



**Testimony of Hetti Brown, Couleecap, Inc. in support of the Wisconsin Opportunity Act
Senate Bill 467 & Assembly Bill 508**

Submitted to the Members of the Senate Committee on Local Government, Small Business, Tourism and Workforce Development & the Assembly Committee on Housing and Real Estate

I respectfully submit comments on behalf of Couleecap Community Action Program. Since 1966, our agency has offered an array of programs across Crawford, La Crosse, Monroe, and Vernon Counties, and serves about 24,000 people annually with food, housing, education, transportation, home repairs, and utility bill assistance. We collaborate with many public and private stakeholders to strengthen the rural economy and address conditions that create poverty.

Like many rural communities in the state, our community is anchored by our agricultural industry. Our community offers robust recreational and tourism opportunities, downtown spaces that rely on strong small businesses and a sense of neighborly cooperation, and where a small handful of larger companies offer jobs in volume that drive population centers.

Another characteristic we share with other rural communities in WI is that our residents – from farmers to healthcare workers, teachers and bus drivers, and those working in manufacturing – struggle with poverty.

According to the Great Rivers United Way ALICE report, 42% of working people in our region do not make enough to provide the necessities for themselves and their families. Costs continue to rise, and wages are not keeping up with those costs.

At the same time, our rural community, like others in the state, has suffered from dis-investment in roads, schools, communication systems, and other amenities that create robust economies. Therefore, we struggle to bring in quality jobs that can offer living wages, and residents struggle to afford housing, transportation, healthcare, and early child education. Our children, who will be Wisconsin's future workforce, are not provided the resources they need to be successful.

A recent community needs assessment conducted by Couleecap, which assessed barriers to economic stability experienced by low-income individuals and households, highlighted the challenges faced by people living in rural Wisconsin.

- Most of the people in our region are working. Of the low-income households we surveyed, most received income from wages. Yet over half of those households that do receive wages, still had to rely on food pantries, and state and local safety net programs, such as Badger Care and Food Share, just to make ends meet for their families.
- 86% of households surveyed had health insurance, but still listed the cost of healthcare and healthcare accessibility, especially dental, vision, and mental health care as a significant barrier for their families.



- 60% of people reporting having difficulty paying for their utility bills and homeowners, which was about half of survey respondents, struggled to make home repairs that kept their homes safe, putting their housing at risk.
- Up to a half of people in our rural counties traveled more than 30 miles roundtrip to access necessities – such as groceries, healthcare, and their job. Therefore, transportation assistance, such as help purchasing or paying for car repairs, is a high need.

Rural communities are also unique in how we experience homelessness and lack resources that are often available in more urban areas. Our region has one of the highest rates of homelessness in WI outside of Madison and Milwaukee, and last school year almost 500 children identified as homeless. Yet in three of the rural counties we serve, there is not one emergency shelter. If a family is struggling with housing in those rural areas and have no alternative shelter option, they must travel to another county for sheltering, disrupting their jobs, children's education, and support network. Current programs that fund temporary housing in rural communities – such as motel vouchers - are insufficient and typically run out within the first few months of allocation, leaving few options during dangerously cold winter months.

I am here today because the WI Opportunity Act is a bold and comprehensive plan to address poverty especially in our rural communities. The Act includes provisions that would address much of what I have explained today.

The Act would address a variety of transportation needs by implementing small community mass transit aid payments and nonemergency medical transportation assistance.

The ACT prevents housing insecurity and helps those experiencing homelessness by providing eviction and critical housing assistance – funds especially important to those in rural communities that do not have emergency shelters. It also works to establish new data and solutions for families with children who are experiencing homelessness, and on those living in poor housing conditions that can be unsafe for children.

The ACT provides several initiatives to help people access work or the education they need to secure a quality job and promotes small business development as an economic driver. The Act establishes mechanisms to understand and address addiction and mental health needs of farmers at risk of suicide.

Finally, the Act offers a state supplement to the Community Services Block Grant – which is the most powerful poverty intervention tool designed to advance innovative programming to address the causes and conditions that create poverty. This tool enables local communities to determine how to prevent and address poverty for their residents. However, as you heard from the data I shared earlier, it is not enough. That is why the WI Opportunity Act is critically important.

On behalf of Couleecap and the 24,000 rural residents we serve, I urge the Wisconsin State Legislature to pass the Wisconsin Opportunity Act.

Hetti Brown
Executive Director, Couleecap, Inc.