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Connecticut Association  
for Community Action

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Comments by Deb Polun, Executive Director  
before the Connecticut General Assembly's  
Appropriations and Human Services Committees

Informational Forum on  
the Community Services Block Grant (CSBG) Allocation Plan for FFY 2021  
and the CSBG CARES Act Amendment Allocation Plan for FFY 2020

August 26, 2020

Distinguished Chairpersons, Vice-Chairpersons, Ranking Members, and  
Members of the Appropriations and Human Services Committees:

Thank you for holding this informational forum on the FFY 2021 Community Services Block Grant (CSBG) Allocation Plan and the proposed amendment to the FFY 2020 CSBG Allocation Plan, to account for the CARES Act Supplemental Award. The Connecticut Association for Community Action (CAFCA) is the state association that works with Connecticut's nine Community Action Agencies (CAAs), the state and federal designated anti-poverty agencies serving over 250,000 low-income people in all 169 cities and towns across Connecticut.

### ***About Community Action Agencies***

Community Action Agencies were established as part of the War on Poverty, and the 1,000+ CAAs across the country have a long and proud history of serving low-income people and communities. The Community Services Block Grant (CSBG) provides Connecticut's CAA network with essential support for various programs and services that address the needs of limited-income people. CSBG helps CAAs provide a service delivery system that is:

- Effective;
- Customer-focused;
- Culturally sensitive;
- Multigenerational; and,
- Integrated.

This comprehensive "no wrong door" approach means that when someone goes to a Community Action Agency for any reason, they are accepted at any contact point and guided through a service system that works to address both short and long-term needs, helping people to achieve and maintain economic stability. Individuals and families may have needs related to housing, food, child care,

employment, and more, and CAAs can help address all of those needs in one place – like “one stop shopping.”

This is why Connecticut’s Community Action Agencies are such critical partners in improving our residents’ lives. Well-known and trusted in the communities they serve, our CAAs connected over 250,000 customers last year to the tools, resources, programs, and services they needed to survive and thrive. They helped limited income individuals and families meet their immediate, short, and long term needs, identify goals, and worked side by side with them to plan, achieve, and maintain a realistic path to economic self-sufficiency.

CAAs are held accountable to meeting program measures through a variety of accountability measures, including organizational standards, state accountability measures, and the use of Results-Oriented Management and Accountability (ROMA).

You can find demographic and other data about CAAs’ work in our [Annual Report](#), as well as stories of people who have been helped by CAAs across our state. I hope you take a few minutes to review these important results, as they truly show Community Action’s impact on Connecticut’s most at-risk and vulnerable people.

### ***Impact of COVID-19 on CAA Operations***

Throughout the COVID-19 crisis, Connecticut’s CAAs have nimbly transitioned their service delivery to ensure those facing financial struggles continue to receive vital services while taking the necessary precautions to ensure the safety of staff and customers. CSBG funds helped make these transitions happen, by providing critical infrastructure in staffing and other resources.

A few examples:

- CAAs shifted to more Meals on Wheels home deliveries instead of congregate meals at senior centers, ensuring that homebound older adults are still able to eat nutritious meals;
- They moved to providing intake for programs like energy assistance and SNAP by phone and by mail, set up dropboxes in their parking lots for completed application forms;
- They made outreach phone calls to homebound individuals to ensure their safety and address needs;
- Two CAAs shifted their child care centers to serve children of hospital workers and other first responders.

As we move into the recovery phase of COVID-19 and the end of various moratoria, CAAs will continue to help people who are facing utility shut-offs, evictions, and excess electric costs get back on their feet. Six CAAs are contracted as Community Resource Coordinators (two each in three of the five DEMHS regions), utilizing Community Health Workers to help meet identified needs of people impacted by COVID-19.

### ***Comments regarding the CSBG Allocation Plan for FFY 2021***

We are pleased to provide support for Commissioner Gifford and the Department of Social Services' FFY 2021 allocation plan for CSBG – with one suggestion noted below.

As indicated above, CSBG funds are essential to help CAAs help residents across the state, both now and into the future. Connecticut had already lagged behind the rest of the nation in personal income growth, and the state is still feeling the effects of the first few years after the last recession ended.<sup>1</sup> Now, with the COVID-19 pandemic and resulting economic downturn, even more Connecticut families struggle to make ends meet. Although the one-time federal stimulus and the additional unemployment benefits were helpful, as are the various moratoria on utility shutoffs and evictions, those are not long-term solutions to families' economic difficulties. Unemployment remains high in Connecticut, and many businesses are closing permanently. It is difficult to imagine a quick and full recovery.

With CSBG, CAAs conduct comprehensive community needs assessments to determine which programs, services, and resources will address the specific, unmet needs of people within the communities they serve. These needs may vary – for example, in rural versus urban areas, or in parts of the state that are experiencing disproportionate job losses. CAAs use CSBG funds for strategic planning to design and implement programs that meet those needs, while also considering organizational change, growth, and financial sustainability. CSBG funds also provide training and technical assistance to CAA staff – including tracking the services they provide – to assist with state and federal data reporting requirements. And, CAAs have thousands of partnerships with other local, state, federal, and community-based organizations, working to coordinate and improve service integration.

Notably, these federal CSBG dollars are also critical in leveraging both public and private funds. Each dollar in CSBG funds leverages \$28.55 from federal, state, local, and private resources, including the value of volunteer hours.

One area we wish to highlight is the performance thresholds and incentives included in Section F. Although CAFCA and the Community Action Agencies support the utilization of incentives in general, we suggest that the threshold for the lowest benefit amount be lowered slightly – or that only strictly objective measures be utilized for this assessment.

### ***Comments regarding the CSBG CARES Act Amendment***

When the COVID-19 pandemic and economic crisis hit, and Congress sought to provide supplemental funds to help people across our country, policymakers turned to the Community Action Agencies as trusted partners. The CARES Act provides over \$12 million of funding for Connecticut's Community Action Agency network to address a variety of economic and social service needs for people in our state, related to COVID-19. Funding is flexible and will be used somewhat differently by each CAA, so that each can address the needs identified in its catchment area. CAFCA's funding, as the Limited Purpose Agency referenced in the proposal, will support

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<sup>1</sup> Phaneuf, Keith M, "New report shows CT still lags the nation in "personal income growth", CT Mirror, August 13, 2019. Available from: <https://ctmirror.org/2019/08/13/new-report-shows-ct-still-lags-the-nation-in-personal-income-growth/>

training and technical assistance specific to CARES Act funds, including tracking and reporting, as well as the creation of Continuity of Operations plans for the network.

CAFCA supports DSS’s proposal for the use of this award, including the option to provide services to people with incomes up to 200% of federal poverty level (an increase from the standard 125%). For a family of four, this means serving people with household incomes of \$52,400, instead of \$32,750.

Household Size	125% of FPL	200% of FPL
2	\$21,550	\$34,480
3	\$27,250	\$43,440
4	\$32,750	\$52,400

This increase in eligibility will help capture individuals with incomes too high for SNAP and too high for HUSKY – but who, because of high costs of living in Connecticut, still struggle to pay for housing, food, and other necessities. In fact, according to the United Way’s ALICE Report<sup>2</sup>, **it cost a Connecticut family of four \$77,832 to meet the bare minimum Household Survival Budget in 2018**. The funding provided through the CARES Act will ensure that CAAs are able to take on these additional customers, without shifting resources from the lower income individuals and families they traditionally serve.

On behalf of Connecticut’s Community Action Network, I would like to thank all of you, as well as Commissioner Gifford and her staff at the Department of Social Services, for your support of and advocacy for programs that serve low-income people in Connecticut and aim to help them improve their lives and communities. I am happy to discuss these funds and the work of Community Action Agencies further at your convenience.

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<sup>2</sup> ALICE: A Study of Financial Hardship in Connecticut, Connecticut United Ways, 2018.  
<https://alice.ctunitedway.org/>