

## West CAP celebrates 40 years of fighting poverty

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*By Barbara Lyon, News Editor*

One of the first of its kind in the nation, the West Central Wisconsin Community Action Agency, Inc. (West CAP) has spent the past 40 years working with single-minded purpose toward eliminating poverty in the region.

And while poverty hasn't disappeared, its effects have certainly been mitigated for many, thanks to the dozens of programs offered by West CAP.

At a 40th anniversary banquet held Wednesday at UW-Stout's Terrace Caf/, executive director Peter Kilde welcomed Lt. Governor Barbara Lawton, the event's keynote speaker, as well as senior grant writer/planner (and former West CAP director), Patrick Pesek-Herriges, who reflected on the agency's accomplishments since 1965.

"West CAP got off to an amazingly active beginning and has been incredibly active through the years in terms of innovation, of start-ups, of new programs, of discovering what needs of people truly are and then going to the root of the problem and meeting those needs," Pesek-Herriges said.

In the past, West CAP has offered services in the area of employment and training, health, and child and family development. Many programs, like JBD Business Startups and Jobs, food pantry services, housing preservation, affordable housing, and JumpStart and Ideal Auto, are still going strong.

"It's been interesting to look back to see when things started and when things stopped," Pesek-Herriges said, remarking that cuts in funding during the 1980s characterized the decade as "an era of survival rather than an era of innovation and new development."

Despite the challenges, the agency's service numbers tell a tale of success. For example, thanks to 40 years of funding totaling nearly \$151 million, West CAP has weatherized and rehabilitated more than 12,000 homes and constructed 88 affordable housing units.



Lt. Governor Barbara Lawton spoke at West CAP's 40th anniversary banquet Wednesday at UW-Stout. Lawton said West CAP is "an incubator for ideas but it's not just innovation but entrepreneurship ..." Barbara Lyon/Dunn County News

Its early childhood programs at one time served more than 11,000 youngsters and 208 good, used autos have been sold to its low-income parents. And thanks to West CAP help, 105 new businesses got their start.

Those are just a few of the reasons Lawton is a big fan of community action agencies, West CAP in particular.

"So much of what you're doing and what you've defined as your direction is something that I am thinking about when I think about government and what we need to do to shape our mission in this changing climate," the Lt. Governor said. "West CAP is an incubator for ideas but it's not just innovation but entrepreneurship -- and that's what's so important."

She praised the agency's mission to not only help low-income rural families but to give them the tools to help themselves.

"Your goal of building a sustainable society, and where government can intersect to support your intent, is our shared agenda," Lawton said. "You offer programs to families standing on shaky, moving ground, ones that give them more substantial legs to stand on. We are their ticket to enrich what you're able to do."

Disappointed in the administration of the Welfare-to-Work (W2) program, she noted that its intent has been only to put women to work and off the welfare rolls, not to break the bonds of poverty.

"Unfortunately, the legislature cut funds to W2 in the governor's budget to beef up the feeble infrastructure for childcare and to try to support the expense of getting out of poverty -- and not just finding a job," she explained.

A sustainable economy is only possible, Lawton said, when the state's lowest-income citizens become a part of the economic mainstream.

"Wisconsin has a proud, progressive tradition and it reminds us of government's central role in creating ethical and just communities for all citizens -- with dignity and a very real sense of promise in their lives," she said.

Kilde readily recognized that in the face of ever-dwindling resources, West CAP will need even more imagination and innovation as it continues to pursue its goals.

"Needless to say, we do not anticipate a great expansion of federal funding for domestic discretionary programs," he said. "And foundations are stretched beyond their capacity to fund the demand."

But Kilde doesn't feel despair as he eyes the agency's future, one that embraces "the operating principle of building a sustainable society."

"Imbedded in the story of West CAP's 40-year history is the fact that this agency is resilient, creative, compassionate, innovative, ahead of the curve and surprisingly light on its feet," he stated.

Much of its longevity, he added, stems from a consistently supportive board of directors and a dedicated staff with diverse backgrounds.

"It is of no small consequence that over the past 40 years, West CAP has employed over 1,300 people, many of whom have gone on from the agency to important positions promoting positive change in their varied careers,"

Kilde concluded. "It is a place where it is realistic to be idealistic."