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AMERICA'S POVERTY FIGHTING NETWORK

2015 STANDARDS OF EXCELLENCE©

*Pursuing and Achieving Excellence
in Community Action*

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The Promise of Community Action

Community Action changes people's lives,
embodies the spirit of hope,
improves communities,
and makes America a better place to live.
We care about the entire community,
and we are dedicated to helping people
help themselves and each other.

What are the Standards of Excellence?

The Standards of Excellence describe thirty-five of the very best practices of the very best Community Action Agencies. They are aligned closely with the Malcolm Baldrige Criteria for Performance Excellence—used world-wide for organizational performance and improvement. Developed and updated bi-annually 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 high, as excellence represents the very highest operational objectives for Community Action Agencies. It is about striving for and seeking to stretch the limits of performance. It must be emphasized that compliance is not excellence: compliance is the starting point for excellence. *Do not confuse these Standards with the CSBG Organizational Standards.* The CSBG Organizational Standards are mandated by your State CSBG Office and represent a baseline threshold. The Standards of Excellence are voluntary and represent best in class goals to strive for. The Community Action Standards of Excellence represent benchmarks of CAA excellence and should be viewed as optimal CAA practices that represent a high performing, continuously improving agency of excellence. They represent the very best a CAA can be—not achieved easily, but always worth striving for.

The Standards of Excellence are distributed across seven categories, and represent attributes that distinguish all high-performance organizations, as well as those that set Community Action Agencies apart from other organizations when it comes to performance, community service, and overall excellence. Categories 1 through 6 examine an agency's approach to and deployment of each Standard. Category 7 assesses organizational performance trends, results and improvements. The Award/Pathways self-study process and subsequent peer-review and feedback report will enable you to benchmark your agency against each of the thirty-five standards and chart your course to Excellence.

Pathways to Excellence

Every organization can improve, and should continuously strive to increase efficiency, effectiveness, and to exceed expectations. In the highly competitive funding environment of the 21st century, the pursuit of excellence has become a matter of survival. The Community Action Partnership's Pathways to Excellence program is a 12 month process in which CAAs undertake a team-based and very detailed self-assessment of their policies and practices and compares them to the thirty-five Standards, which emphasize the systemization of these best practices. It begins with comprehensive training for the agency's team of management staff and Board members, so that they are fully prepared for the process of performing

and writing the self-study. The peer review and feedback process helps the agency assess its unique starting point for improvement, and provides a road map for the journey to world-class excellence. The Standards of Excellence represent the highest possible operational benchmarks for which a CAA should strive. Through participating in the Pathways to Excellence process, agencies help to identify, disseminate and implement the best practices that prepare the CAA network to face the future with confidence.

The Award for Excellence

When a CAA demonstrates and can document systematic excellence in each of the Standards, it is ready to apply for the Award for Excellence in Community Action. Agencies undertaking this process also conduct a self-study, which goes through a technical review. If the review team and the Award Commission both deem that the CAA has met or exceeded minimum requirements for each Standard within the seven Categories of Excellence, an on-site peer review is conducted to assess and validate the self-study, and a report is made to the Award Commission, who have the responsibility and privilege of determining the Award. Though it is not required, agencies are strongly encouraged to go through the Pathways to Excellence process before applying for the Award.

What is the Excellence Commission

The Commission consists of nine members, with balanced representation from the Partnership National Board, Certified Community Action Professionals, and system experts. The Commission's members are committed to quality and continuous improvement of operations and services of Community Action Agencies. The Community Action Partnership National Chair appoints the Commission members for three-year terms.

The Commission is responsible for approving changes and updates to the Standards of Excellence, based on network feedback and national best practices in public administration and non-profit management. It oversees the administration and the integrity of the Award for Excellence, including the selection of Award reviewers, serves as a Panel of Judges, and recommends Award recipients.

You may download the detailed set of Standards, the Pathways to Excellence Application Form, the Award for Excellence Application Form, FAQ, Brochure, and other information at www.communityactionpartnership.com

For additional information and questions, contact: Jarle Crocker, Director of Training and Technical Assistance 202-449-9774 jcrocker@communityactionpartnership.com

A Framework for Achieving Excellence in Community Action

The Community Action Standards of Excellence are distributed among seven Categories of Excellence creating a management framework

Categories 1-3: These categories focus on Organizational Drivers that determine the purpose and direction of an organization.

Category 4: This category supports all others. It is the "Brain Center" of an organization, as it focuses on how data and information are aggregated, analyzed, distributed, and used to determines progress and inform all aspects of agency operations.

Categories 5-6: These categories focus on the efficiency and effectiveness of an organization's People and Processes.

Category 7: This category focuses on the "Bottom Line", how you use ROMA, and whether the organization is progressing toward its mission and achieving its intended outcomes and results.

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.

1.1 Leadership Focus

A highly visible, effective, and proactive leadership system is in place that clearly articulates the agency's mission, vision, values, and performance goals both within the agency and to external partners, stakeholders, and community constituents. Both Board and staff leadership are actively and continuously engaged in the agency's near and long term sustainability. This includes succession planning, ethics and overall agency progress and success in achieving its mission and goals, particularly in addressing the impacts of poverty on individuals and families. Through a formal, agency-wide performance management system, senior staff and the Board systematically review agency performance in achieving agency goals, strategies, operational benchmarks, and CSBG Organizational Standards. They use this information to make improvements in agency programs and service delivery, agency systems, and community initiatives. *(Links to 2.4 Strategic Measures of Success; 4.3 Performance Management and Improvement Systems; and 7.1 Agency Outcomes and Program/ Service Delivery 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. 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. *(Links to Standard 1.1)*

1.3 Board Structure/Function

The Board membership is knowledgeable about and actively involved in reviewing agency progress, performance, and results. It meets all legal and regulatory membership requirements, understands its role, and utilizes an effective committee structure and by-laws to engage fully in all aspects of the organization's mission, strategic direction, and assessment of its success in combating poverty and increasing self-sufficiency. The agency systematically offers training for Board members on topics directly related to their duties, so that the Board can more knowledgeably and efficiently carry out their governance responsibilities. *(Links to Standard 1.1)*

1.4 External Advisory Group Roles/Actions

External advisory groups, task forces, or other community structures are formally adopted or designated by the Board to augment the "voice of the low income community" and serve to enhance communication and better inform the Board about low income constituent issues and needs. These groups actively and systematically represent their constituencies through recommendations to the Board (Standard 1.5) on issues that directly impact new program initiatives, identifying agency advocacy issues, and/or the delivery of services, or organizational operations. *(Links to 1.5 Maximum Feasible Low- Income Involvement)*

1.5 Maximum Feasible Low-Income Involvement

Over the past three years, the Board has formally adopted, acted upon, or supported issues specifically identified by or recommended by low-income representatives serving on the Board, or via external advisory groups or other low-income community groups as indicated in Standard 1.4. *(Links to 1.4 Advisory Group Roles/Actions)*

1.6 Community Advocacy

The agency demonstrates proactive advocacy activities and results by identifying and acting on unmet needs, gaps in services, lack of funding, or other barriers to those in need as defined or identified in Standard 1.5. The Board, executive director, and senior agency leadership demonstrate proactive advocacy by actively engaging legislative, regulatory, and/or community institutions and focusing on the needs and areas of concern of the low-income community. The agency documents, tracks, and reports (Standard 7.5) measurable impacts addressing the advocacy issues identified and targeted by Board action in Standard 1.5. *(Links to 4.3 Performance Management and Improvement Systems; 1.5 Low- Income Involvement; and 7.5 Partner/Advocacy Results)*

When we first started working toward the Award, it was all about getting the Award. As we progressed and moved through the Standards of Excellence, we realized that we were a better agency than when we started and decided that the process itself was more important than the Award. Since there were opportunities for improvement included in the final report from the Award review team, we know there is still work for us to do and we are committed to moving ahead. While the process took a long time – from the initial Pathways to Excellence self-study, to deciding to continue working toward the Award for Excellence, to finally completing the Award's self-study – we found it to be the best organizational improvement process our agency has ever undertaken.

~Russell K. Spain, CCAP, Executive Director
Eastern Idaho Community Action Partnership, 2012
Community Action Award for Excellence recipient

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 integrated living documents that guide 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 progress and success over time.

2.1 Strategic Plan and Deployment

The agency has formally adopted and actively uses an agency-wide strategic plan. The plan serves as a framework for agency-wide performance management to track the progress and overall success of all agency resources and services. 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, articulates its focus on poverty, integrates national ROMA goals, and includes specific strategies, outcome measures, and metrics that form the foundation of agency-wide performance management that drive all agency action. *(Links to 7.1 Agency Outcomes and Program/ Service Delivery Results and 4.3 Performance Management and Improvement Systems)*

2.2 Plan Development/Updates

A systematic and structured process and pre-set timetable is in place to keep the strategic plan current and up to date and ensure community and customer/partner/stakeholder input in identifying critical needs. As part of plan development/updates, the agency systematically assesses causes and conditions of poverty, constituent needs, and available resources to eliminate poverty using current published data and information, community surveys, and stakeholder input. The Strategic Plan is current and under its pre-set timetable, the agency systematically updates its plan to keep it relevant via community and customer input in identifying necessary changes and critical needs.

2.3 Mobilizing New Resources/New Programs/New Partnerships

The agency mobilizes *substantial* additional (non-CSBG public and other private investment) dollars for every CSBG dollar it receives to support stated strategic goals/strategies, and it regularly develops new or innovative programs, services, and partnerships in response to its community needs assessment and as identified in its strategic plan via a goal or specific strategy.

2.4 Strategic Measures of Success

The agency's strategic goals/strategies have specific performance measures and metrics that are linked to ROMA outcomes and systematically tracked over time by senior leadership and the Board to assess the agency's progress and success over time. An agency-wide scorecard is utilized by the staff and Board to track and report overall agency progress and success trends over time, including ROMA data and outcomes, as well as the CSBG Organizational Standards. All agency projects (See definition under Standard 6.6) are linked to and support one or more of the agency's strategic goals/strategies, one or more of the six ROMA goals, or one or more of the CSBG Organizational Standards. *(Links to 4.3 Performance Management and Improvement Systems; 5.2 Employee Performance Management; and 7.1 Agency Outcomes and Program/Services Delivery Results)*

Eastern Idaho Community Action Partnership (EICAP) was presented with the Community Action Award for Excellence in August, 2012. The work products produced by EICAP's board and staff during the process are included in this toolkit along with copies of presentations made at the national Community Action Partnership Annual Convention in August 2012. EICAP is proud to share all of these resources with the Community Action Network so that all CAAs can benefit from EICAP's experience.

The EICAP Toolbox can be downloaded from the Resources section of the Partnership website www.communityactionpartnership.com

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.

3.1 Customer/Constituent/Community Knowledge

The agency formally identifies, designates and targets its key external customers using four or more categories including: (1) Low-income people, (2) Partners/Stakeholders, (3) Investor/Funding sources, and (4) Community. A formal, agency-wide policy is in place that systematically guides the collection, tracking and reporting of all external customer/stakeholder data and feedback. *(Links 3.2 Customer/Constituent Feedback System and 4.3 Performance Management and Improvement Systems)*

3.2 Customer/Constituent Feedback System

Under an agency-wide policy and process, 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 and customer groups designated in Standard 3.1. *(Links to 3.1 Customer/Constituent/Community Knowledge; 4.3 Performance Management and Improvement Systems; and 7.2 Customer-Focused Results)*

3.3 Internal Improvement

The agency has formally identified and designated its internal customers to include (at a minimum) Staff, Board members, and volunteers. The agency has adopted a formal policy and deploys a systematic methodology to solicit, track and report internal customer feedback about the efficiency and effectiveness of internal operations, procedures, and work environments as part of the agency performance management system. *(Links to 4.3 Performance Management and Improvement Systems and 7.3 Human Resource Results)*

3.4 Partnership System

The strategic plan includes a partnering goal with strategies and measures that are tracked over time as part of the agency's performance management system. An inventory of existing partnerships, the purpose of each, and proposed benefits to the agency is maintained for tracking, evaluating and reporting each partnership's results or contributions to agency success over time. (*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 aligns strategic and operational goals with day-to-day operations.

4.1 Information System Technology

A comprehensive, integrated and highly effective management information system is in place to collect, track and report on all agency programs, services, and administrative processes. It responds quickly to external changes and needs of the agency, its staff, customers and stakeholders. It produces unduplicated counts of individuals served and has the ability to track and report program/services provided to each individual served by the agency.

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 Systems

A formal system integrating strategic, operational, financial, administrative, and other performance related data and results information is aggregated into a comprehensive agency-wide scorecard. The agency systematically manages and shares with the Board agency-wide performance and improvement data and results using manual and automated methods to track and improve agency performance over time. The system serves five roles: (1) monitor and analyze administrative and program processes, including administrative and financial risk assessments; (2) track agency strategies and operational program performance measures; (3) ensure agency progress and improvement trends over time; (4) systematically track overall agency outcomes, results, and success trends over time, including aggregate client outcomes; and (5) link financial and program data using both manual and automated methods in measuring agency progress, success and integrity. *(Links to 7.1 - 7.7 Organizational Results; Leadership Standards 1.1 and 1.5; Strategic Plan and Direction Standards 2.1 and 2.4; Customer, Constituent, and Partner Standards 3.1, 3.2, and 3.3; and Organizational Process Management Standards 6.1 and 6.4)*

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 Board adopted personnel policy/manual/handbook is in place and is reviewed annually by the Board and modified as needed. It 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. Agency salary levels, including documentation on area living-wage benchmarks, are analyzed and documented, and a plan is in place with provisions for career growth pathways to attaining a living wage over time for 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. *(Links to 2.4 Strategic Measures of Success)*

5.3 Employee Engagement/Participation/Well-Being

Employees at every level of the agency have a strong sense of well-being, and are fully engaged and actively participate in the operations of the agency. Staff has the equipment and supplies necessary to achieve excellence in their jobs, and the agency work environment is safe, secure, and supportive of employee well-being *(Links to 7.3 Human Resource Results)*

5.4 Staff Development and Learning System

The agency has formally adopted and systematically deploys an agency-wide staff skill and professional development policy or plan. It includes provisions for assessing employee needs for future training and evaluating the sufficiency of and improving offered training. New and current staff orientations cover agency mission/vision and history, as well as the mission/vision, values, history, Promise of Community Action, and ROMA. The agency offers full support to appropriate staff to acquire and maintain Certified Community Action Professionals (CCAP) certification. *(Links to 7.3 Human Resource Results)*

5.5 Low-Income on Staff

The agency's HR Policy incorporates specific guidelines/procedures for proactively dispersing agency job postings and employment opportunity information within the low income community, including how to apply for employment with the agency. Under the proactive low-income hiring approach, the agency documents, tracks, and systematically reports hiring results to the management staff and the Board.

MALCOM BALDRIGE CORE VALUES FOR NONPROFITS

1. Visionary Leadership
2. Organizational and Personal Learning
3. Focus on the Future
4. Valuing Employees and Partners
5. Managing for Innovation
6. Management by Fact
7. Focus on Results and Creating Value
8. Agility
9. Societal Responsibility
10. Systems Perspective
11. Customer-Driven Excellence

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. It evaluates your organization's management of them in relation to achievement of overall agency results and success.

ADMINISTRATIVE SUPPORT PROCESSES

6.1 Financial Systems

A Board adopted Financial Management Policy/Manual is in place and is reviewed annually by the Board and modified as needed. It is systematically deployed and integrated across all programs and services, and includes provisions for an annual financial and administrative risk assessment, analysis, and report to the Board on overall agency integrity. An annual, agency-wide budget is adopted by the Board, and the financial management system is integrated into the agency's performance management system to effectively track and report all budget related management. The financial system is user-driven, integrated with program data, 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 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 Systems and 7.6 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 and disaster planning are clearly articulated to all staff.

6.3 Purchasing/Procurement

A formal, written procurement system including provisions for property/equipment disposal and meeting all appropriate legal and contractual requirements is in place. It uses 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 formally adopted an agency-wide communication plan or policy deploying multiple methods such as periodic press releases, newsletters, media events, reports, social media and other means of conveying positive agency news about its programs, activities, and overall success. The agency

systematically collects, tracks, and reports data measuring the effectiveness of the plan's impact including awareness levels and the public perception of the agency and its services. *(Links to 4.3 Performance Management and Improvement Systems and 7.1 Agency Outcomes and Program/Services Delivery 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 using automated, manual or combined methods ensuring that customers are well-served, have expectations met, and end results support overall agency success and outcomes. A core set of common data elements is formally adopted and deployed across all programs and services of the agency.

6.6 Project Management

A formal, agency-wide project management policy and process is in place incorporating eight core elements. Under the policy, the agency systematically manages all projects and initiatives in a coherent manner to ensure close integration/linkage with agency goals/strategies and program specific activities. The policy addresses the following eight core elements:

1. Project performance is systematically managed to meet/exceed project goals and objectives.
2. All projects include measurable (ROMA) projected outcomes and objectives linked to broader agency strategies.
3. Project staff regularly reviews and improves 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 prodIuced assessing a project's success and contribution to overall agency goals/strategies.

Note: The term "project" is defined as any time specific, stand-alone initiative that is supportive of (but separate from) on-going and recurrent agency program areas such as **CSBG, Head Start, LIHEAP** etc. Projects usually have a dedicated timetable, budget parameters, defined activities, and anticipated outcomes that support the stated mission/goals of the agency.

CATEGORY 7. ORGANIZATIONAL RESULTS OVERVIEW

This category examines your agency's performance trends, results, and improvements over time in critical areas. In addition, the agency's implementation of ROMA and its integration into everyday operations is stressed. Categories 1-6 focus on an agency's systems and processes. Category 7 focuses on the agency's bottom line outcomes and results as displayed in trended data charts, visual graphs, or specific listings.

7.1. a - Leadership and Governance Outcomes

7.1. b - Strategic and Operational Results/Outcomes

Through an agency-wide scorecard and performance management system, the agency documents high strategic and operational results and outcomes that are tracked and reported systematically over time. Multi-year outcomes are demonstrated using trended data and metrics documenting the agency's success in addressing poverty by moving individuals and families toward achieving self-sufficiency. Overall agency results and outcomes are clearly linked to the agency's mission/vision and goals, are integrated with the six national ROMA goals and utilized as part of the organization's marketing strategies to communicate agency success. *(Links to 1.1 Leadership Focus; 2.4 Strategic Measures of Success; 4.3 Performance Management and Improvement Systems; and 6.4 Communication/Public Relations)*

7.2 External Customer Results

The agency systematically collects, tracks, and reports trended data over time that demonstrates high feedback/satisfaction results information from external customer groups in four categories: (1) low-income people, (2) partners/stakeholders, (3) investors, and (4) community stakeholders or other customer segments defined by the agency in Standard 3.1, community residents, and other stakeholders, including funding sources, on programs and services it operates. 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 meet customer expectations and achieve overall agency successes and outcomes. *(Links to 3.1 Customer/Constituent/Community Knowledge, 3.2 Customer/Constituent Feedback System and 4.3 Performance Management and Improvement System)*

7.3 Internal Customer/Human Resource Results

The agency systematically collects, tracks, and reports internal customer (Standard 3.3) data over time, including staff and Board feedback, staff turnover, employee skill development and learning, and overall satisfaction and well-being. Using internal customer feedback and analysis, the agency systematically assesses and improves its internal administrative, operations, and work processes. *(Links to 3.3 Internal Improvement; 4.3 Performance Management and Improvement Systems; and 5.4 Staff Development and Learning System)*

7.4 Partner/Stakeholder Results

The agency systematically assesses, tracks, and reports current partnerships' impact/benefits over time. It identifies opportunities to expand local relationships that support the organization's strategic and operational goals. The agency annually collects, analyzes, tracks, and reports tangible results of partnerships and uses them to improve current relationships or establish new ones. *(Links to 1.5 Maximum Feasible Low-Income Involvement; 3.4 Partnership System; and 4.3 Performance Management and Improvement Systems)*

7.5 Advocacy Results

The agency systematically assesses, tracks and reports data over time that documents its community advocacy efforts, results and outcomes related to advocacy issues identified in Standard 1.5. *(Links to 1.6 Community Advocacy and 4.3 Performance Management and Improvement System)*

7.6 Financial Accountability and Health

The agency's financial health is sound as demonstrated by resource growth, sound audits, and exemplary risk assessment reports to the Board. The agency exceeds all regulatory requirements, is in good standing with current funding sources and required accreditation entities, and demonstrates high integrity in its annual financial and operational risk assessment reports to the Board. Financial trend data, including cost efficiency ratios, are tracked systematically and show improvement over time. For the past three annual audits, no unresolved questioned costs or material findings exist. Recent external evaluations are evidence of agency's improvement strategies. *(Links to 4.3 Performance Management and Improvement Systems and 6.1 Financial Systems)*

7.7 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. *(Link to 4.3 Performance Management and Improvement Systems)*

Conducting the Comprehensive Self-Study

A basic tenet of quality is that you cannot improve what you do not first measure. The whole concept of the Pathways Initiative and the agency wide self-study is that it offers a comprehensive and systematic framework and methodology for addressing improvement. You have to assess, measure (benchmark), and document where you are as an organization, before you can set your next course of action—your pathway to excellence. Any worthwhile approach to quality and improvement first begins with some type of organizational self-study or analysis. The Pathways assessment methodology, peer review, and feedback report are powerful tools that allow you to measure how you are doing compared to the above 35 best-in-class CAA practices or standards. Using a ninety-eight question methodology and third party peer expert review process, the Pathways self-study and feedback report fulfills theobligatory need to answer three questions:

1. **Where are we now as an organization—compared/ benchmarked to a set of high CAA standards?**
2. **What direction/priorities do we set as an organization—on our unique pathway to excellence?**
3. **How do we get there and on what timetable?**

Using the 10-Step Agency Wide Self-Study Process

Although it is a highly flexible process, below are 10 steps that an organization may follow to complete the Pathways self-study:

1. **Establish/engage a leadership team**
2. **Charter the leadership team**
3. **Conduct an overview/orientation for the agency**
4. **Adopt a communication plan**
5. **Ground the team: complete the Organizational Profile first**
6. **Begin the self-study process/start gathering response data**
7. **Draft initial category responses**
8. **Conduct independent reviews/solicit comments on clarity**
9. **Reach final team consensus**
10. **Compile/review/edit final 55 page report**

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