



Healing Our Communities from the Inside

The Vital Role Community Action Agencies Play in
Minnesota's COVID-19 Response & Recovery

A White Paper

By
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Action Partnership

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About Community Action

The Economic Opportunity Act of 1964 created the Community Action Network of national and local organizations that connect millions of people, with low and moderate incomes, to essential services. The network works to build community resiliency and helps people move out of poverty. In Minnesota, 24 Community Action Agencies and 11 Tribal Nations serve all 87 counties across the state, providing poverty solutions through various programs and services including: homeless prevention and housing assistance, utility bill assistance, healthcare enrollment, food and nutrition services, Head Start early childhood programming, financial asset building, regional transit, and more.

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Executive Summary



Building community resiliency and addressing the causes of poverty are the cornerstones of Community Action. When the COVID-19 pandemic hit in early 2020, the challenges facing people with low incomes and persons of color were exacerbated – from unemployment to housing and food insecurity to transportation and technology barriers to healthcare deficits – the disparities were laid bare. Community Action Agencies (CAAs) and Tribal Governments were the first line of defense for so many in their communities. Being of their communities, CAAs could see, first hand, where the growing and changing needs in services were and where gaps in other programs appeared and pivot quickly to address them.

This paper will first highlight the many ways CAAs and Tribal Governments have, in past crises and during the current pandemic, been the primary provider of these essential services within their communities. Community Action is unique in its role within its community and connection to each community's needs. This positions Community Action to be especially effective in managing local emergencies on the ground. This paper will also demonstrate the invaluable role that flexible funding, including the Minnesota Community Action Grant Program (MCAG), has played in giving CAAs and Tribal Governments the ability to be nimble in addressing the ever evolving needs within Minnesota's communities being driven by COVID-19. MCAG also allows CAAs to leverage additional state, federal and private funds. Finally, this paper will explore how Community Action's focus on the "whole person/whole family" – from early education to employment training to housing and food services to mental health and senior services – will be key to addressing crucial social determinants of health and racial disparities. These will be necessary steps to move Minnesota out of this health and economic crisis toward long-term recovery.



Historical Model of Success

Community Action's role in the 'Great Recession' recovery

Throughout its 60-year history, Community Action Agencies (CAAs) have helped communities rally from economic recessions and natural disasters. One of the most effective examples of this was during the Great Recession. To address this recession, the federal government created the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) which provided an additional \$1 billion to the existing Community Services Block Grant (CSBG) program—an annual federally-funded grant program for CAAs and Tribal Governments to alleviate poverty in their communities. With the additional funding, CAAs around the country were able to create 18,000 jobs by building innovative new programs and expanding existing ones [1]. These jobs were key to helping pull communities out of the recession. It was the flexibility of these grants that allowed CAAs to respond nimbly and quickly to their communities' ever growing and changing needs [2]. The immediacy and flexibility of these funds was crucial to allowing CAAs to better leverage all of their funding sources to move communities out of crisis mode and into economic recovery.

More recently, during the economic and public health crises caused by COVID-19, the federal government once again turned to CAAs to help reach people at the local level and implement programs quickly for those most in need. With the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act, the federal government allocated an additional \$1 billion of CSBG nationally for CAAs and Tribal Nations because they could respond quickly and deftly to the crisis. The CSBG dollars came in conjunction with a variety of other funding for CAA programs at both the federal and state level, from funding for homeless shelters and emergency housing support, to extensions and waivers for federal support programs like Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and Medicaid, to additional funding for the Low-Income Home Energy Assistance Program. With the additional dollars for specific CAA programs, CSBG dollars—both the annual CSBG appropriation as well as the additional CARES Act funding—helped fill the gaps in immediate needs for essential services while agencies waited for other funding sources to come through.

Community Action Agencies in Minnesota also receive flexible funding from both the federal and state governments. This flexible funding is increasingly becoming a cornerstone to their ability to respond effectively to the public health and economic fall-out being caused by COVID-19. This paper will outline some of the ways CAAs are using their CSBG and Minnesota Community Action Grants (MCAG) to provide the immediate essential services needed in their communities as a result of the pandemic.

Did You Know:

Community Action Agencies nationally created **18,000 jobs** during the Great Recession.

Notations

[1]
<https://www.urban.org/sites/default/files/publication/25571/412602-Implementation-of-Community-Services-Block-Grants-under-ARRA.PDF>

[2]
<https://www.urban.org/sites/default/files/publication/25571/412602-Implementation-of-Community-Services-Block-Grants-under-ARRA.PDF>

Continuing Efforts

Local Innovation Fights Growing Gaps during COVID-19

Community Action Agencies are embedded in their communities, led by community members on their board, and understand the specific experiences and demographics of families with low incomes in their communities. In Minnesota, CAAs have risen to the occasion during this pandemic, evolving existing programs and launching new ones to meet the ever-changing needs caused by COVID-19. Some of these creative solutions include:

Health and Benefits Enrollment

CAAs have worked in partnership with county and state public health over the years to connect community members to essential public health services and to provide assistance with health care navigation and benefits enrollment for programs like the Child Health Insurance Program (CHIP), Medical Assistance, and MNsure. Due to the pandemic, these partnerships with public health departments have deepened, with CAAs providing new services to limit the negative health outcomes caused by COVID-19 in their communities.

To limit community spread of COVID-19, public health departments have deployed tremendous financial and personnel resources to engage in contact-tracing and testing. A great example of this partnership is happening at [Scott, Carver and Dakota Community Action Partnership](#), which has worked with the county public health department to provide free community COVID-19 testing at the agency. Many CAAs around the state are working with their county public health offices to provide this service or are working with their county health officials to amplify and connect agency participants with free testing and treatment options. But many of the people who test positive for COVID-19 do not have health insurance. CAAs are embedding their MNsure Navigators at COVID testing sites to enroll people without insurance either in Minnesota's free testing program or in health insurance to cover the cost of their testing and any follow-up care and treatment.

For community members who have been exposed to or who have COVID-19, additional resources and wrap-around services are often needed beyond just testing and access to treatment. CAAs are working to provide those wrap-around services from safe and affordable housing—especially for people exposed to COVID-19 without a place to quarantine like people experiencing homelessness, to food delivery, transportation to healthcare providers and essential services, and emotional support programs. These wrap-around services are a key component to preventing the spread of COVID-19. CAAs are able to provide the full scope of these services largely because of the flexible funding which allows them to purchase the necessary personal protective equipment and cleaning supplies they need to keep staff and program participants safe and expand services to reach people who are homebound.

Did You Know:

- **American Indians** are over **3-times** as likely to get **COVID-19**.
- **Black and Latinx** deaths from COVID-19 are over **6-times** higher.



In Response:

Community Action Agencies partnered with county public health departments to deploy COVID testing.



Did You Know:

1 in 8 Minnesotans likely to become food insecure due to COVID-19.



Food Insecurity

Community Action Agencies have ramped up their existing food security programs, such as enrolling people in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and the Women, Infant, and Children (WIC) program, and providing and delivering meals to older adults. But food insecurity has increased drastically across the state as a result of the pandemic. Research done by Second Harvest Heartland in collaboration with McKinsey & Co in June showed a significant increase in food insecurity in Minnesota during the pandemic. In fact, they found the number of food insecure Minnesotans is likely to rise to one in eight people, an increase of about 275,000 Minnesotans as compared to last year [3]. Often, food shelves and other emergency food services are underfunded and rely on donations and volunteers that are now limited due to COVID-19. But with their flexible funding, CAAs have been able to meet the growing food access needs in their communities, adapt and expand their programs to ensure people can safely receive healthy food options while remaining in their homes, and provide nutritious options that also support local growers.

- **Wright County Community Action (WCCA)** launched a nutrition program for older adults in Wright County at the start of the pandemic, in partnership with Catholic Charities, Waverly Café, and Airline Industries, to deliver healthy frozen meals to older adults who are homebound. WCCA has created strong partnerships with local farmers and producers, providing over 27,000 pounds of fresh produce to older adults in Wright County. And, the extra produce donated by local farmers has been distributed to folks in need in North Minneapolis in partnership with Second Harvest Heartland and other Twin Cities organizations.
- When **Scott, Carver and Dakota Community Action Partnership** saw that the demand in food shelf distributions had increased by 234 percent from July 2019 to July 2020, it acquired Esperanza, a Latinx community organization, to better meet the food insecurity needs of its communities.
- Community Action Agencies like **Tri-Valley Opportunity Council** and **Arrowhead Economic Opportunity Agency** are partnering with the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Farmers to Families Food Box program, which distributes local meat, produce, and dairy to anyone in the community in need. By connecting farmers with community members, the program ensures that farmers—who are often the cornerstone of the business community in rural areas—are able to make a living throughout the pandemic while providing households with low incomes with necessary nutritious food.

Notations

[3]
<https://www.2harvest.org/our-impact/hunger-facts/the-coming-hunger-surge.html#.X2T1fmhKiU>

Technology Support

For many of the Community Action Agencies in more rural or remote areas, lack of access to technology and broadband has been an issue the CAAs have been trying to deal with for years. But, with remote school and work, the issue of limited broadband is made worse and is disproportionately impacting students with low incomes across the state. Families with low incomes are almost three times more likely to say their children have to use public Wi-Fi to complete their school work during the pandemic due to unreliable internet at home and to say their children cannot complete schoolwork due to lack of a device than families with middle incomes [4]. And, these statistics are true across urban, rural, and suburban areas. CAAs in all parts of the state are working to limit the digital divide, and ensure students and families with low incomes are able to thrive in school and their jobs as they are forced to work and learn remotely.

- **Prairie Five**, a CAA serving five rural counties in Western Minnesota, launched a Tablet Lending Library in August 2020. The idea and goal of the library is to ensure all older adults and senior citizens in the five counties can access technology if they choose. The lending library includes hotspots and a tablet and also provides instructions on how to use the technology.
- **Community Action Duluth** has given out 150 laptops and Wi-Fi during the pandemic through their Community Tech-Up program.
- **KOOTASCA Community Action** launched an expanded computer and internet distribution program in late March 2020. Initial CSBG funds have been leveraged nearly six-fold by community investments that have enabled the distribution of more than 200 computers and 150 hotspots and internet subscriptions to date.

Long-Term Recovery

Flexible Funding Key to Address Racial Disparities Exacerbated by COVID-19

As the pandemic continues, CAAs are beginning to look for solutions to set up their communities for lasting, long-term recovery. But the challenges to economic and public health recovery from the pandemic will not be shared equally among communities or its members. CAAs are intimately aware of these inequities. The community members that have historically benefitted from CAA programs, those who were already struggling with housing, food, transportation and/or healthcare insecurity, are also the ones being hit the hardest by COVID-19.

The pandemic has highlighted the already existing fissures in our society, especially those related to race and class. Over half of Latinx, Black, and families with low incomes report losing work or hours due to the pandemic, compared to about one-third of white and middle-income



Did You Know:

Families with low incomes are 3-times more likely to need public Wi-Fi.

Notations

[4]
<https://www.crpe.org/thelens/digital-divide-among-students-during-covid-19-who-has-access-who-doesnt>

Did You Know:

Over half of
Blacks and Latinxs
lost employment
due to COVID-19.



Notations

[5]
<https://www.aappublications.org/news/2020/06/03/covid19hardships060320#:~:text=Financial%20hardships%20caused%20by%20the,according%20to%20a%20new%20report.&text=Just%20over%20half%20of%20low,income%20families%20reported%20job%20losses>

[6]
<https://www.cdc.gov/media/releases/2020/p0819-covid-19-impact-american-indian-alaska-native.html>

[7]
<https://www.brookings.edu/blog/up-front/2020/06/16/race-gaps-in-covid-19-deaths-are-even-bigger-than-they-appear/>

[8]
<https://www.census.gov/library/stories/2020/06/low-income-and-younger-adults-hardest-hit-by-loss-of-income-during-covid-19.html>

[9]
<https://www.twincities.com/2020/09/17/extra-300-unemployment-benefits-end-after-6-weeks-minnesotas-economy-continues-it-rebound/>

[10]
<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC577389/>

families [5]. And, the same patterns hold true for morbidity and mortality related to COVID-19. People who identify as American Indian/Alaska Native (AI/AN) are over three times more likely than their white peers to be diagnosed with COVID-19 and have a higher likelihood to experience severe COVID-19 than other racial and ethnic groups [6]. Black people are disproportionately represented in COVID deaths, and these disparities are even more exacerbated at younger ages. Deaths among Black and Latinx peoples are over six times higher than deaths among white people in the 45-54 age bracket [7]. Recovery will have to address these disparities and address the two-fold issues of economic stability and mental health. CAAs are well situated to meet both of these needs but, in order to do so, they will need continued access to flexible funding sources.

Recovery tied to Social Determinants

Research across the board has illustrated that families with low incomes are significantly more likely to report having low or no confidence they will be able to pay their rent or mortgage on time and not have enough food to eat during COVID-19 [8]. Although the unemployment rate in Minnesota has started to decline from the peak of 9.9 percent in May 2020, down to about 7 percent unemployment rate in August, it has actually risen in both the Black and Latinx populations, with the Black unemployment in Minnesota over 16 percent in August [9]. The stress created by the challenges of being without a job, housing or food insecure has been shown to exacerbate underlying health conditions. According to the National Institutes of Health, these social determinants of health, if not addressed, can undermine primary care treatment and lead to lower life expectancies for those with low incomes and persons of color [10].

To have an economic recovery from the pandemic, job training and employment support programs and services will be needed. And, CAAs are already running many of these programs. CAAs like [Lakes and Prairies Community Action Partnership](#) have continued Workforce Development Programs throughout the pandemic, helping people train and receive their certificates to become Certified Nurse Assistants. This is just one example of how CAAs work to help people achieve self-sufficiency. Homeownership programs, financial literacy classes, and the Family Assets for Independence Program in Minnesota (FAIM) are often run by CAAs, and they all focus on helping people with low incomes build assets and wealth.

Improving community wealth will also be an essential part of our long-term recovery. Community wealth focuses on sustainable, local economic development and is essential to building community resiliency and helping communities and individuals move out of poverty. To support and help build community wealth, CAAs are partnering with local farmers and small businesses to provide fresh food delivery to community members.

And, CAAs provide money directly back into the economy through its wages for its own staff, as well as rental and mortgage assistance programs, and through its work securing tax refunds for community members. Although analyses for the amount of money CAAs have put back into the economies specifically during COVID-19 is not available yet, the amount ranges from around \$1 million in smaller counties to over \$4 million in larger counties annually, and is likely much higher during COVID due to the increase in federal and state resources.

Addressing Community Trauma and Mental Health

In addition to the immediate health issues facing Minnesotans from the pandemic, a long-term issue will be community trauma from isolation, illness and death. Similar to the unequal financial impacts of COVID, households with low incomes are about twice as likely to report feeling down or depressed during COVID than households that make more than \$100,000 [11]. Nationwide, the prevalence of depression has increased three-fold during the pandemic, but people with lower incomes and people with less than \$5,000 are more likely to experience this mental health issue due to the pandemic [12]. Improving the economic stability of individuals and communities may help but won't completely address the long-term trauma.

CAAs have historically provided emotional and mental health support for program participants and are already ensuring these services have remained accessible and available during the pandemic. In [Head Start](#), counselors and social workers are available to support families through this challenging time, and Head Start teachers check in with their families by video while the schools are physically closed at least twice per week to provide additional support. Nationwide, Head Start teachers have also helped identify cases of domestic violence during virtual check-ins, which has been increasing during the pandemic but harder to identify with stay-at-home orders [13].

Outside of Head Start, agencies are working to connect their participants to mental health resources through new platforms. [Lakes and Pines Community Action Council](#), for example, is doing weekly Facebook Live check-ins with its participants, providing information about mental health resources and other supports. And, through their Working Together: The Community Action BLOG, [Community Action Partnership of Ramsey & Washington Counties](#) has highlighted mental health and social justice programs and events for people of color like the Slow Roll event, a bike ride to connect and build community while also addressing the health disparities that impact communities of color. Community trauma caused by the pandemic will have long lasting impacts on communities, especially those communities that have been disproportionately impacted by COVID-19 and the related economic crisis. CAAs are already pivoting to build community resiliency and provide the support their communities need.

Did You Know:

Community Action Agencies in Minnesota have put \$1-\$4 million back into their counties each year.



Notations

[11] <https://www.census.gov/library/stories/2020/06/low-income-and-younger-adults-hardest-hit-by-loss-of-income-during-covid-19.html>

[12] https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jamanetworkopen/fullarticle/2770146?utm_source=For_The_Media&utm_medium=referral&utm_campaign=ftm_links&utm_term=090220

[13] https://www.nhsa.org/files/brief-head_start_and_covid19_1.pdf

About Minnesota Community Action Grant

The **Minnesota Community Action Grant (MCAG)** is a state-funded grant through the Minnesota Department of Human Services, Office of Economic Opportunity, funding all 24 Community Action Agencies (CAAs) and 11 Tribal Nations across **all 87 counties**, with flexible funding. MCAG, currently funded at \$3.9 million, is allocated to the network by a formula that is based on poverty in each area.

What does the Community Action Grant do?



Provides essential services to families in need

Community Action Agencies use MCAG as a stopgap funding source for emergency, one-time services, often in times of economic or natural disaster, or to provide needed services that do not receive sufficient funding from other sources **such as food shelves**.



Leverages additional dollars and grants

MCAG is the **backbone funding source** for CAAs providing them the flexibility to leverage other funding opportunities. CAAs can use their MCAG to help state agencies quickly get funding distributed to those in need during an emergency, provide administrative support to community-based organizations in their areas, or provide a **match for federal, local or private dollars**.



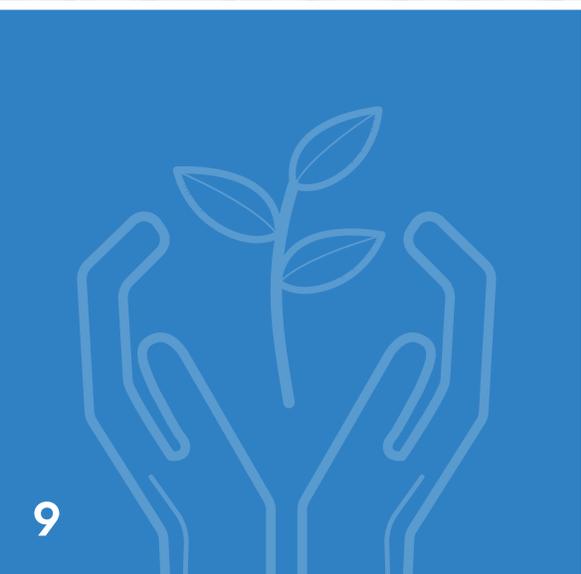
Meets the needs of each individual community

As part of MCAG, Community Action Agencies must create and update Community Action Plan based on a Community Needs Assessment to ensure CAAs are responding to the needs identified by members of their communities with low incomes and are adapting their programs as those needs change. For some, the most pressing issues MCAG can help address are **transportation** and **living wage jobs**; for others, they are **broadband access** and **farmer mental health**, just to name a few.



In 2018, MCAG allowed MinnCAP Agencies to:

- Leverage **\$297 million** in additional funding
- Provide services to **440,100 Minnesotans**



Conclusion

Community Action is Vital to COVID-19 Recovery

Community Action's promise is to change people's lives, embody the spirit of hope, improve communities, and make America a better place to live. We care about the entire community, and we are dedicated to helping people help themselves and each other.

Community Action Agencies have already shown how they are able to meet the immediate needs of people in their communities during the economic and health crises related to COVID-19. But for the long-term economic, physical and mental recovery of Minnesota's communities, CAAs will need more flexible financial resources and partnerships in this work. This pandemic is not over but even when it's spread slows and our communities can come back together physically, the mental and economic scars will take much longer to heal. It will be a hard and long journey. We cannot succeed in this recovery without local communities in the lead. Working together, we can limit the negative immediate outcomes, make the long-term recovery smoother and ensure it does not leave out community members with low incomes.

Call To Action

MCAG is the backbone funding source for Minnesota Community Action Agencies and Tribal Governments allowing them to leverage additional funds and provide essential services that would otherwise likely be overlooked. This funding **is key to our communities' recovery.**

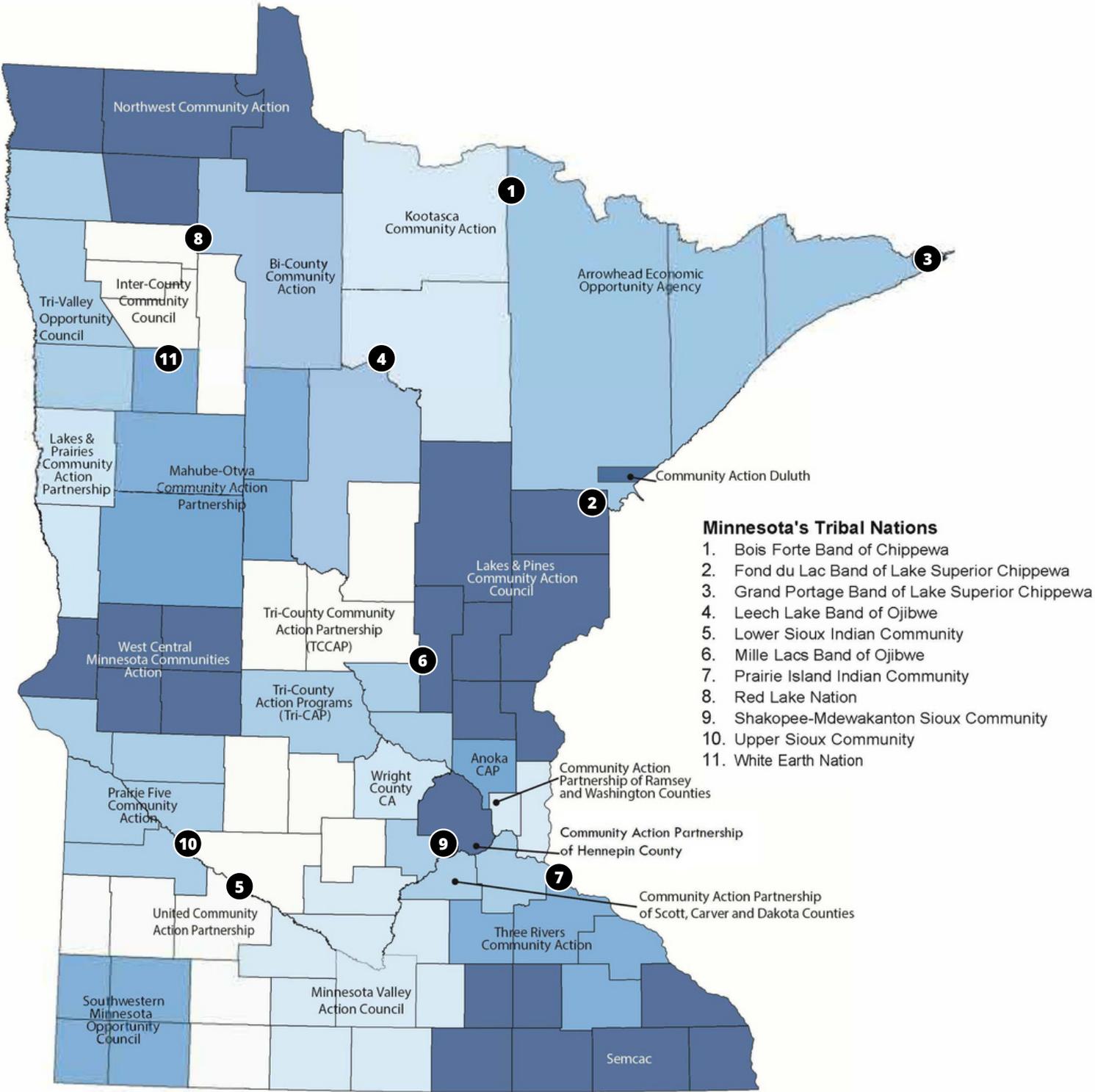
More Local Agency Examples:

- [Community Highlights Blog](#)
- [Annual Report](#)



MinnCAP's 24 Local Agencies & 11 Tribal Nations

• [Find a local agency](#) 



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