

EVENT

Katrina aftermath puts work of county's Community Action Agency in perspective



Gwen Robinson (center), president & CEO of the Cincinnati-Hamilton County Community Action Agency, and Hamilton County Coroner Dr. O'Dell Owens are shown at the agency's annual banquet.

By Dan Yount
The Cincinnati Herald

The aftermath of Hurricane Katrina more than ever highlighted the service the Cincinnati-Hamilton County Community Action Agency provides for those in need, said president and CEO Gwen Robinson at the agency's annual luncheon at the Westin Hotel on Nov. 4. Hamilton County Coroner Dr. O'Dell Owens was the guest speaker at the luncheon.

"No event had more impact than a hurricane named Katrina, that ripped through the Gulf Coast a few months ago, in putting the work of CAA and the

work that many of you do into context," Robinson said to staff members, volunteers and community supporters.

"In the wake of devastation and human tragedy, a disturbing reality was unveiled. Against the backdrop of the 9th Ward, Hurricane Katrina forced America to locate its collective moral conscience as we saw poverty personified in the faces of poor children and the abandoned elderly.

"Many of us were reminded how lucky we are - enjoying amenities and luxuries we take for granted. The irony is we were reminded by what we forgot.

"Across this country of ours and right here in Hamilton County, forgotten communities suffer everyday. Basic needs too often are not met. Promises made to the poor, too often, are not kept.

"In 1964, your Community Action Agency made a pledge to respond to the needs of our community's most vulnerable. We never forgot. And 41 years later, here we are - still standing, still serving."

CAA - working with a \$40 million annual budget - provides comprehensive assistance to nearly 30,000 low- to moderate-income individuals and families a year throughout Cincinnati and Hamilton County, Robinson reported.

The agency provides emergency services such as assistance with rent, utilities, food, transportation, budget management, and medical aid. It also provides career education programs, an employment resource center, housing support, home energy assistance, and linkage with other programs.

Thanks to private and public support, the agency is moving into a new facility at Jordan Crossing at Reading Road and Seymour Avenue, and it should become a cornerstone in the revitalization of Bond Hill, said Mark Lawson, chairman of the Board of Trustees.

Lawson commended the many volunteers who work with the agency to give people a hand up out of poverty.

He noted the success of the agency's new Blueprint for Success program, which trains and places at-risk youth in construction trade jobs.

Mayor Charlie Luken said the CAA is doing a better job than ever in serving the city of Cincinnati.

Some of the accomplishments the agency reported for 2004 are as follows:

- CAA served over 3,500 children in Head Start and Early Head Start programs.
- CAA poured more than \$1 million back into Hamilton County through Home Energy Assistance programs and Weatherization programs that served over 20,000 households.
- CAA served 3,000 individuals through its community services division that includes assistance with housing, emergency shelter, transportation, prescriptions, clothing, work readiness training, job placement, GED classes and post-secondary scholarships.

"But more importantly," Robinson said, "when you tunnel through the numbers, what you will find are human lives touched by what we do - the children, the disabled, the elderly, the working class who grind it out, some with multiple jobs, and still can't make ends meet."

Robinson added, "It is imperative that we never forget and, thus, we never will. It's the organic nature of CAA. This is what we do and with your continued support and commitment to reducing poverty in our city and county, we will continue to fight the fight and do it well."