



2008 Standards of Excellence©

What are the Standards of Excellence?

The CAA Standards of Excellence describe 34 of the very best practices of the very best Community Action Agencies. Developed and annually updated with broad input from the Community Action network and partners, these Standards help answer the question: *What does an excellent Community Action Agency look like?* The bar is set exceedingly high, as excellence represents the very highest operational benchmarks for Community Action agencies to strive for, seeking to stretch the limits of performance. Do not confuse these Standards with traditional compliance requirements, which generally represent operational minimums.

The Standards are distributed across seven categories, and represent attributes that distinguish all high-performance organizations, and set Community Action Agencies apart when it comes to performance, community service, and overall excellence.

Why Bother?

Every organization can improve, and should continuously strive to increase efficiency, effectiveness, and exceed customer expectations -- especially in the highly competitive environment of the 21st century. It is a matter of survival. Using the powerful Award/Pathways diagnostic tools and team based assessment process, each CAA compares its current practices against each of the thirty-four Standards. The peer-review and feedback process then helps the agency benchmark its own unique starting point for next-steps, improvements, and moving along the path to world-class excellence. The Standards of Excellence represent the highest possible operational benchmarks for a Community Action Agency to strive for. By participating, every agency can help identify, define, and proliferate excellent practices that prepare the CAA network to face the future with confidence.

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Category 1. Organizational Leadership Overview

This category examines the CAA's leadership system, and how senior leaders guide the agency. It examines how your agency is governed, and how senior leaders support the achievement of the organization's mission, values, direction, and overall performance. It examines how your leadership system sustains the agency, promotes community advocacy, focuses on addressing poverty, and achieves low-income involvement.

Leadership Standards

1.1 Leadership Focus

Senior leadership actively engages board members, staff, partners, and community stakeholders; and clearly articulates the agency's mission/vision, values, performance expectations and results. The agency cultivates a leadership system that is highly visible and focused on strategic direction, addressing poverty, continuous improvement, and actions that will sustain the agency for the long term, including ethics and succession strategies for board and staff members. Through a formal, agency-wide performance management system, senior leaders (including board members) systematically review agency performance and success in achieving agency goals, strategies, and operational benchmarks. (*Links to 4.3 Performance Management and Improvement Systems; and 7.1 Agency Outcomes and Results*)

1.2 Mission Statement, Code of Ethics, Community Action Promise

The CAA's Mission focuses on addressing poverty. The agency Board has formally adopted the: (1) Agency Mission/Vision, (2) Community Action Code of Ethics, and (3) Promise of Community Action, and these are prominently displayed throughout the organization, and are integral to the agency's message to the community and its day-to-day business operations. The agency is proactive in ensuring ethical behavior in all agency business practices, services, and transactions.

1.3 Board Structure/Function

The board membership is knowledgeable of and actively involved in reviewing agency progress, performance, and results. It meets all legal and regulatory membership requirements, understands its role, and is fully engaged in all aspects of the organization's mission, strategic direction, and assessment of its success in combating poverty and increasing self-sufficiency.

1.4 Committee/Advisory Group Roles/Actions

Participatory Board advisory committees and/or task forces are in place. They actively and systematically represent their constituencies through recommendations to, and specific actions by the CAA board on constituent issues that directly impact delivery of services, organizational operations, and/or advocacy.

1.5 Community Advocacy

The agency has identified and formally adopted specific low-income/poverty-related issues and demonstrates proactive advocacy (including initiatives and funding) that address these issues. The board, executive director, and senior agency leadership actively engage legislative, regulatory, and/or community institutions focusing on these and other issues affecting the low-income community. The agency demonstrates measurable impacts addressing the targeted advocacy issues. (*Links to Standard 4.3 Performance Management and Improvement Systems; and Standard 1.6 Low-Income Involvement*)

1.6 Low-Income Involvement

The agency demonstrates maximum feasible participation of the low-income community. Over the past three years, the board has adopted, acted upon, or formally supported issues specifically identified by or recommended by low-income representatives of the board or other low-income community groups.

Category 2. Strategic Planning and Direction Overview

This category examines how your agency sets strategic direction, develops action plans and strategies, updates these plans, and utilizes them as an integrated living document that guides the agency. It stresses customer input and emphasizes the need for specific implementation strategies and performance measures that are used by the staff and board to track the plan's progress and success over time.

Strategic Planning Standards

2.1 Strategic Plan and Deployment

The agency has formally adopted and actively uses an agency-wide strategic plan to track its progress and overall success. It is systematically used throughout the agency as a guide to implementing and tracking goals and strategies. The plan incorporates the agency's mission/vision, its focus on poverty, and incorporates specific measurable strategies that drive all agency action. (*Links to 7.1 – Agency Outcomes and Program/Service Delivery Results.*)

2.2 Plan Development/Updates

The agency has systematically assessed poverty conditions and available resources to eliminate poverty using current published information, community surveys, and input from individual customers and stakeholders in low-income communities. The agency's strategic plan is current and is systematically updated using a structured process that ensures community and customer input in identifying critical needs.

2.3 Mobilizing New Resources/New Programs/New Partnership

The agency has mobilized substantial additional (non-CSBG public, and other private investment) dollars for every CSBG dollar it has received to support stated strategic goals/strategies, and it has regularly developed new programs, services, and partnerships in response to its community needs assessment and as identified in its strategic plan.

2.4 Strategic Measures of Success

The agency's strategic goals/strategies have specific performance measures that are systematically tracked over time by senior leadership and the Board to assess the agency's progress and success. All agency projects are linked to and support one or more of the agency's strategic plan goals/strategies, and corresponding measures/or one of the six national ROMA goals. (*Links to 4.3 Performance Management and Improvement System; 5.2 Employee Performance Management; and 7.1 Agency Outcomes and Results*)

Category 3. Customer, Constituent, and Partner Focus Overview

This category examines how your agency seeks to understand the voices of customers, constituents, and stakeholders in the community. It stresses relationships as an integral part of an overall listening and learning strategy, and examines how your organization builds relationships with customers, partners, and other stakeholders.

Customer Focus Standards

3.1 Customer/Constituent/Community Knowledge

The agency has formally identified and targeted its key external customers and constituents/stakeholders in the community and deployed multiple listening strategies to systematically listen to, understand expectations, and learn from them. (*Links 3.2 Customer Feedback System; and 4.3 – Performance Management and Improvement System*)

3.2 Customer/Constituent Feedback System

The agency systematically collects, segments, assesses, and acts upon customer/constituent feedback from its targeted customers about the agency's programs and services. The agency systematically tracks and produces formal reports using trends and comparative customer/constituent feedback data that provide evidence of a high degree of satisfaction shown among low-income customers, community residents, and other stakeholders, including funding sources. (*Links to 3.1 Customer Knowledge; 4.3 Performance Management and Improvement System; and 7.2 Customer-Focused Results*)

3.3 Internal Improvement

The agency has articulated its internal customers and deploys a systematic internal approach to solicit feedback from each customer segment about the efficiency and effectiveness of internal operations, procedures, and work environments, and tracks such information as part of the agency performance management system. (*Links to 4.3 Performance Management and Improvement System; and 7.3 – Human Resource Results*)

3.4 Partnership System

The agency has formally adopted or incorporated into its strategic plan a partnering goal with strategies and measures supporting the achievement of its vision/mission. This approach to partnering and partnerships interacts both with long-standing and new organizations in the community on behalf of low-income people. (*Links to 7.4 Partner/Stakeholder Results*)

Category 4. Measurement, Analysis, and Performance Management Overview

This category examines your agency's information and performance measurement systems and how you select, gather, and manage data, information, and knowledge assets. It examines how your agency uses data/information and technology to manage and improve performance, and align strategic and operational goals with day-to-day operations.

Measurement, Analysis and Performance Management Standards

4.1 Information System Technology

An integrated, highly effective, technically proficient management information system is in place linking agency programs and services. It responds quickly to the needs of the agency and stakeholders, and produces unduplicated counts of individuals served.

4.2 Information and Knowledge Management

The agency's information management system ensures that staff have ready, reliable, and accurate information for decision making and for improving their effectiveness, including the ability to monitor progress and results of the organization's overall goals/strategies as well as specific programs and services administered by the agency.

4.3 Performance Management and Improvement System

The agency has a formal, systematic approach to managing its performance and deploys interactive methods to manage, track, and improve agency performance. The system serves five roles: (1) monitor and analyze administrative

and program processes; (2) track agency strategies and operational program performance measures; (3) ensure agency progress and improvements; (4) systematically track overall agency outcomes, results, and success over time, and (5) link financial and program data in measuring agency progress, success and integrity. (*Links to 7.1 – 7.6 Organizational Results; Customer Focus Standards 3.1, 3.2, and 3.3; and 6.1 Financial Management System.*)

Category 5. Human Resource Focus

Overview

This category examines how your agency’s staff learning and work systems enable all employees to develop and utilize their full potential and align with your organization’s overall mission, strategies, and action plans. It also examines how your agency maintains a healthy and safe work environment and one supportive of personal/organizational growth.

5.1 Policies, Procedures, and Personnel Systems

A formal personnel policy/manual/handbook has been adopted by the board that supports the agency’s mission, vision, and goals. All personnel procedures including staff recruitment/selection and employee records are mission aligned, up-to-date, and compliant with employment-related federal and state laws. Affirmative action, grievance, family leave, drug policy provisions are in place, and fringe benefits address employee medical and retirement needs. Salary levels are appropriate for the area, and a plan is in place to offer a living wage to all employees.

5.2 Employee Performance Management

The agency annually conducts formal and systematic staff evaluations and includes provisions for staff response. Job descriptions are current and clearly linked to and support the agency’s stated strategic goals, strategies, and performance measures. Staff evaluation criteria are directly linked to the implementation and success of the agency’s stated goals and strategies. (*Link to 2.4 Strategic Measures of Success*)

5.3 Employee Engagement/Participation/Well-Being

Employees at every level of the agency are fully engaged and actively participate in the operations of the agency. Staff have the equipment and supplies necessary to achieve excellence in their jobs, and the agency work environment is safe, secure, and supportive.

5.4 Staff Development and Learning System

The agency has deployed a formal and systematic approach for conducting staff skill and professional development, including provisions for assessing employee needs for future training and evaluating the sufficiency of offered training. New and current staff orientations cover agency mission and history; the mission/vision, values, and Promise of Community Action; and ROMA. Appropriate agency staff are offered the opportunity to become Certified Community Action Professionals (CCAP). (*Links to 7.3 Human Resource Results*)

5.5 Low-Income on Staff

The agency has adopted and systematically deployed a formal policy ensuring low-income community members are informed of and have opportunities to apply for employment with the agency. Agency practices under the policy promote hiring of low-income individuals, as well as documenting, tracking and reporting results over time to the Board of directors and management staff.

Category 6. Organizational Process Management

Overview

This category examines the efficiency and effectiveness of your agency’s key administrative support and program/service delivery processes and how your organization manages them to achieve overall agency results and success.

Organizational Process Standards

Administrative Support Processes

6.1 Financial Systems

A formal Financial Management Policy/Manual has been adopted by the board and is systematically deployed by the agency. It includes provisions for an annual financial risk assessment, analysis, and report to the board on overall agency integrity. The financial management system is integrated into the agency's performance management system, and effectively supports the goals of the agency by providing quick and easy access to financial information to all levels of the agency. It is user-driven and utilized in conjunction with program data as an effective tool for tracking performance and agency-wide improvement efforts. (*Links to 4.3 Performance Management and Improvement System; and 7.5 Financial Accountability and Health*)

6.2 Infrastructure Support

A formal building and equipment maintenance system with written procedures is in place supporting a safe, clean, and effective workplace. Regular inspections/maintenance and upkeep services follow a periodic, pre-set schedule and emergency procedures are clearly articulated to all staff.

6.3 Purchasing/Procurement

A formal procurement system with written procedures is in place. It use technology effectively and incorporates a current and regularly updated list of goods and services suppliers, and specifies solicitation of bids from minority and disadvantaged business owners.

6.4 Communications/Public Relations

The agency has adopted and deployed a formal communication plan or policy incorporating multiple means of communicating with customers and community stakeholders, including periodic press releases, newsletters, media events, reports, and other means of conveying positive agency news about its programs, activities, and overall success. The effectiveness of the plan, its message, and public perception of the agency are assessed and measured periodically. (*Links to 4.3 Performance Management System and 7.1 Agency Outcomes and Results*)

Program/Service Delivery Processes

6.5 Intake, Eligibility, Assessment, Case Management, and Follow-up

The agency effectively and efficiently integrates these five components into a service delivery system, ensuring that customers are well-served, have expectations met, and end results support overall agency success and outcomes.

6.6 Project Management

The agency systematically manages all projects, programs, and initiatives using the following elements:

1. Project performance is systematically managed to meet/exceed project goals and objectives.
2. All projects include measurable (ROMA) objectives linked to broader agency strategies.
3. Project staff regularly review and improve projects based on customer feedback.
4. Project implementation/progress is systematically assessed, tracked, and reported to agency leadership.
5. Project budgets are systematically monitored and not exceeded.
6. Project staff attends appropriate and necessary training.
7. Project related facilities meet or exceed ADA and building codes.
8. A final status report is produced assessing a project's success and contribution to overall agency goals/strategies.

Category 7. Organizational Results Overview

This area examines your agency's performance trends, results, and improvements in areas. In addition, the agency's implementation of ROMA and its integration into everyday operations is stressed.

Results Standards*

7.1 Agency Outcomes and Program/Service Delivery Results

The agency systematically collects, tracks, and reports high overall agency results in achieving its stated mission/vision including provision demonstrating its progress in addressing poverty and moving families from poverty to self-sufficiency. It demonstrates excellent programmatic performance outcomes, results, and improvement trends over time specific to its mission/vision, goals, and strategies. The agency's board, staff, and the broader community are systematically informed about agency progress and results in addressing the causes, conditions, and impacts of poverty for individuals, families, and the community. The six national ROMA goals are fully integrated into the agency's strategic and operational approach and are utilized as part of the organization's performance management and reporting system. (*Links to 2.4 Strategic Measures of Success; and 6.4 Communication/Public Relations*)

7.2 Customer-Focused Results

The agency systematically collects, tracks, and reports high feedback/satisfaction results information from low-income customers, community residents, and other stakeholders, including funding sources, on programs and services it operates, and tracks it over time for trends. The agency tracks results over time for trends and uses this information as part of its performance management and improvement strategies to improve or modify its operations to better achieve overall agency success and outcomes. (*Links to 3.2 Customer/Constituent Feedback System*)

7.3 Human Resource Results

The agency systematically collects, tracks, and reports staff feedback over time, including staff turnover, and employee learning, development, well-being, and satisfaction; and regularly assesses and improves its internal administrative, operations, and work processes. (*Links to 3.3 Internal Improvements; and 5.4 Staff Development and Learning System*)

7.4 Partner/Stakeholder Results

The agency annually assesses, tracks, and reports current financial and non-financial partnerships' impact/benefits to identify strategies and opportunities to expand local relationships that support the organization's strategic and operational goals. Tangible results are evident from these partnerships. Data on partnerships is collected, analyzed, tracked, and used effectively to improve current relationships or establish new ones. (*Links to 3.4 Partnership System*)

7.5 Financial Accountability and Health

The agency's financial health is sound, resources are growing, and audit reports are exemplary. The agency has exceeded all regulatory requirements, is in good standing with current funding sources and required accreditation entities, and demonstrates high integrity in its annual risk assessment report. Financial trend data, including cost efficiency ratios, are systematically tracked and show improvement over time. For the past three annual audits, no unresolved questioned costs or material findings exist. External evaluations have been conducted recently and used as part of the agency's improvement strategies. (*Links to 6.1 Financial Systems*)

7.6 Definitive or Noteworthy Community Recognition and Innovation

The agency has an established track record of innovation and community recognition for its achievements and commitment to its mission, vision, and operations.

* *Standards 7.1-7.6 are closely linked to 4.3 Performance Management and Improvement System*