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Community Action Partnership Strategic Communication Plan



January 5, 2017

Since August, Springboard Partners has worked with the Community Action Partnership's team to develop a strategic communications plan to increase the visibility of the Partnership and Network. We have met with the Partnership's staff and board, reviewed external communication materials and competitors' materials, and spoken with key stakeholders to help us develop our recommendations.

We are pleased to share a condensed version of our recommended communication plan in the following pages. It includes:

- **A communication goal and objectives**, to drive communication activities moving forward.
- **Key audiences** that should be prioritized for your success.
- **A landscape analysis**, which provides an overview of the challenges and opportunities facing the Partnership and the Community Action Network as you seek to ramp up your communications.
- **Prioritized tactics**, which serve as a top-tier to-do list for implementing the plan.
- **An appendix** with draft core messages, a full list of recommended tactics, staffing needs, and metrics for success.

Goal and objectives

Our work uncovered the importance of two focus areas for your communication: to ensure that Network members can engage with the Partnership office and with each other; and to do more to broadcast the Network's priorities to external audiences. The following goal and objectives reflect these priorities.

Communication Goal

Position the Community Action Partnership as an extensive, knowledgeable force on poverty so it can attract and sustain an effective on-the-ground network of Community Action Agencies and build its influence to shape national debates on poverty.

Objectives

1. Increase the Partnership's value to the Network by connecting agencies to the specific training, technical assistance, resources, and opportunities that are relevant to them.
2. Position the Community Action Partnership's national office as an expert on poverty with a broad national reach to build the influence it needs to shape national debates.
3. Increase positioning cohesion between members to boost awareness of the Network as being a robust, on-the-ground force nationwide.
4. Strengthen the capacity of the Network to communicate about Community Action Agencies as trusted, effective community partners.
5. Build the Partnership's internal capacity to communicate effectively.

Key audiences

As we developed the Community Action Partnership's goal and objectives, we identified **key audiences** who will be prioritized in future communications. These audiences include:

1. National think tanks, advocacy groups, and membership organizations that are leaders on poverty
2. Members of the Network, including:
 - State associations
 - Community Action Agencies – newer leaders
 - Community Action Agencies – longtime leaders
3. Non-engaged members
4. Collaborating partners (NCAF, CAPLAW, NASCSP)

For your communication to effectively engage these audiences, it is important to understand what views they hold about the Partnership, including what they value and barriers that could be holding them back from engaging with you. Springboard conducted a series of 12 stakeholder interviews with members of your key audiences to help us understand these values and barriers.

Our interviews revealed that **Network audiences** valued the Partnership because of its:

- Expertise on how to improve the work of Community Action Agencies;
- Extensive resources and information that you make available to members; and
- Availability and responsiveness to Network questions and needs.

In terms of barriers, when members of the Network did not engage with the Partnership and its resources, it was most often related to not being able to connect with information and resources tailored to their specific needs.

External audiences we spoke to among the national think tanks, membership associations, and advocacy groups were not very familiar with the Partnership. However, once they heard more they became excited about a number of areas, including:

- Extensive reach of the Network agencies into every American community;
- Partnership's expertise on how federal solutions to alleviate poverty are working or not working within communities; and
- Potential of partnering with the Partnership office to tap into these community-based voices for greater national-level learning and impact.

In addition to informing our recommendations about tactics, this audience research has been incorporated into the development of a new recommended message for the Community Action Partnership included as **Appendix A**, that explains who you are, what you do, and why it matters.

The communication landscape

To better understand the Partnership's communication landscape, Springboard conducted a series of research activities including a SWOT analysis with the Partnership's staff, a review of current communication materials, a scan of competitor organizations' communications, and interviews with key audience members. Below, we've organized our research findings into a set of opportunities and challenges for your communications.

Opportunities to Tap

- **The Partnership has access to a broad-reaching network with local influence.** The Community Action Network serves nearly every county in the nation, which is a great platform for use to advance the Partnership's goals.
- **Technical expertise is valued both internally and externally.** This sets the Partnership apart from other groups we researched, who didn't have the broad range of knowledge shared through conferences, webinars, etc.
- **The Partnership "punches above its weight" in terms of volume of communication with members.** Despite its small staff size, the Partnership has created multiple touchpoints with the Network to keep members engaged and in the know.
- **As a result of all of the above, engaged members find high value in their membership.** Members appreciate the extensive technical support they receive and how responsive staff are to their questions and needs.

Challenges to Overcome

- **Non-Network audiences are not hearing from the Partnership.** Nearly all public-facing materials primarily target the Community Action Network and affiliates; meaning external audiences simply aren't hearing from the Partnership.
- **The Partnership and the Community Action Network are operating in a complicated political landscape.** The Network delivers its community services within a highly partisan environment that sometimes politicizes issues it addresses, including alleviating poverty and racial equity.
- **Many Partnership communication materials use jargon.** Materials aren't always accessible to people who aren't already familiar with Community Action and often don't clearly describe what the Partnership does and why it matters.
- **Communication isn't tailored, in or out of the Network.** The Partnership's communication is generally targeted to the Network at large, which could be preventing it from reaching audiences that are not engaged but should be.

Strategies & tactics

To help you achieve your goals, we recommend a communication strategy that prioritizes, targets, and tailors content for specific audiences that you are trying to engage. This includes:

- **Integrating the new messaging throughout your communications.** This will ensure you are connecting with your existing audiences and that new audiences can easily understand who you are, what you do, and why it matters.
- **Introducing the Partnership to national audiences** and promoting your expertise to them through in-person meetings, a new national report on the Network's impact, and regular updates about member impact.
- **Retooling your most public communication vehicles** – your website and eNewsletters – with streamlined content that is more explicitly tailored to your audiences.
- **Ensuring you are sharing more stories about your members** through your website and social media and through promoting and circulating local media stories that cover Network members.
- **Increasing overall communication capacity** by dedicating more Partnership time to communication and ensuring the members are communicating more consistently about the power of the Network.

In a more extensive version of this plan, we recommend a number of tactics within each of your communications objectives and provide full details on how to achieve each recommendation. A summary of our full list of recommended tactics is included as **Appendix B** and our staffing recommendations are included as **Appendix C**.

We recognize that achieving all of our recommendations will require an increase in resources, both in terms of budget and staffing. Therefore, the tactics included below are a summary of our recommended “tier 1” activities – those that the Partnership should prioritize as it seeks to increase its communications resources in the future.

Priority activities

OBJECTIVE 1: Increase the Partnership's value to the Network by connecting agencies to the specific training, technical assistance, resources, and opportunities that are relevant to them.

1. **Streamline all eNewsletters sent by the national office by following email marketing best practices.** Small changes to the Partnership's eNewsletters, including inserting a clickable menu at the top of all newsletters, using a consistent template and header, and leveraging the newsletter to drive traffic to the website will make it easier for subscribers to find the information most relevant to them.

OBJECTIVE 2: Position the Community Action Partnership’s national office as an expert on poverty with a broad national reach to build the influence it needs to shape national debates.

1. **Launch a “get acquainted” tour for the CEO.** Many national organizations are not familiar with the Partnership. To overcome that, the Partnership should prioritize the top 10-15 organizations that we have identified through our work together and schedule one-on-one visits with the CEO. These visits should take place once a suite of new materials is developed, so organizations have updated and compelling information to review once contacted. The agenda should include an update on what the Partnership office’s priorities are, a snapshot of exciting things happening among your members, some potential ideas of how you could partner or provide value to their work (e.g., opportunities to share their resources via your newsletter, a webinar, or at your conference), and ways to keep in touch (ask to add them to your eNewsletter, etc.).
2. **Develop and issue a new yearly (or biennial) report that showcases the impact of Community Action Agencies across the country.** To raise your profile and the profile of your Network members at the national level, you need a regular communications vehicle that allows you to showcase your reach and impact.

We recommend the Partnership issue a national report that provides state-level (or regional-level) updates on what Community Action Agencies deliver, modeled after the very successful [KidsCount data book](#) issued by the Annie E. Casey Foundation. For the first report, the Partnership should consider focusing on a regional look at how families are faring (using publicly available poverty and employment data in a couple of key areas) and then what the Community Action Agencies are doing in response. The report should be highly graphical with limited text, and should include:

- An introductory essay that frames the challenges within communities, how the Network has grown to meet the need, programs offered, and any impact that could be shared.
- Data tables for each region that report out the key indicators you’ve decided best positions the Network’s work, with brief introductory text that sums up how each region is doing.
- Pull-out boxes throughout the report that highlight promising practices, innovative approaches, and spotlight stories of a few agencies.
- A closing essay with recommendations and areas of greatest need.

The goal is not to produce original research, but to tap into existing research (and existing information collected from members) and package it as something that national audiences and the media would find of interest.

If resources are available, the report could be released in conjunction with a DC-based event that includes national partners. Another option would be to tag onto an existing event, such as your national conference, to release the report. In either case, media should be pitched to cover the event and the report should include a digital version and strong social media components (with social media posts suggested for members to share).

Once you’ve established the basic model, the Partnership should consider issuing the report regionally in subsequent years in conjunction with key state associations.

3. **Promote stories and reporting on the local impact of the Community Action Agencies.** The Partnership should use its website and social media to bring the work of the Network agencies to life, providing concrete examples of the difference Community Action makes. The Partnership can issue a call for stories from members, establish a bank of stories on the website, and use social media to showcase member impact with these stories and other content produced by members (such as videos or blog posts).

OBJECTIVE 3: Increase positioning cohesion between members to boost awareness of the Network as being a robust, on-the-ground force nationwide.

1. **Create cohesive talking points to be used by the Network about the need for, role of, and impact of Community Action Agencies.** Having greater alignment across the country about the Network's impact will require Network members to adopt and promote a number of shared messages about their collective role and impact. To ensure these messages reflect the Network's collective wisdom and increase the chances of adoption, we suggest that a set of new talking points be co-created with key segments of the Network and then shared regularly.
2. **Improve the Network's collective identity by encouraging more members to recognize the Community Action Partnership brand on their public materials.** To create a more recognizable Network, we suggest the Partnership office issue a request that every agency include the Partnership's logo, a link to the Partnership website, and a brief description of the Network on a prominent place on their website.

OBJECTIVE 4: Strengthen the capacity of the Network to communicate about Community Action Agencies as trusted, effective community partners.

1. As noted in Objective 3, we suggest the Partnership **create cohesive talking points to be used by the Network about the need for, role of, and impact of Community Action Agencies.** The process of co-developing these talking points includes messaging training that will build buy-in about the need for a unified message and build the Network's skills to broadcast these messages out into the world.
2. **Ensure regular communications and messaging trainings are included in the Partnership's regular suite of conferences and trainings** – and use these trainings as an opportunity to constantly share the Partnership's messaging with members.

OBJECTIVE 5: Build the Partnership's internal capacity to communicate effectively.

1. **Create a new suite of materials – and update existing materials with the new messaging – to serve as tools to communicate to national audiences.** The Partnership should create a one-pager and short deck of PowerPoint slides to give a clear snapshot of who it is and the impact of the Network, produce a short annual report, and ensure the CEO's bio is readily available on the website. It should also integrate its new messaging throughout the current website and other materials that are disseminated regularly.

2. **Track email marketing analytics to understand what content is most useful and what you can adjust.** After implementing the eNewsletter updates we outlined above, track the success of the Partnership's overall email marketing efforts to determine what's working and what you may need to tweak.
3. **Create an editorial calendar to align events with communication activities.** An editorial calendar maps out your communication opportunities month by month and notes the tactics you will use to engage your audiences. The calendar includes a mix of major events for the national office (e.g., Annual Convention, Community Action Month, etc.), peer organization conferences that members of the Network would likely attend (to avoid scheduling conflicts), and smaller happenings you want to use as an opportunity to be a part of a broader conversation (e.g., Congressional budget releases, Census Annual Poverty Report, etc.). A calendar helps you spread out content throughout the year, plan ahead for key opportunities, and keep an eye on the big picture so that all communication reinforces your goal and objectives.

In addition to the recommendations included above, we strongly encourage the Partnership to redesign its most public communications vehicle – its website – when it has the capacity to do so.

The Partnership's website hosts a lot of information, but it can be difficult for users from within and without the Network to navigate and find specific resources that meet their needs. In addition, the current content is almost entirely targeted toward the Network, leaving external audiences with the impression that the Community Action Partnership is not seeking to engage with them. At a minimum, we encourage the Partnership to review the homepage and "About Us" section of the existing website to ensure that it includes content for external audiences, integrates the new messaging, and is free from jargon.

Finally, we include in **Appendix D** a list of suggested metrics the Partnership could use to evaluate how its communications is going and whether/where to retool its efforts. These should be reviewed quarterly and revised to reflect what the Partnership is able to accomplish.

Appendix A: New Core Message

In order to most effectively engage the Partnership’s audiences – and clarify its positioning vis-à-vis others who are also competing for attention – it is important to use consistent, compelling, values-based messaging to communicate about the Community Action Partnership and its impact. The new core message was developed to tap into what your audiences value about you and to explain your work in accessible language free from jargon.

<p>The Need</p>	<p>Our country can’t thrive unless our communities and families do. Yet, today’s uneven economy has put a good quality of life out of reach for too many Americans. To be effective, solutions should tap into the proven expertise of local agencies with real-life experience connecting families to greater opportunity.</p>
<p>How the Partnership Addresses the Need</p>	<p>The Community Action Partnership is a national hub that links the nation’s 1,000+ Community Action Agencies to each other – and to federal and state leaders looking to connect Americans to greater opportunity. This includes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <u>The Community Action Network:</u> The nation’s Community Action Agencies are a robust, state and local force – reaching children and families in 99% of America’s counties with life-changing services, from early childhood education to job training to services for seniors. • <u>Training & Innovation:</u> The Partnership office supports local agency leaders with training and technical assistance so they can apply best practices to their work and pursue innovative strategies that strengthen families and communities. • <u>Community Change:</u> The Partnership works hand in hand with our Network agencies to pursue community-wide solutions, including through our programs on Community Economic Development program and Racial Equity. • <u>A Voice for Opportunity:</u> The Partnership is a unified voice for our members, lifting up common challenges and promoting effective solutions so federal and state proposals to help families overcome poverty reflect what is working in communities.
<p>Vision</p>	<p>The nation’s Community Action Agencies embody our nation’s spirit of hope, change people’s lives, and improve communities. When national, state and local leaders tap into these agencies’ experience, they can promote workable solutions that connect more families to opportunity – and make America a better place to live for everyone.</p>

Appendix B: Recommended Communication Activities

We recognize that achieving all of our recommendations will require an increase in resources, both in terms of budget and staffing. Because increasing both may take some time, we include below a table that summarizes our full list of recommendations and prioritizes them. A description of each of these recommendations is available in a more detailed version of this plan.

Recommended Communications Activity	Priority Level
OBJECTIVE 1 (Increase the Partnership's value to the Network)	
• Retooled suite of newsletters	1
• Redesigned website	2
• Twice yearly lobbying calls/webinars	3
• Designated conference tracks for senior leaders	3
OBJECTIVE 2 (Position CAP as an expert on poverty)	
• Launch a get acquainted tour by the CEO	1
• Monthly eNewsletter targeting external audiences	2
• New national impact report launched	1
• Promote regular stories on local impacts of CAAs	1
• New website launched	2
OBJECTIVE 3 (Increase positioning cohesion between members)	
• Network talking points	1
• Effort to get members to include CAP logo and description on their websites	1
OBJECTIVE 4 (Strengthen the capacity of the Network to communicate about CAAs)	
• Co-development of Network talking points	1
• Regular communications and messaging training for Network	1
OBJECTIVE 5 (Build CAP's internal capacity to communicate effectively)	
• Suite of new materials produced (fact sheet, PowerPoint slides)	1
• Annual report launched	2
• New website launched	2
• Style guide developed	3
• Editorial calendar established	1
• Digital metrics regularly evaluated	1

Appendix C: Recommended Staffing

To fully implement this recommended plan would require more communications capacity within the Partnership, including the following:

- **100% of current communications manager** who would be fully responsible for overseeing the plan implementation and reporting out on outcomes.
- **20% of the CEO's time** should be dedicated to external communications in the first year, especially to reach out to national organizations and explore partnership and speaking opportunities with them. The CEO will also have a leadership role in launching the new report and reviewing new materials as they are developed.
- **50% time of an intern** who could take on social media posting, eNewsletter tracking, editorial calendar management, website updates.
- **Consultants:** a graphic design consultant could develop the templates for the newsletter, a bank of graphics for social media and the website, and design for reports; a writing/research consultant should help design the new Community Action Network survey, collect and analyze data, and write the report.

In addition, **periodic time would be required from other staff** to help implement changes such as newsletter redesign. Other staff would also be required to take up training and technical assistance opportunities from the CEO to allow her to dedicate more time to external communications.

Appendix D: Metrics of Success

Included below are some suggested metrics the Partnership could use to evaluate how its communications is going and whether/where to retool its efforts. These should be revised to reflect what the Partnership is able to accomplish.

OBJECTIVE 1 (Increase the Partnership's value to the Network)

- Increase in # of Network members who open the newsletter
- Increase in # of Network members who are clicking through on newsletters stories
- Increase in # of Network members who are downloading or accessing member resources
- Increase in conference attendance by target segments of the Network (eg, more senior leaders)
- Increase in # of non-engaged Network members who newly engage with the Partnership office (eg, attend a conference or webinar or request technical assistance)

OBJECTIVE 2 (Position CAP as an expert on poverty)

- # of meetings held with national target groups
- # of subsequent invitations received to speak at national group events
- # of times national groups share resources or other content the Partnership shares with them
- National report launched (include other metrics of success for the report release in the first year, such as # of regional areas that co-release regional data, # of partner groups that cross-promote content, digital shares/downloads of report, media mentions)

OBJECTIVE 3 (Increase positioning cohesion between members)

- % change in number of members who include CAP logo and description on their websites
- # of Network members who adopt talking points

OBJECTIVE 4 (Strengthen the capacity of the Network to communicate about CAAs)

- # of Network members who use talking points
- # of Network members who participate in communications and messaging training
- # of Network members who share success messaging/positioning success stories with the Partnership office

OBJECTIVE 5 (Build CAP's internal capacity to communicate effectively)

- Suite of materials produced
- Annual report launched
- New website launched
- Style guide developed
- Baseline of digital metrics established
- # of times monthly wrap-up of digital metrics drives content decisions for following month
- % of CEO's time dedicated to external audiences
- New intern hired