

A photograph of a smiling woman with dark, curly hair, wearing a dark blue button-down shirt. She is in a library, with bookshelves filled with books visible in the background. The entire image is overlaid with a semi-transparent blue filter.

Measuring progress toward self-reliance

Early results of the Self-Reliance
Achievement Scale

**Minnesota Community
Action Association**

**Minnesota Department
of Children, Families &
Learning - Office of
Economic Opportunity**

**Wilder Research
Center**

This summary presents highlights of *Improving the Self-Reliance of Low-Income Minnesotans: Measurement Strategies and Effectiveness Results*, March 2002.

To request additional copies, contact the Minnesota Community Action Association at 651-645-7425. For more information about the project, contact Tarryl Clark at the same number, or Connie Greer at the Minnesota Department of Children, Families & Learning - Office of Economic Opportunity, 651-582-8569.

The Self-Reliance Achievement Scale is a joint project of:



Minnesota Community Action Association

www.mncaa.org

MINNESOTA DEPARTMENT OF

*Children
Families &
Learning*

Minnesota Department of Children, Families & Learning

Office of Economic Opportunity

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Measuring progress toward self-reliance

Early results of the Self-Reliance Achievement Scale

How do you chart the complex journey toward self-reliance, with its real-world mix of setbacks and progress?

How do you tell the story of not just one family, but of many families in many communities, in a way that is both reliable and meaningful?

Minnesota Community Action Agencies have been testing a new way to tell their story – to describe changes in the lives of low-income people they work with.

Policy-makers and funders look increasingly for solid evidence of results. The agencies themselves want better information about which of their efforts are most and least effective with which types of participants.

The Self-Reliance Achievement Scale is a new way to measure progress toward self-reliance and stability of low-income people. It is designed to document the progress of low-income individuals and families in 15 essential aspects of economic stability, called domains. A yearlong pilot test of the Scale shows promising results.

Visible progress toward self-reliance

Even in a time of slowed economic growth, which tends to create serious setbacks for low-income people, the Self-Reliance Achievement Scale shows clear evidence of positive change in the lives of many participants in the first year of the pilot test.

Preliminary data on 456 participants from seven different Community Action Agencies provides a testimony both to the efforts of participants to improve their own situation, and to the value of services that Community Action Agencies provide to low-income Minnesotans.

The link between services and progress

In 11 of the 15 domains of self-reliance covered on the Self-Reliance Achievement Scale, participants who received Community Action services showed greater progress than those who did not.

In all but one domain (Income Sources), the relationship with the Community Action Agency had a positive impact on the progress of participants.

The link between agency services and improved self-reliance was much stronger in some domains than in others. These tended to be issues that can respond relatively quickly to intervention. For example:

- 37% of those who received services to help them work more hours did increase their hours of employment by 10 hours or more.
- 43% of those who received services to help them gain enough income to pay for food and shelter were later able to meet those basic needs
- 70% of those who received services related to being homeless or in temporary housing were later in market rate or subsidized rental housing or were homeowners.
- 34% of those who at first could not meet their daily transportation needs reported later that they were meeting those needs.

It will take more time and wider use of the Self-Reliance Achievement Scale to understand the impact of Community Action services in domains that typically require more complicated or long-term efforts. For example, the domains that showed weaker progress for those who received services included Child Support Income, English Proficiency, Informal Social Support, and Education. Measurable progress in these areas can take considerable time, so a longer track record is needed to examine the effectiveness of services.

How the scale works

The Self-Reliance Achievement Scale covers 15 essential aspects of economic stability, called domains:

- Hours of employment
- Income sources
- Child support income
- Earned Income Tax Credit
- Adequacy of income for food and shelter
- Financial credit
- Housing stability
- Housing affordability
- Household health insurance coverage
- Child care
- English proficiency
- Education
- Transportation
- Informal social support
- Number of jobs (this domain was tested in the pilot year but has since been dropped, since it proved less useful than the other measures)

Each domain has three to six levels of self-reliance. The levels are designed to be very concrete and observable, so that they can be used consistently among different locations and staff members.

For example, for Income Sources the levels of self-reliance include:

- No income
- Public cash benefits/no earned income
- More than 50% public cash benefits with some earned income
- More than 50% earned income with some public cash benefits
- Earned income/no public cash benefits

Agency staff also record any services provided to the participant. This makes it possible to look for correlations between services and improvements in the participant's situation.

When completed for larger numbers of participants over time, the Self-Reliance Achievement Scale will provide agencies with a new depth of insight into the impact of their work. It may also help communities identify local issues that pose persistent difficulties for low-income families.

Putting the tool to the test

Seven of Minnesota's 29 Community Action Agencies began to use the Self-Reliance Achievement Scale in September 2000. In the first full year, they completed the Scale at least twice with 456 participants. These were participants who had ongoing contact with the agency and received more than one type of service. Reports from agency staff have been encouraging. They have found the Scale clear and easy to use. Most completed it in less than 15 minutes. They also found the Scale to be thought-provoking and said it spurred new communication and coordination of services.

Twenty-nine Minnesota Community Action Agencies began to use the Self-Reliance Achievement Scale in 2002.

Services aimed at self-reliance

During the yearlong pilot test of the Self-Reliance Achievement Scale, participants received an average of eight services.

In each domain, the most services went to the participants with the farthest to go to achieve self-reliance. This was particularly striking in the domains of Adequate Income for Food and Shelter, Transportation, and Child Care.

One hallmark of local Community Action programs is that they not only provide direct services, but also guide people to many other services available in the community. This role of "information and referral" can be as simple as sharing information, or as intensive as walking someone through the process of applying for and receiving services.

In fact, this information and referral role is so strong that during the pilot test period, it accounted for nearly half of all services provided in all 15 domains of the Self-Reliance Achievement Scale.

Who participated in the pilot test?

More than 500 participants in the seven test site communities agreed to help Community Action Agencies test the Self-Reliance Achievement Scale.

Of these, 456 had at least two checkpoints when the Scale was completed, allowing us to look at change in their situation over time.

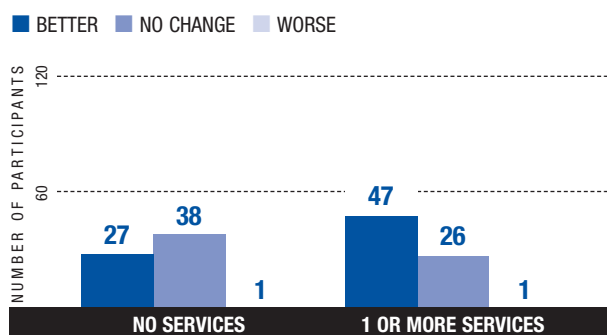
Looking at some basic demographics of the test group:

- 87% were women
- 87% had at least one child in the household; 28% had three or more children
- 59% were the only adult in the household
- 30% were married or in a marriage-like relationship
- 34% had less than a high school education; 4% had a college degree
- 32 was the average age; the majority were age 26 to 45
- 81% were White/Caucasian; 12% were Black/African American; 7% were of another race
- 13% were of Hispanic/Latino origin

Changes in self-reliance

Each chart shows the number of participants whose situation in that domain improved, remained the same, or worsened from their first checkpoint to their last during the pilot year. The domains listed first are those that show the strongest progress for clients who received Community Action services. On the right side of the page are the categories found in the Self-Reliance Achievement Scale.

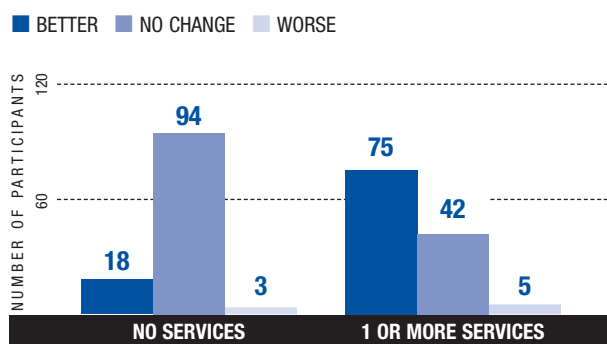
EARNED INCOME TAX CREDIT



Increasing levels of self-reliance:

- Eligible, no benefit
- Eligible, applied for benefit
- Eligible, received or receiving benefit

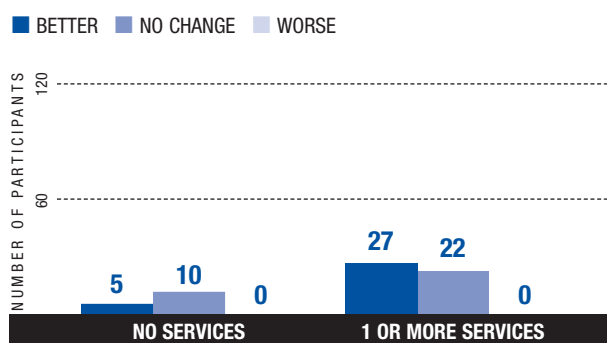
HOUSING STABILITY



Increasing levels of self-reliance:

- Homeless
- Emergency shelter, doubled up, or notice of eviction or foreclosure
- Transitional housing (time-limited)
- Subsidized rental housing
- Market rate rental housing
- Home ownership

CHILD CARE

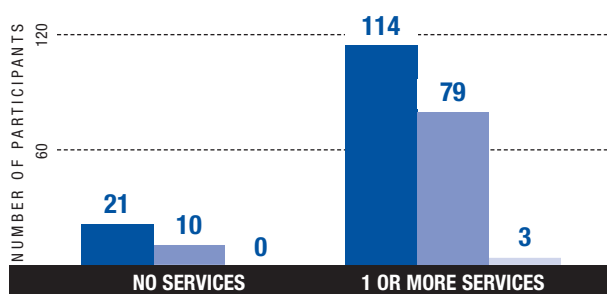


Increasing levels of self-reliance:

- No child care available
- Child care available but inadequate
- Child care available and adequate with subsidy
- Child care available and adequate without subsidy

ADEQUACY OF INCOME

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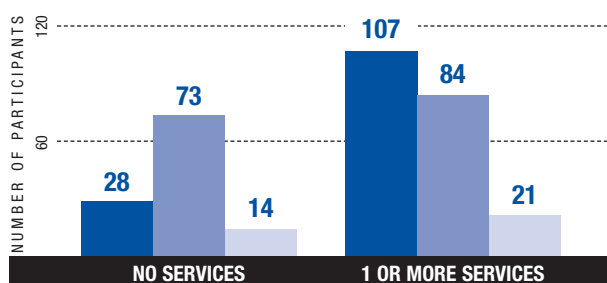


Increasing levels of self-reliance:

- Unable to meet food AND housing expenses during the last month
- Able to meet food OR housing expenses during the last month
- Able to meet BOTH food and housing expenses during the last month

HOURS OF EMPLOYMENT

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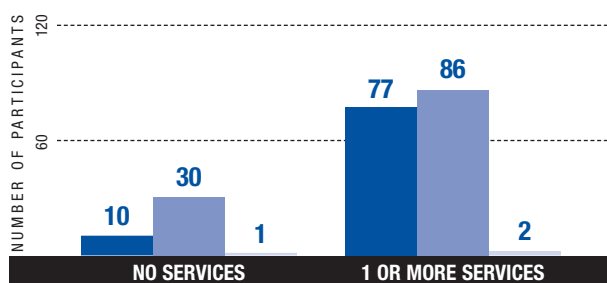


Increasing levels of self-reliance:

- Working less than 15 hours / week
- 15-19 hours / week
- 20-24 hours / week
- 25-29 hours / week
- 30-34 hours / week
- 35-40 hours / week

TRANSPORTATION

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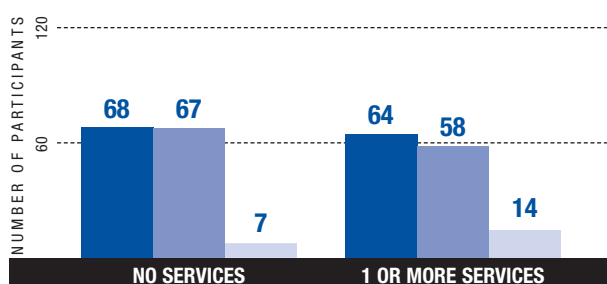


Increasing levels of self-reliance:

- Transportation not adequate to meet daily needs
- Adequate to meet some but not all daily needs
- Adequate to meet daily needs

INCOME SOURCES

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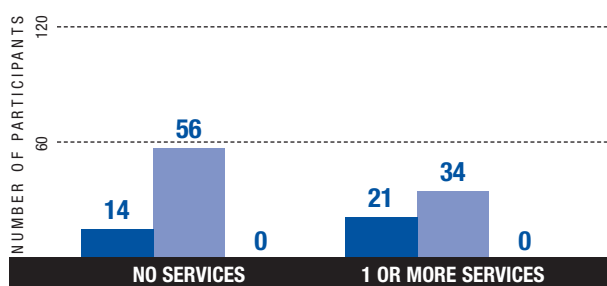


Increasing levels of self-reliance:

- No income
- Public cash benefits, no earned income
- More than 50% public cash benefits with some earned income
- More than 50% earned income with some public cash benefits
- Earned income, no public cash benefits

SOCIAL SUPPORT

■ BETTER ■ NO CHANGE ■ WORSE

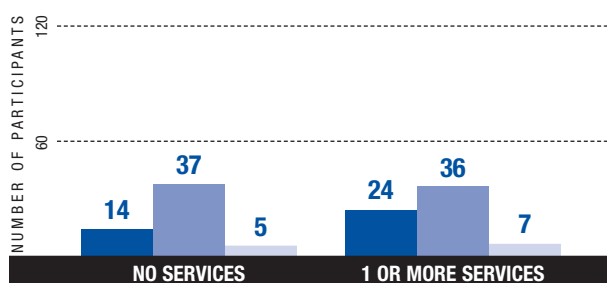


Increasing levels of self-reliance:

- No support from family and friends
- One family member or friend to turn to in a crisis
- Two or more family members or friends to turn to in a crisis

HEALTH CARE COVERAGE

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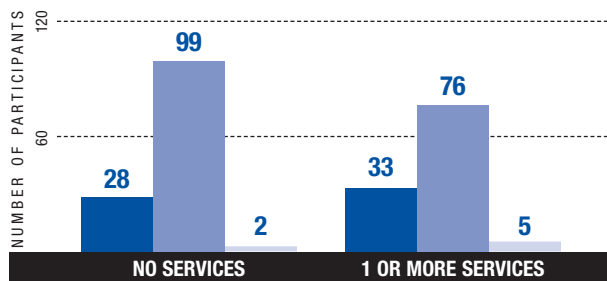


Increasing levels of self-reliance:

- No insurance for any household members
- Public health insurance for some household members
- Public health insurance for all household members
- Mix of public and private insurance for some household members
- Mix of public and private insurance for all household members
- Private insurance for some household members
- Private insurance for all household members

HOUSING AFFORDABILITY

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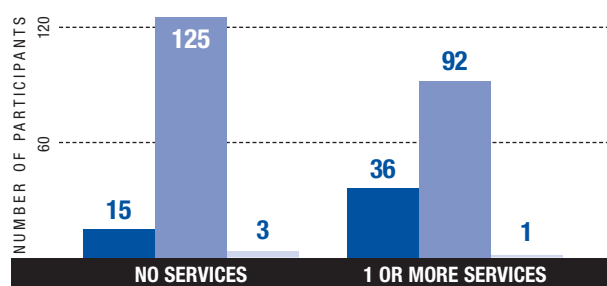


Increasing levels of self-reliance:

- Pays more than 50% of household income for housing
- Pays less than 50% but more than 30% of income
- Pays less than 30% of income

FINANCIAL CREDIT

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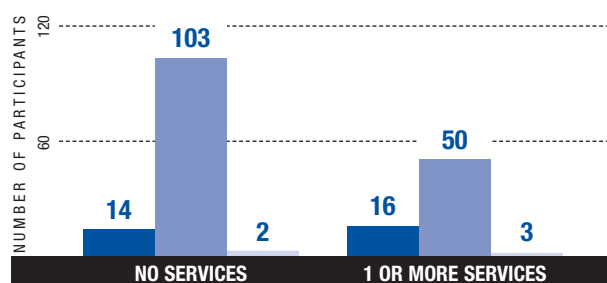


Increasing levels of self-reliance:

- No credit
- Poor credit
- Restoring credit or beginning to establish credit
- Good credit or restored credit

CHILD SUPPORT INCOME

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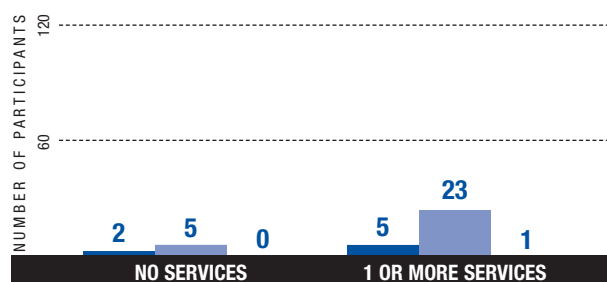


Increasing levels of self-reliance:

- Eligible for child support, no income benefit
- Eligible for child support, partial or irregular benefit
- Eligible for child support, receives full benefit

ENGLISH PROFICIENCY

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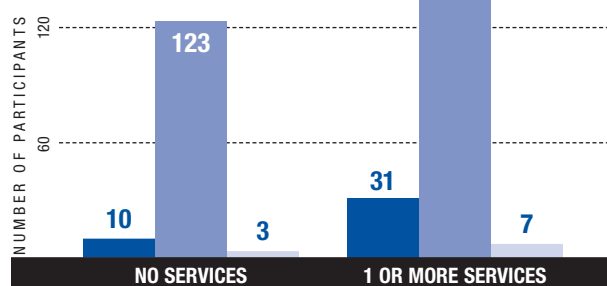


Increasing levels of self-reliance:

- No English skills or inadequate English skills
- Limited English skills
- Functional English skills with some support
- Functional English skills, no support needed

EDUCATION

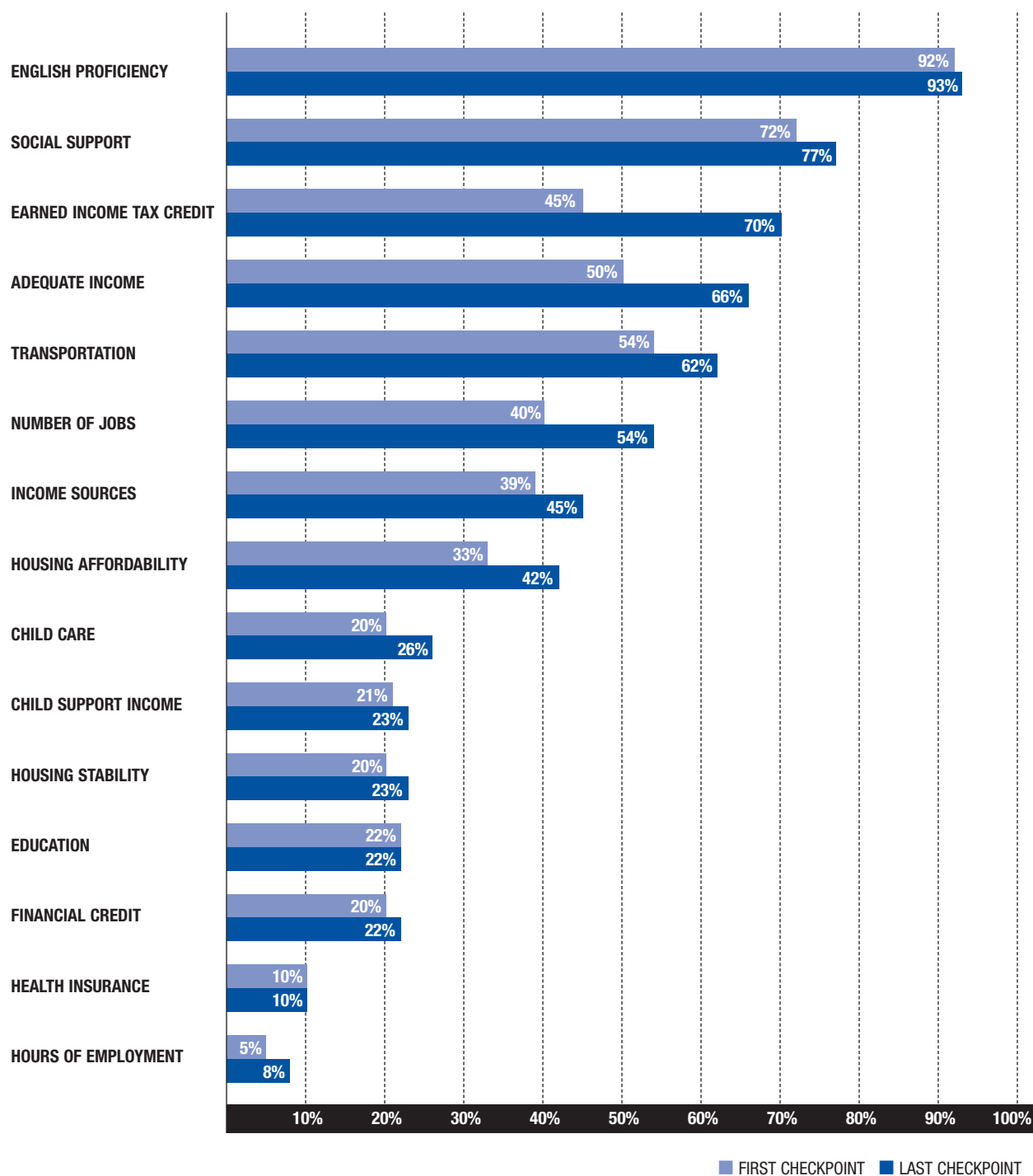
■ BETTER ■ NO CHANGE ■ WORSE



Increasing levels of self-reliance:

- Formal education not adequate to meet employment needs
- Formal education adequate for current employment but not for work advancement
- Formal education adequate for current employment and advancement

At the end of the study, a greater percentage of participants were at the highest level of self-reliance.



About Minnesota Community Action Agencies

Community Action Agencies were established in the 1960s to fight America's War on Poverty. Each agency is locally based, with a local governing board of directors made up of one-third low-income individuals, one-third government officials, and one-third business community members. The agencies design strategies to fight poverty and advocate for low-income people. In Minnesota, 29 Community Action Agencies and 11 tribal governments receive state and federal funds to do this kind of work and operate a statewide network.

Specifically, Community Action Agencies in Minnesota provide children and family services, economic self-sufficiency services, housing services, senior services, transportation services, emergency and energy assistance and other programs and services. Find more information at www.mncaa.org.

Collaborators in creating the Self-Reliance Achievement Scale

The collaborative team that developed the Scale includes staff from local Community Action Agencies, the Minnesota Community Action Association, the Minnesota Department of Children, Families & Learning - Office of Economic Opportunity, and Wilder Research Center.

The team came together in the mid-1990s in response to a new federal emphasis on Results Oriented Management and Accountability (ROMA) for Community Action efforts nationwide.

The U.S. Congress directed the Community Action Network to focus on measurement of progress and continuous improvement in order to achieve these ultimate goals:

- Low-income people become more self-sufficient.
- The conditions in which low-income people live are improved.
- Low-income people own a stake in their community.
- Those who support and provide services to low-income people work in partnership.
- Agencies increase their capacity to achieve results.
- Low-income people, especially vulnerable populations, achieve their potential by strengthening family and other supportive systems.

