



May 27, 2008

ABC, community partners build ladders out of poverty, ill health

James Norman
Guest essayist

During May, Community Action month, more than 1,000 grass-roots agencies nationwide celebrate the victories in the war against poverty and make a special effort to raise awareness about the challenges still facing communities.

The National Community Action Partnership in Washington, D.C., of which Action for a Better Community Inc. is a member, launched an ambitious campaign in January titled "Rooting Out Poverty." This bold initiative draws from the experience of the national network of community action agencies. Including five action themes, the campaign is a call to action, inviting local agencies like ABC to take this national campaign to the local level. The five themes are:

- Maximize participation.
- Build an economy that works for everyone.
- Invest for the future.
- Maximize equality of opportunities.
- Ensure healthy people and places.

These themes are only the framework; the real work can only be done locally, tapping into this community's ingenuity and collaborative spirit to find solutions for our unique challenges.

Since 1965, ABC has done just that: actively collaborating with the public and private sectors in Monroe County — and in Ontario County since 1988 — to fight the war on poverty. ABC has kept pace with the changing face of poverty, implementing programs that are relevant to the times, which address the underlying factors causing poverty and peripheral issues that arise where poverty exists.

For example, as the epidemic of HIV/AIDS spread, ABC's Action Front Center was established in the late '80s to provide support to individuals, children and families affected by AIDS/HIV. No one could have imagined or planned for such an epidemic when ABC was founded more than 40 years ago.

Recently, ABC launched Milestones, a pilot project to help youths who are involved (or at risk of becoming involved) in street and gang culture to find a way to transition to lifestyles leading to legitimate self-sufficiency. ABC was on the brink of launching Milestones when one of the agency's staff, James Slater, a community organizer, was gunned down last October. His murder, the result of random violence perpetrated by two young men intent on robbing him, galvanized the community against such tragically senseless violence in our community.

Earlier this year, ABC acquired Micrecycle from the Rochester Museum & Science Center. The

Micrecycle program refurbishes donated high-quality computers for resale, at a nominal cost, to low-income people. Supported by a grant from the Daisy Marquis Jones Foundation, Micrecycle supports ABC's efforts to help bridge the digital divide and make computers and the Internet accessible to all. Again, it was inconceivable in 1964 just how critical computers would be to ensuring opportunity for all individuals in our society.

Finally, later this year, thanks to two generous grants from the Greater Rochester Health Foundation, ABC will launch two initiatives to promote healthy homes.

The first establishes a Lead Resource Center designed to guide families on how to assess the lead risk in their homes and help property owners apply for available funding to remediate lead risks. Sadly, the legacy of lead persists, despite the recognition of its toxicity, especially to infants and toddlers, more than a generation ago.

The second initiative, ABC 1+2+3, encourages families with young children to pursue healthy life choices that include one hour of activity, two servings of fruits, and three servings of vegetables every day.

Even tried-and-true anti-poverty initiatives like Head Start have been adapted to better serve our local community. Recently, thanks to grants from the M&T Foundation and Excellus BlueCross BlueShield, more than 1,000 families in ABC's Head Start and Early Head Start programs will have greater access to books and other materials to promote literacy, coinciding with Mayor Robert Duffy's citywide effort.

Together, ABC's three divisions — Early Childhood Services, Community Services, and Employment and Economic Development — provide a full spectrum of programs and services that promote and provide opportunities for low-income individuals and families to become self-sufficient.

So much of what ABC does, particularly in implementing new initiatives, is made possible by partnering with other community stakeholders. This is precisely what community action is about: bringing together all the stakeholders — business owners, elected officials, the faith community, and low-income residents — to develop local, community solutions to barriers to self-sufficiency.

Norman is president and CEO, Action for a Better Community Inc.
