



Agency Story

1964 – 1967 | How It All Began

Winona county citizens joined the war against poverty when they heard about the Economic Opportunity Act, passed by federal legislation in 1964. The Act resulted in the development of Community Action Agencies (CAAs). One year later, this group of concerned citizens created the Winona Citizens Action Council with the hope of accessing funding to help those in need.

The Council was informed by state officials that serving only one county would probably not be the most cost-effective approach. As a result, the group asked Fillmore and Houston county citizens to join them, in early 1966. Next, they formed the Southeastern Minnesota Citizens Action Council.

The team made diligent efforts to create a planning grant, submitted early that year. In June of 1966, a telegram was received by Halvor Lacher from Senator Mondale's office. The message was received with great anticipation; it revealed that the newly formed organization had been awarded \$30,000 toward the grant proposal ideas. In addition, \$14,000 was awarded for a Summer Youth Program in Winona. A new private, nonprofit organization was funded with the help of Senator Walter Mondale. It was the last Community Action to be funded in the state of Minnesota.

Board of Directors

In 1968 there were 48 board of director members; 16 members from each county. Later, the Agency grew to service 7 counties and the number of board members was reduced to 6 per county; 2 private, 2 public and 2 consumer leaders. The board would consist of 42 members, total. In 2012, the number of members was reduced to 21 members; 1 representative from each sector were represented in the tri-partite board.

By 2012, sweeping changes had occurred at the Board level, including bylaw updates and adding term limits.

1966 – 1987 | Foundation of Leadership, Mr. Lacher

Mr. Halver Lacher was the Agency's first long term executive director. His tenure lasted 21 years. (He was preceded by Mr. Robert Sachstchalle, who held only a 6 month long term.) He believed in social justice and is remembered for his efforts to help others. With the first grant authorized, Lacher rolled up his sleeves and started the long road of establishing the Agency and administering an array of diverse programs. The City of Rushford allowed the administrative operations to occur in the Tew Memorial building, free of charge.

Mr. Halver Lacher retired in 1987. Some of his closing remarks were, “Community Action Agencies are recognized both in the halls of Congress and in most state legislatures as legitimate organizations who know how to help...”

Community Action Agencies in Minnesota were celebrating 25 years of service in February of 1990. 27 Economic and Social Justice Awards were given to people who worked tirelessly to reduce poverty in their communities. Halvor Lacher was the recipient of the “Poverty Warrior” award for his many years of dedicated service and contributions. This award was presented by Governor Rudy Perpich.

The year of 2001 marked the 35th Anniversary of Semcac and Halvor Lacher was awarded the first Lifetime Achievement Award. One of Community Action Partnerships’s key founders, Gene Flaten, remarked, “Halvor exhibited civil courage to help low income people”.

Leadership Continued

Former Fiscal Director, Kent Brommerick, took the helm and was executive director from 1987 – 1992 (5 years).

Bruce Hartert was hired by the Board as the next executive director, in 1992. His tenure would span until 2004 (12 years). While Mr. Hartert was leading, the personnel policies and procedures were created and an administration building was purchased. This has been the home of administration and staff ever since.

In 2004, Terry Erickson was hired. He served as the executive director until 2010 (6 years). Mr. Erickson took a new direction with his leadership approach. Some of his endeavors included software enhancements, fiscal changes, restructuring reports and more Agency policies were created. In addition, the leadership from Erickson helped the agency withstand the tragic flood of 2008.

The Board hired Wayne D. Stenberg as the next executive director, in 2010. Mr. Stenberg currently occupies the position today. He has an astute awareness of Community Action, as he worked as the director for the Housing and Energy programs, previously. Mr. Stenberg has embraced many changes in technological advances to better the efficiency of Agency operations and communications.

Development

As mentioned previously, Winona, Fillmore and Houston Counties were the first counties serviced by the Agency. In 1975, Dodge and Steele counties joined the Agency’s service area. In 1985, Mower County became the sixth county to join. In 2004, Freeborn County became a part of the Semcac service area and the total amount of counties served by Semcac increased to seven. Semcac had grown to 79 locations.

Along with all the other areas of development, the Agency name also evolved with time. The Agency was the Southeastern Minnesota Citizens Action Council in 1966. 1977 was the year that the Agency shorted its name to Semcac Inc. In 1995, the Agency proposed to change the name

from Semcac Inc. and the official name became Semcac. Over 30 programs were being operated and administered by Agency staff throughout that decade.

In April of 1988, a collaborative effort of self-sufficiency programs began and included five Community Action Agencies - Freeborn County Community Action Agency, Three Rivers, Minnesota Valley Action Council, Olmsted Community Action Program, and Semcac.

In 2007, a devastating flood hit southeastern Minnesota. Semcac's region and home town of Rushford was hit hard. Semcac's main office, 16 affordable units, many local rental units, single family homes and the Senior Dining program kitchen site were found under water. The main administrative office moved to Winona and found itself with 6,000 sq. feet less workspace than a few weeks prior. Under the leadership of Terry Erickson, the Agency bounced back from the tragedy of the flood. Semcac had to fully remodel the Rushford administrative office. The building used for the Senior Dining service site was purchased from the City of Rushford and fully restored to include a new kitchen, dining area and fully operational food shelf. And, Semcac staff were at the forefront of helping to rebuild flooded communities in 2008.

Semcac was awarded the Charities Review Council Standards Certificate in 2010, for meeting the various standards of the council.

By 2011, the Agency and revenue had grown to over \$16,000,000, annually.

1970 – On | Programs & Projects

Some of the first programs to be created included a Summer Head Start program (which served 127 children), a New Careers Training program and Transportation services (with the help of one 1967 Chevrolet bus).

Operation Mainstream was a Semcac program funded from July 1 to December 30, 1970. Enrollees were employed with public or private nonprofit institutions to do the work that would otherwise not get done.

Semcac's Outreach program was developed in the early 1970's in coordination with services offered through the Rural Health Team. Services were offered in Fillmore, Houston, and Winona counties. Provision of information and services was given to people "in an attempt to improve their social and physical health and general well-being".

In 1972, the Community Development Corporation (CDC) was established by the Semcac Board to foster the interest of underemployed persons by making jobs available to them. The CDC did this by promoting housing, community development, and other human concerns that foster economic development.

The Senior Nutrition Program began on February 1, 1973 as a pilot program funded by Minnesota's Office of Economic Opportunity. Senior Nutrition programs consist of Meals on Wheels and Congregate Dining. Meals on Wheels deliveries and Congregate Dining service

started in 1973, for a trial of six months. Also, a grant was received to expand the existing senior volunteer programs through the Retired Senior Volunteer Program (RSVP).

The Agency started the Emergency Energy Program, known now as the Weatherization Program, in 1975. The first funding allotted for this program was \$8,800.

Semcac administered the Community Food and Nutrition Program from 1976 to 1978 in Dodge, Fillmore, Houston, Steele, and Winona counties. The project was designed to better serve the food and nutritional needs of low-income families.

In 1977, Semcac became an administrative entity for the Minnesota Housing Finance Agency Home Improvement Grant (MHFA). In addition, this is the same year that the Energy Assistance Program was administered. The program was designed as a temporary program to aid low-income households during the period of extremely high oil prices in the 1970's.

Also, in 1977, Semcac Family Planning Clinic opened. Clinic staff welcomed patients at 157 Lafayette Street in Winona, Minnesota. Services provided by the Clinic were expanded in 1978, for the diagnosis and treatment of sexually transmitted diseases.

In 1984, Semcac built a 12-unit senior citizen apartment building in Rushford.

Semcac started Emergency Food Shelves in the cities of Dodge Center and Rushford in 1985. Food was distributed to families facing emergency situations. In 1986, Semcac started Emergency Food Shelves in Blooming Prairie, Caledonia, and Preston. Food was distributed to families facing emergency situations in these locations, as well. Then, in 1987, a Senior Food Shelf Co-op was added to the Emergency Food Shelf services in Dodge Center.

Semcac started administering the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) program in 1988. The money was used to provide emergency food and shelter to people in need.

In 1989, Semcac received a two-year Minnesota Housing Finance Agency (MHFA) grant to expand HomeShare to Winona County.

In 1993, Semcac first received funding to administer the Minnesota Rural and Urban Homesteading Program (MURL). The first MURL funds were given to Semcac on behalf of the City of Blooming Prairie. Using these funds, Semcac purchased three homes and renovated them. Then, these homes were sold to low-income, first time homebuyer families. Then, in 1994, Family Homeless Prevention and Assistance Program (FHPAP) was designed to decrease homelessness in southeast Minnesota. (The program provided permanent housing for homeless or potentially homeless families as well as unaccompanied youth.) Funding was received through the MURL Program on behalf of the City of Dodge Center. The Agency purchased three homes and renovated them. The homes were sold to low-income, first time homebuyers. In 1995, funding was received through the MURL Program on behalf of the City of Spring Valley. Again, Semcac purchased three homes, renovated and sold them. These homes were also sold to low-income, first time homebuyer families.

Semcac developed 12 homes in Spring Valley for low to moderate income households, in 2002. This marked new territory, ensuring that affordable housing was available to all who were in the single family home market. Subdivisions were created and developed in Grand Meadow, Blooming Prairie and St. Charles over the next few years.

Semcac helped to spearhead the response to the tragic flood of their service area, in 2008. Over \$10,000,000 dollars of flood relief was administrated by Semcac. The money was dispersed as 225 disaster recovery loans, 83 Greater MN Housing loans and 471 flood insurance reimbursements. This was in addition to restoring the Semcac offices and sites in Rushford so that they were useable spaces.

In 2009, the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) increased the amount of services that were provided by Semcac. A huge expansion was seen in the Weatherization (WX) Department. Larger funding was also awarded to the food shelves and other parts of the operation. By 2011 1,010 homes had been weatherized since the beginning of the distribution of ARRA funding. Fourteen new WX employees had been hired. In 2012, adjustments had to be made internally, as ARRA funding concluded.

Other significant projects in 2011 included the Senior Dining program opening seven new sites in Rochester, and a new structure consisting of 6 units was developed in Rushford (replacing the apartments that were destroyed in 2007).

Many program changes and updates occurred in 2012. Electronic health records became part of the Family Planning Clinic. Visions software was fully implemented into Semcac. A fee for service venture known as Home Energy Licensed Professionals (HELP) was created by Semcac staff. The Supplemental Assistance Program (SNAP) and fee for service catering was added to the Senior Dining program. Expansion of administration by the Bluff Country HRA was occurring within the Housing program. In addition, the Head Start program added zero to three years olds as part of their client base.

In 2013, additional progress was made. Semcac's public transportation services were expanded into Spring Valley and a re-branding of the busses took place. The Semcac public transportation system is now referred to as Rolling Hills Transit. Social media marketing was being used increasingly for Agency awareness. The *Powerful Tools for Caregivers Class* began. Fiscal software conversion and processes were created to help streamline the 1,706 daily business transactions. Results oriented management and accountability outcome reporting (ROMA) and the strategic plan were merged to help achieve national goals.

Conclusion

For over 48 years, Semcac has been connecting people with resources to ensure that they achieve their goals of self-reliance and independence. There have been several programs and projects, not mentioned in this narrative, that Semcac has added or administered. Semcac supports the citizens in a myriad of ways, especially during times of great need. We are the voice for the voiceless and we invest private, federal and public dollars into the communities to strengthen our greatest resource, the people. We believe in the people who comprise our great area of the state.