



## VT Community Action Agencies' (CAAs') Agenda for the 2019 Legislature Creating a Vibrant Opportunity Economy for All Vermonters

*"The creation of the safety net during the twentieth century was a wonderful achievement, but the task of the twenty-first century is to create a ladder so that people can climb out of poverty."* ~Robert Friedman~

More than 25% of Vermont households are one layoff or serious medical incident away from falling below the poverty line.<sup>1</sup> Despite these startling numbers, creating a vibrant economy—an *opportunity economy* in which all Vermonters thrive—is within our reach. The financial security strategies outlined below offer proven on-ramps into the economy and strong returns on investments for families with low incomes. These well-researched and demonstrated programs create and enable improved access to jobs, enhance financial stability, and help people build and manage assets, while addressing economic inequality.

It is recommended that every agency of the state share *responsibility and resources* to stabilize low income families, break down barriers to successful employment, and support initiatives that foster job creation, workforce development, financial capability, and economic opportunities where appropriate.

**Increase Funding for the Micro Business Development Program (MBDP)** Since 1989, MBDP has provided free business technical assistance (training and counseling) and access to capital to low-income Vermonters. The Vermont Community Action Agencies (CAAs) work in conjunction with many partners, including other service providers, state agencies, business technical assistance providers, and lenders, both alternative and traditional. Each year, an average of 115 businesses are started or expanded across Vermont, 86 new jobs are created, and more than \$1 million in capital is accessed. **The average cost per job is less than \$3,800. Current base funding is \$300,000; we request a \$200,000 increase funding to \$500,000.**



### **Fully fund the Individual Development Account (Vermont**

**Matched Savings) Program** In 2018 the Legislature reinvested in the matched savings (IDA) and financial education program that helps low-income Vermonters invest in their future by enabling them to build financial assets. Matched by state funds, participants save—and have their savings matched—to purchase or repair a home, invest in training or post-secondary education, grow a business, or purchase or repair a vehicle. Since its start in 1997, 998 Vermonters have completed their savings period and invested \$2.8 million in their future, much of which has helped support their local economy. 566 have invested in businesses, 229 in education, and 203 in first-time homeownership. **Current base funding is \$135,300; we request an increase to the original appropriation of \$250,000.**



<sup>1</sup> 2016 Assets & Opportunities Scorecard, Census Bureau, Survey of Income and Program Participation. 1/30/19

**Support Workforce Development/Training Initiatives** The VT CAAs offer a number of workforce initiatives that address persistent barriers to employment faced by disadvantaged workers with no, little, or unsuccessful work experiences, and who need customized and comprehensive training and services to overcome those obstacles, such as job readiness programs that help a wide range of groups, including at-risk youth to obtain their first jobs, and incarcerated individuals to gain core life & workplace skills to enter the workforce when they're released. **We request \$250,000 to support efforts to increase access to the workforce and ensure a supply of job-ready, dependable workers to enable employers to maintain and expand their businesses.**



**Fund Financial Education, Coaching, and Credit Building Services** To overcome barriers to financial security, financial capability education & coaching services empower people to stabilize their finances, set goals and work to achieve them, and sustain successful financial behaviors over time. The knowledge and skills gained by low-income Vermonters enable them to manage their scarce resources, repair or build credit, and establish or strengthen connections to financial institutions. Vermont Community Action agencies report that some families participating in financial education programs have yielded a savings of more than \$2,514 since participating—a substantial sum for families living in poverty. Additionally, a national study found that 58% of low-to-moderate-income individuals receiving financial coaching and credit building services had their credit score increase as a result.<sup>2</sup> These services can and have been customized to meet the particular needs of Reach Up families. **We request \$500,000 to cover the cost of existing services and expand availability.**



**Fund the Volunteer Income Tax Assistance Program (VITA)**

The Volunteer Income Tax Assistance (VITA) offers free tax preparation for anyone with annual income of less than \$55,000. In FY2018, the VT CAAs completed 3,309 Federal returns and 3,844 State returns. The total refunds and tax credits brought \$6.8 million back into the state economy and helped stabilize low-income Vermont households. VITA has a 94% accuracy rate, higher than any other tax preparation service. In addition to the State and Federal returns, CAA agencies assisted households with Renter's Rebate applications and Homestead Declarations. **The cost of the program statewide is \$189,000. We are requesting \$100,000 to leverage \$49,000 in IRS funding to sustain and expand access.**



In combination, these CAA Economic and Workforce Development programs provide Vermonters with low incomes opportunities to enter and succeed in the workforce, start and retain successful small businesses, enhance their financial capability, build or repair credit, achieve economic stability, and create and use financial assets effectively to invest in a better future for themselves and their families as well as a stronger and better Vermont.

*“We start with the recognition of the capacity and productive potential of low-income and economically-marginalized people: they are all potential creators of wealth, whether as skilled workers, entrepreneurs, home owners, savers or investors.” ~ Robert Friedman ~*

<sup>2</sup> Credit Builders Alliance, Analysis of CBA Members: Confirms Value of Credit Building, August 2014. 1/30/19