam Springs, a retired U. S. Navy captain and volunteer.

West, 66, who worked in the private and public sectors before becoming executive director in 2004, said in a news release announcing his election, "I'm proud to be president of a network that has done so much for Arkansas, and am grateful that I'll be able to work with other executive directors and their staffs, the ACAA staff, and our many partners to strengthen our work, so we can help more people and help them more completely, in these difficult economic times."

He said the agencies have historically lacked funding to help all those eligible for their programs, but now will be able to help many more, because of additional federal funding they're receiving under the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) approved by Congress and President Barack Obama in January. OHC is to receive more than \$4 million in ARRA funds in the next three years, in addition to its regular funding.

"We're thrilled the community action agencies were designated to receive ARRA funds," he said, adding that "it demonstrates that the congress and the president have confidence in us to be a vital part of the national recovery."

The funds, called stimulus funds because they are meant to stimulate the economy by preserving and creating jobs and helping the unemployed and others become more fiscally stable, will enable the agency to help more people through its Community Services Block Grant programs and its Weatherization Assistance Program. The block grant programs provide an array of opportunities, services and support; weatherization makes improvements on homes to make them more energy-efficient, safe and healthy.

Regulations related to the stimulus funding will enable those of more moderate income, up to 200 percent of the federal government definition of poverty, to be eligible for community services and weatherization programs, West said, adding that the change “recognizes that many who have been ineligible for our help now are struggling and in need.”

(A family of four with an annual income of up to \$44,100 would be eligible for certain help; see sidebar for more detail.)

West said the stimulus funding “is a godsend because so many more people are in crisis because of the recession and are struggling to sustain themselves.”

(More than 18 percent of the state’s population, or more than 500,000 people, lives in poverty, according to the latest U. S. Census figures. The poverty rate in Benton County is 9.1 percent; Carroll County, 16.2 percent, and Madison County, 17.3 percent, according to the 2000 census, the most recent estimate of poverty by county.)

OHC, which hired 10 more people recently and will hire more as part of expanding the work, will “concentrate on helping laid-off workers, the chronically unemployed, and younger people who’ll be our future workers,” he said, adding that they’ll be given instruction in reading and math, if needed, and trained.

As part of such work, the agency is establishing a bargain store, which will sell an array of goods at discount, and will train people – 24 the first year – in how to operate a small business. “By providing quality merchandise for a good price and producing positive results in education and job training, it will become the model of how a store can strengthen the community,” he said.

He said the stimulus funding, because it’s helping the agency broaden its work, will help it gain more partners and leverage more funding “that will help us help more people.” (The agency now has more than 90 partners – institutions, businesses, organizations, and groups.)

Despite rising unemployment, plant and business closings and cutbacks, and other developments that have caused widespread hardship, he said he remains optimistic that “we can work our way out of this, because we know what to do and how to do it, and, I believe, have wide support.” He maintained that “helping people help themselves is at the heart of the American value system, and Arkansans and Americans support such work because they want to have better, stronger communities where everyone is able to have fulfilling, productive, contributing lives, for the betterment of all. I have faith that, working together, that is what we’ll achieve.”

Sidebar

Eligible for OHC Help?

The Office of Human Concern in Rogers, which mainly helps those of low income, is now able to offer its opportunities, services, and support, through two primary programs, to those whose annual incomes are up to 200 percent of the federal government definition of poverty.

The change in the eligibility guidelines, made recently by the federal government to enable more of those of moderate income to be helped, means that, to be eligible for the Weatherization Assistance Program and those funded by the federal Community Services Block Grant, an individual may have an income of \$21,660; a family of two, \$29,140; a family of three, \$36,620; a family of four, \$44,100; a family of five, \$51,580; a family of six, \$59,060; a family of seven, \$66,540; a family of eight, \$74,020. (Add \$7,480 for each additional family member.)

For more information about OHC and the opportunities, services and support it offers, call the agency at (479) 636-7301.

(The news release was prepared in cooperation with William Green, director of communications for the Arkansas Community Action Agencies Association in Little Rock. He is a former reporter and feature writer for

United Press International in St. Louis and Chicago, The Commercial Appeal in Memphis, the now-defunct Arkansas Gazette in Little Rock (for 13 years), and USA Today in Rosslyn, Va.)