Nomination: Michele Engh
Outstanding Friend of Community Action Award

Michele Engh has been a tireless advocate for ending poverty for many years. Michele became passionate about community action as an employee for Couleecap from 2007 - 2014. After she left the organization, she carried forward the fight against poverty in various roles in county government, nonprofit organizations, and in her current role as Pastor for Immanuel Lutheran Church.

Michele continuously looks for opportunities to help Couleecap serve those struggling with poverty. Most recently, Michele has volunteered time and resources to help us respond to COVID-19. She raised money for our financial assistance program, assisted our staff to prepare a grant application to help immigrant families, and coordinated a donation drive at her church to help Couleecap clients struggling with unemployment. She is currently working with the executive director of Couleecap and the faith-based community to plan future initiatives to serve the immigrant populations in need.

But these examples are only the tip of the iceberg. In the true community action spirit, Michele works to create long-term community change. Two examples of her work involve reducing barriers to childcare for low-income families and creating a supportive system for people recovering from disasters. In both cases, Michele worked closely with Couleecap and other community organizations to design and implement programs that have forever changed our community.

While participating in meetings with public stakeholders, Michele saw an opportunity to address childcare needs in rural Wisconsin. She led a collaborative effort with a local group knows as Kickapoo Conversations to study the problem, conduct focus groups, gather data, and test models to launch new resources. Michele focused on creating a system that could expand licensed childcare, understanding that low-income families could only access state childcare subsidies if there were licensed facilities in their community. When challenged by unique barriers faced by rural communities - like distance to travel and an inability to recruit enough children to make a centralized facility viable - Michele utilized her relationship with the Wisconsin Early Childhood Association to help solve the problem. This resulted in the creation of the first-ever Wisconsin Early Education Shared Services Network (WEESSN), an innovative program that invites childcare providers to participate in a cooperative-style membership, where they receive benefits of bulk purchasing, support during illness or time away from work, and shared education and software programs. The program launched in 2018 and by the end of 2019, most childcare facilities in two counties were participating. Moreover, the network started to attract new providers, enabling them to become licensed and better established.

Michele has also transformed how our community prepares for and manages recovery from disasters by being a founding member of the Long-Term Recovery Group (LTRG) in 2007 and resurrecting the group after the devastating floods of 2018. Michele was also instrumental in establishing a Project Recovery program at Couleecap after the 2018 floods.

Flood response is not new to Michele. In 2008-2012 she worked with Couleecap to relocate many homes in the town of Gays Mills after flooding de vested the entire town. She understood the massive community effort it takes to respond to the emotional, financial, and structural needs of the public after a disaster. After the 2018 floods, Michele approached the Couleecap leadership team to explain Project Recovery and encourage Couleecap to become a provider. She set up teleconferences with state partners and Couleecap, and helped the organization feel confident that it is an effort we could be successful in. Later, she also negotiated for Couleecap to provide recovery services to the Long-Term Recovery Group (LTRG). Even though Couleecap had not participated in this type of work in the past, Michele guided the team through planning, staff training, and establishing critical partnerships. She even trained new case managers on the processes for inspecting damages and preparing proposals for the LTRG board of directors. Couleecap has since assisted over 11,000 residents with crisis and emotional support and distributed over $100,000 in funds to help people recover. Because of Michele, Couleecap was able to expand services in this way.

These are just some examples of Michele’s impact as a true friend to community action. She continues to tackle big issues in our community and serves on the Couleecap Board of Directors to ensure her efforts are in alignment, and supportive, of our mission in community action. Michele is a true friend of community action and everything we stand for.
Here is a photo of Michele next to donations she raised for immigrant families being served by Couleecap.

Thank you for your consideration of this nomination,

Hetti Brown
Executive Director