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Innovative Food Program Earns Statewide Honor

COLUMBUS—Community Action Agency of Columbiana County (CAA) accepted a Best Practice Award from The Ohio Association of Community Action Agencies (OACAA) and the John Glenn School of Public Affairs at The Ohio State University last week. CAA was honored for its work with Farmers and Hunters Feeding the Hungry to stock its food pantry and the Columbiana County Job and Family Services Department's food pantry with venison.

“If you do run a food pantry, this is one of the easiest things to do,” said Community Services Director Ruth Allison to more than 250 Community Action colleagues from around the state as she accepted the award. “Hunters want to feed the hungry.”

Since its manufacturing economy collapsed in the 1970s, Columbiana County has consistently had unemployment and poverty levels higher than Ohio's average. In 2010, unemployment was at 11.2 percent, 15 percent of the county's population was receiving Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program (food stamps) and 52 percent of the county's public school children were eligible for free or reduced lunches. This high rate of poverty means the CAA and JFS food pantries are busy.

Meat is the most expensive item for the food pantries and the item most in demand by the target population. Seeking a cheaper source of protein, CAA staff found Farmers and Hunters Feeding the Hungry and began working with its small local chapter in 2005.

“This is a locally developed and innovative way to provide meat to needy families,” Allison said. “It works in Columbiana County because of the abundance of deer, the popularity of hunting and the acceptance of venison by the food pantry clients.”

CAA and JFS promoted the program to hunters through the Columbiana County Federation of Conservation Clubs. Hunters then take deer they have killed to approved meat processors. CAA and JFS raised funds to cover processing fees of \$75 per deer. The Ohio Division of Wildlife has also provided matching funds. Meat processors have donated freezer space and the Lisbon Eagles provided new industrial-sized refrigerator and freezer for the CAA's food pantry.

In the 2009-2010 hunting season, CAA and JFS distributed 2,488 packages of venison to 1,541 families. The program has grown tremendously seeing a four-fold increase from the 2008-2009 hunting season. The meat is distributed in small packages, which allows clients to be

flexible in how they use it. Each client receives an average of three pounds. Recipes are also included.

The Best Practice Awards honor innovative and effective Community Action Agency programs that meet the needs of clients, families and communities by helping low income people become more self-sufficient. The awards serve as a showcase for unique Community Action Agency efforts that make a measurable and life-changing difference.

The program is funded by a Community Services Block Grant (CSBG) Training and Technical Assistance award from the Ohio Department of Development's Office of Community Services.

Awards were presented by Cindy Holodnak, Associate Director of Outreach and Engagement for the Glenn School, and Phil Cole, Executive Director of the Association. Holodnak praised the network for its collaboration, accountability and responsiveness. Reacting to the potential for reductions in CSBG funding, Holodnak urged the network to gather its strength and tell its story.

"You are in a position to elevate what you do in a way that informs practice at the state and the national level," she said.

Other winners were:

- Akron Summit Community Action
- Cincinnati-Hamilton County Community Action Agency
- Community Action Wayne Medina
- Community Action Partnership of the Greater Dayton Area's
- Supports to Encourage Low Income Families (Butler County)
- WSOS Community Action Commission, Inc.

The Community Action Agency of Columbiana County, Inc. was incorporated with the Ohio Secretary of State as a private, not-for-profit organization on 9 July 1965. It is governed by a 15 member volunteer Board of Trustees. The CAA is the local grantee for the Head Start Preschool Program, the county's rural public transit system, known as CARTS, the Elderly Nutrition Program, The Home Energy Assistance and Weatherization Programs, and operates two community health centers and the community dental center, along with other programs including consumer credit counseling.

The Ohio Association of Community Action Agencies represents the 50 Community Action Agencies around the state which serve the needs of low-income people in all of Ohio's 88 counties. The agencies administer nearly \$750,000,000 in resources aimed at alleviating the problems of poverty in Ohio's communities. They employ more than 6,000 people and provide service to nearly 800,000 Ohioans. Programs include Head Start, home heating assistance, weatherization, food pantries and emergency shelters.

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