

BUCKS COUNTY OPPORTUNITY COUNCIL

 Doylestown, PA

 bcoc.org



Agency Context

Organizational Capacity

Bucks County Opportunity Council (BCOC) is a local Community Action Agency located in Doylestown, Pennsylvania. They serve over 56,000 people annually through five program areas including: Housing, Weatherization, Food, Income Tax Preparation, and Economic Self-Sufficiency. The annual budget is approximately \$15 million which consists of 67% public funding and 33% from private and other funding sources. The work is led by a 21-person tripartite Board of Directors and a 17-person leadership team including a Chief Executive Officer (CEO), Chief Financial Officer (CFO), three Directors (Development, Compliance, and Client Services), six Housing Site Supervisors, and six Managers (Human Resources, Volunteer and Community Connections, Self-Sufficiency Program, Food Program,

Communications and Development, and Weatherization Program). Additionally, there are 60 employees on staff and over 1,700 volunteers who contribute over 100,000 hours of volunteer service per year.

Service Delivery

Bucks County is a suburb of Philadelphia, with a population of approximately 650,000. The county's population has grown by 3.4% since 2010 and the current poverty rate is 5.9%. This includes nearly 17% of children under the age of 18, and 5% of senior citizens over the age of 65. The community's needs vary depending on which part of the county they reside in. For example, in the Lower Bucks County area, income tends to be lower and four of the school districts have free or reduced lunch rates for over 50% of their student body.

Food security is a concern with the rising cost of living and families struggling to be able to afford groceries, as well as some areas being food deserts where families do not have transportation to access food. In some parts of the county public transportation is available through train, bus, or shuttle, but other parts of the county require a personal vehicle. Even where public transportation is available, families can spend hours a day on public transportation and often use Uber or Lyft to save time, but it is not effective and can cost over \$1,000 per month.

The cost of housing and utilities is also a significant concern in the county with 45.2% of renters paying more than 30% of their income for rent. For residents living in Upper Bucks County, the utilities are often higher. Families living in this area can owe thousands of dollars in utility bills, and disconnection results in additional fees being added.

There are also gaps in education and training with 5.3% of people over the age of 25 not having a high school diploma. The living wage in the area for a family of four is \$45 per hour and the wages needed to afford a modest 2-bedroom apartment at \$1,800 per month is at least \$35 per hour. Employment with these wages often require higher education and advanced skilled training.

BCOC recognizes the interconnection of food, housing, employment, and education for economic mobility. They serve over 56,000 people annually through five program areas including: Housing, Weatherization, Food, Income Tax Preparation, and Economic Self-Sufficiency. The agency operates 35 programs



across these focus areas and has six sites located throughout the county. They work closely with local community partners including Bucks County Community College, the Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA), United Way, Family Service Association, Chamber of Commerce, Workforce Development Board, School Districts, Healthcare System, Housing, and Human Services. The local human service leaders in the community all have a close connection with one another and meet often to work collaboratively towards shared goals.

Innovation & Learning

Over the years, BCOC has implemented a variety of innovative programs and approaches to meet the needs of their community. For example, the Wheelz 2 Work program was established through a partnership with Bucks County Community College. Through this program, BCOC accepts donated vehicles that are in good condition for working families who are enrolled in BCOC's long-term case management program and need reliable transportation. The vehicles are assessed by a

mechanic and approved in advance, with BCOC providing minor repairs as needed, and donors receive a tax deduction based on the value of the vehicle.

The Healthy Families Initiative was another innovative approach that was developed to help build the social capital of program participants. Through this initiative, BCOC provides funding for families to participate in extracurricular activities or events such as youth sports, swimming lessons, prom tickets, and music lessons. The initiative is funded primarily through private donations.

Perhaps the most innovative approach that BCOC has implemented is the Coaches on Campus program. This program was established in 2022 based on the needs of both Bucks County Opportunity Council (BCOC) and the Bucks County Community College (BCCC). Through this program, BCOC's Economic Self-Sufficiency coaches are now located on-site at the Bucks County Community College. Although employed by BCOC, the coaches are now also part of the Student Affairs Division at the community college and are embedded into the Student Services on campus. The target population for the program are Bucks County Community College students with an annual household income at or below 200% of the Federal Poverty Income Guideline. The goal of the program is to provide coaching, financial support and resources to students, so that they stay in school, graduate, and use their education to become economically self-sufficient.

This need was identified when there was a shift in higher education to focus on student needs outside the classroom to improve student retention and graduation rates. Both BCOC and BCCC recognized that without stable housing or food security, students were more likely to struggle to stay in school and complete their education. Students in low-income households often had basic unmet needs that required additional support and connection to other community resources.

By embedding the existing resources that were already available through BCOC into the college's student services, students were able to more easily access the services they needed to meet their basic needs, stay in school, and graduate. This coordinated approach was mutually beneficial for the goals of both the BCOC as the community action agency and BCCC as the community college.



Community Engagement

As a community action agency, BCOC conducts a community needs assessment to guide strategic planning and decision making for the agency's programs and services. The community is engaged in this process through surveys that are made available online, via social media, and through paper copies located at all the agency's sites. Staff share the surveys with families who are enrolled in programs through BCOC to encourage participation and feedback. Based on the most recent assessment, 27% of the general population survey respondents had received BCOC services. The agency also facilitates focus groups to gather feedback from participants, particularly within the Economic Self-Sufficiency

program. This feedback from the community is taken into consideration to help the agency's leadership to identify gaps in services, establish strategic partnerships, and develop innovative programs and services to address challenges, meet needs, and improve economic mobility.



Decision-Making

The idea for Coaches on Campus was established through a previously existing partnership between BCOC's CEO and the Executive Director of the Bucks County Community College Foundation for a scholarship opportunity that had been developed for students in BCOC's Economic Self-Sufficiency program. At the time, the two organizations had an open referral system, but the referrals would often drop off between the community college and the BCOC office.

BCOC's CEO first met with the Executive Director of the Bucks County Community College Foundation, and then with the President of Bucks County Community College to discuss bringing the Economic Self-Sufficiency program onto the campus. As a community-minded leader, the President recognized the value of Community Action in helping to improve the retention rate and was already familiar with the model after coming from a college where a similar relationship was in place.

The next question was simply "What do you need?" BCOC only needed space. Ultimately, it was decided the best place for the coaches to be located would be in Student Services. Once this decision was made, and Memorandum of Understanding was signed, and the process started to move forward.

Implementation Context



Organizational Change

Leading up to the implementation of the Coaches on Campus program, the staff and Board of Directors were excited and supportive of the opportunity. There was no additional cost for coaches to be on campus. It was simply a way for the agency to reach students they could not reach before, which made it easy for staff and board members to get on board with. The Economic Self-Sufficiency team was the most affected by the transition. The Economic Self-Sufficiency coaches were informed that they would be spending time at the college based on rotating schedule. For the first year, BCOC only had one part-time staff supporting the Coaches on Campus program, but in the second year they transitioned to a full-time coordinator position. The coordinator does not maintain a case load but rather helps make sure the coaches have what they need to help support students.



BCOC developed their own training curriculum for coaches. The training includes the basics of building relationships, assessment needs, and developing goals. Every coach also receives a guide that was developed by the BCOC leadership team and has been updated over the years. It is a practical guide that includes information for enrollment, income calculation, writing vouchers, and making payments. It also includes examples of specific scenarios and a list of additional resources. The Economic Self-Sufficiency manager facilitates ongoing training with staff, and staff can participate in external training opportunities as well.

Peer support is another important part of the ongoing learning and professional development for coaches. The coaches have regular joint meetings to discuss cases and advise one another as needed and are in continuous communication with one another through Microsoft Teams. This allows the coaches to bounce ideas off one another and ask for advice or guidance.



Funding

The Economic Self-Sufficiency program is funded through both public and private funding sources. The case management services are supported through the Community Services Block Grant (CSBG) while private grants and donations help support the financial assistance. There are guidelines in place for the type and amount of financial assistance that can be provided. Private donors support annual Back to School and Holiday Celebration events where the donor can adopt a family in the Economic Self-Sufficiency program and provide gift cards

or donations for school supplies or gifts. BCOC also has a great relationship with their congressman, who is supportive of both BCOC and CSBG. As a result, they received a \$1 million congressional grant to help expand the Coaches on Campus program. Unfortunately, they have also experienced funding challenges in recent months, particularly within the food and weatherization programs, and are actively searching for other funding sources to supplement these programs and services.



Partnerships

In this strategic partnership between the local community action agency and the local community college, the primary role of the community college is to provide office space on campus for the Economic Self-Sufficiency coaches to meet with students. In addition to the physical office space, the community college also invites the coaches to participate in “College 101” classes each year to bring awareness of the program to faculty, staff, and students. They have also hosted poverty simulations on campus for faculty and staff as well. BCOC and BCCC staff work together collaboratively to align goals and have regular meetings to continuously identify the needs of students, share resources, discuss funding opportunities, and review retention data and trends for both referred and enrolled students.

Beyond the community college, BCOC is always working to establish new and strengthen existing community partnerships to better meet the needs of the community. Key partnerships include [Housing Link](#), [Career Link](#), [Credit Counseling](#), [Children & Youth](#), [Mental Health](#), [Education Services](#), [A Woman's Place](#), [United](#)

Way, Chamber of Commerce, and The Salvation Army. They also have a collaborative partnership with Habitat for Humanity, Bucks County Housing Group, and the YWCA called Serving Bucks Together where they share office space together.

Successes

The BCOC staff recognized the success of the Coaches on Campus program at their first graduation ceremony. At that time, they had three people graduating who fully completed their educational goal and were employed with a family-sustaining wage. Most recently, they had a student graduate from the Registered Nursing (RN) program. When she originally enrolled in the Coaches on Campus program, she was in her last six months of the program and was struggling to keep up with her rent and utilities because of reduced hours at work and was on the brink of eviction. The RN program is a rigorous program that prevents students from working during the day due to classes, labs, and an internship. She was worried that if she could not get help with her rent that she would be forced to withdraw from the program to start working full time again. BCOC's intervention helped her with rent and utilities for that month so she could maintain housing and complete the program. She graduated as an RN in June of 2024 and is now working full-time earning \$39/hour as a Registered Nurse. She even received a sign-on bonus that allowed her to be able to save enough to be able to purchase a car to maintain transportation.

Even beyond the individual success of students in the program, BCOC has also experienced the success of the program through opportunities to see the program replicated at other communities across the state and the country. They were recently approached by a local University who is looking to implement a similar approach. The Dean of Students, Vice President of Student Affairs, and a consultant were interested in learning about the transition to coaching a model on campus. They have already received significant investment and are working towards the next steps for implementation.

Challenges

In the beginning of implementation for the Coaches on Campus program, BCOC leadership thought they would be able to bring their existing coaching staff to campus through a rotating schedule and would not need to hire for a new position. However, they soon realized the need for a coordinator to manage the schedule. For this coordinator position, it was not only important to have a background in case management and social work, but also a solid understanding of the college. Learning how to navigate the college system was an important part of implementing the Coaches on Campus program, and it proved to be beneficial to have a graduate from the college with lived experience on staff as a coordinator.

The Coaches on Campus Coordinator also helped serve as an intermediary with coaches to remind them that although they were located at the BCCC campus, they were still employees of BCOC. There are a lot of emotions to be

managed with coaching. On a daily basis, coaches respond to both good news and bad news. They are carrying a heavy weight of responsibility as they navigate the long journey to self-sufficiency with their students, and they often struggle with secondary trauma and compassion fatigue. BCOC quickly learned that it was helpful to have a coordinator on-site who was not carrying a case load but was available to help support the needs of coaches as they supported the needs of students.

Another challenge that BCOC encountered early in the implementation was getting the word out to faculty, staff, and students to make sure everyone was aware of the Coaches on Campus program. This included putting flyers up all over campus to let students know about the program and sharing about the program with professors as well as staff in key areas on campus such as the cafeteria or bookstore. To increase awareness of the program with students, coaches showed up where students were and asked relevant questions about whether they were able to afford books, buy food, or pay their bills. The community college has also started inviting BCOC coaches to be part of the Student Success 101 class in freshman orientations.

Although the goals of BCOC as a community action agency and BCCC as an institute of higher education were the same, in that they both understood education and training to be a pathway out of poverty, they approached this common goal from two different perspectives. Faculty and staff at the college tended to focus on student enrollment and retention as priorities but were not as familiar with understanding the basic needs of students from low-income

households. To address this challenge, BCOC staff had to learn to speak the language of higher education. They reached out to professors and talked about how helping students stay enrolled and keep up with the course work may require assistance with transportation or the cost of books. As a result of these conversations, professors started putting information about the Coaches on Campus program into their syllabus each semester.

Lessons Learned

The words of advice BCOC leadership would offer to someone interested in implementing a similar approach is to start with what you have and know what you have to offer. For BCOC, they started with their long-term Economic Self-Sufficiency program. They knew they could offer coaching, supportive services, and financial assistance for students and they reached out to the community college to build on that foundation. It is also important to keep the budget in mind. If the budget allows for a pilot program with 10 students, then it is important to inform the college or university and then build from there. BCOC also suggests finding a champion at the college who supports the program and can help get others on board. This may not always be the college president. It may be the Dean of Students, but it needs to be someone who cares about the students, understands the needs of the community, and has decision-making authority.

The words of advice BCOC coaches would offer is to understand the population and know the students you are serving. The students are

the experts of their lived experience. They recommend talking to them and getting to know what they need. At BCOC, the CEO is active in the community, and this was an important part of their success. The staff describe her as being a true advocate who deeply understands the needs of the community. This type of leadership is motivated, solutions-focused, and able to cast a clear vision. There were also already strong community partnerships that were able to be built upon to bring the goals into alignment and help meet the needs of the community in a new and innovative way.

To learn more: [Coaches on Campus Report](#)



THE COLLABORATIVE ON ECONOMIC MOBILITY



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