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HELPING PEOPLE. CHANGING LIVES.

THE COMMUNITY ACTION PARTNERSHIP OF SAN LUIS OBISPO COUNTY

by Mike Blount

Some 35,000 people in San Luis Obispo are living in poverty and thousands more are struggling to make ends meet. With a shortage of living wage jobs and a high cost of living, the need for services for low-income families in San Luis Obispo is greater than ever.

The Community Action Partnership of San Luis Obispo County is a nonprofit organization that strives to address those needs. Community Action Partnership aims to make a positive change for low-income individuals and families across Central and Southern California by providing them with the opportunity to achieve economic independence through a wide variety of community-based programs.

What are community action agencies?

In 1963, President John F. Kennedy commissioned his economic advisers to come up with a plan to address poverty in the United States. After Kennedy was assassinated, President Lyndon B. Johnson took up this cause and developed The Great Society in 1964, a sweeping plan designed to help eliminate poverty and racial injustice. The same year, the Economic Opportunity Act was signed into law giving birth to a nationwide Community Action Network.

Community action was a new idea at the time, placing control of resources and services on a local level — instead of a federal level — based on each community's needs. It required three-party representation within the board of directors of each CAA, including representatives of low-income individuals or families, elected or appointed officials, and other groups with a shared interest in the community's needs. This ensured those in need would always have a voice by allowing members of the community to represent themselves when making decisions about the services each CAA would provide.

How are CAAs funded?

Community action agencies receive funding through the Community Service Block Grant (CSBG). CSBG is venture capital to invest in evidence-based, results-oriented,

driven and innovative services that promote economic security and level the playing field to give everyone a fair shot at self-sufficiency. But, just as the needs of each community are always changing, federal funding of community action agencies has also changed dramatically. Support to federally fund the CSBG has wavered in recent years, but community action agencies like Community Action Partnership of San Luis Obispo County continue to be a vital entity to promote economic security for the homeless and low-income individuals and families that may have not otherwise received any support due to a lack of services in their area or strict criteria they are unable to meet.

Why support Community Action Partnership?

Community Action Partnership serves more than 40,000 people across Central and Southern California. Without the services the nonprofit provides, many residents would be without the means to have an equal chance in life and the ability to achieve economic independence for themselves and their families. By increasing economic independence within each community, each community at large will benefit by having members that are more productive, responsible and economically viable.



“It is well to be prepared for life as it is, but it is better to be prepared to make life better than it is.”

Sargent Shriver

GETTING A HEAD START

by Barry Wisdom

At 39, Leticia Guerra, a single mother of two, found herself in the San Luis Obispo Women's Shelter after her 16-year marriage ended abruptly. Guerra, a former preschool teacher, recalls the last two years of her marriage feeling like she was drowning and not having much hope for her future.

One of Guerra's first steps back to independence was her son's enrollment in Head Start. Head Start not only gave her son security, stability and play therapy to overcome the trauma, it also gave Guerra hope for a brighter future. Guerra said "[Head Start] gave me the opportunity to work and continue with my education, knowing that my son was in good care."

"In going through the training to help families get back on their feet, I recognized that I was part of a family in need myself."

Leticia Guerra

In June 2008, while still living in the shelter with her two children, 3 and 12, Guerra applied for and was hired as a Home Visitor for the Head Start program.

"In going through the training to help families get back on their feet, I recognized that I was part of a family in need myself." Guerra started using the advice she had advocated to other families: "I started setting my personal goals, which included finishing my bachelor's degree and not feeling like a victim. In doing so, [I would be] providing a role model for my children."

She says that part of the impetus for finishing her degree was due to an Office of Head Start's

requirement that 50 percent of the site staff must attain bachelor's degrees by 2013 — and that the Community Action Partnership advocated for their employees to apply for federal financial aid grants to meet this demand along with coordinating cohorts of employees to further their education together.

Guerra says her Head Start supervisors made it easy by providing her with work hours that allowed her to attend classes and not affect her two children. "It has made a big difference in my life. I am now a homeowner and have been promoted at Community Action Partnership, but more importantly, I no longer depend on social services."

Her proudest moment came at her May 2012 graduation ceremony from University of La Verne, when she received her Bachelor's of Science degree in Child Development. Guerra, who narrowly missed landing on the Honor Roll, recalls her daughter telling her, "That's my goal, I want to be an honors graduate."

Today, her daughter knows it's not even an option whether she goes to college. Her challenge will be on deciding which one. "That, to me, is my biggest accomplishment," she says. "I couldn't have done it without Head Start in my life. Programs like Head Start know what a difference education makes in a person's life."

"Leticia is an amazing story, we're so proud of her — and she's still growing," says Head Start/Early Head Start Director Debra Welch. After receiving her degree, Guerra accepted the job of Site Mentor Monitor for Community Action Partnership of San Luis Obispo's Migrant and Seasonal Head Start Program.

As a result of the community resource, knowledge, and advocacy skills Guerra learned through Head Start, she was able to apply to People's Self Help Housing, which provides moderate-income families with affordable housing opportunities. After being accepted, Guerra fulfilled her dream of becoming a homeowner.

Today, Guerra's family and friends are helping her meet a 40-hour-per-week commitment to assist in the building of her new, three-bedroom, two-bath Atascadero home that is serendipitously located within a mile of three of her 10 siblings. Leticia is fond of reciting Henry Ford's famous quote: "Some people succeed because they are destined to, but most people succeed because they are determined to."

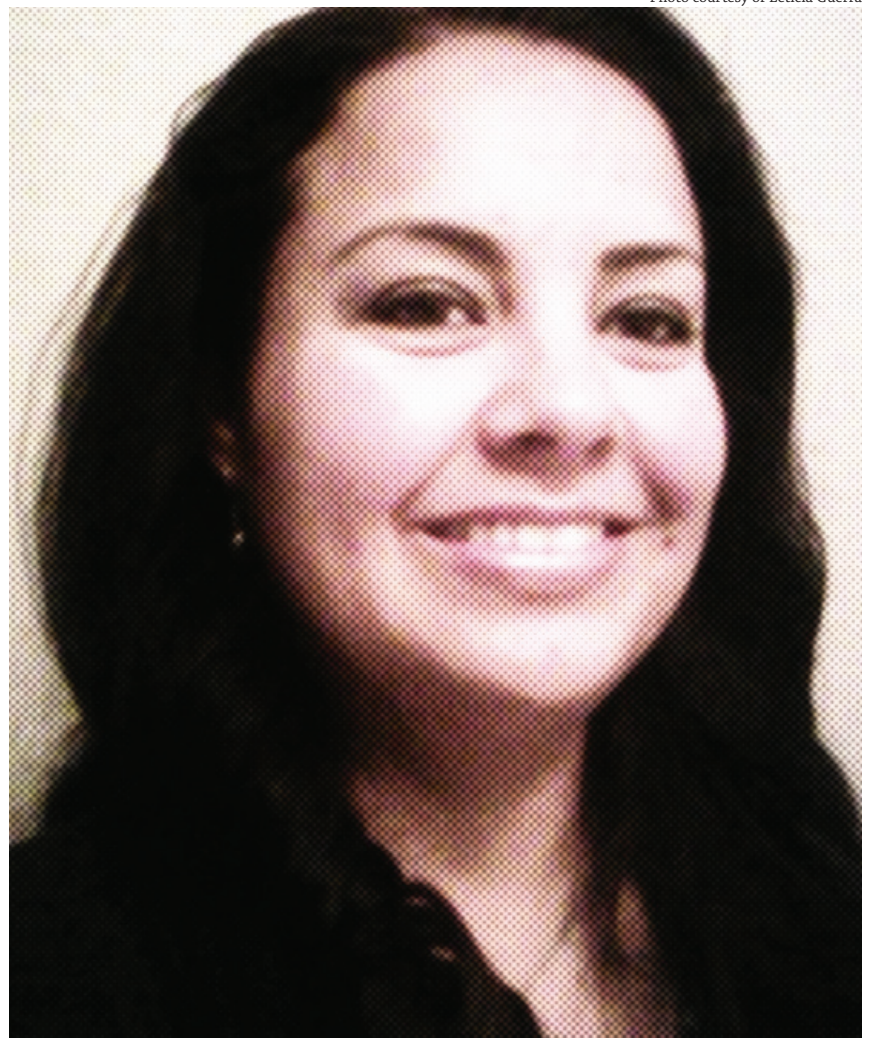


Photo courtesy of Leticia Guerra

Child Development Programs

Head Start and Early Head Start are comprehensive child development programs serving pregnant women and children of low-income families from birth to 5 by increasing parental involvement in the child's education and improving overall preparedness for school. The Head Start and Early Head Start programs of San Luis Obispo County are child-focused programs with an emphasis on overall well-being. Children enrolled in Head Start receive **free medical and dental care**, enjoy healthy meals and snacks and participate in a variety of extracurricular educational activities. The program also provides mental health services.

Head Start and Early Head Start of San Luis Obispo County are operated by Community Action Partnership and fall under the Child, Youth and Family Services division. They are part of a network of national Head Start and **California Child Development programs that serve more than 1.5 million children and pregnant mothers annually**. The CYFS division serves approximately 3,600 children and pregnant mothers per year in ten counties.

CHILD CARE PROGRAM KEEPS ON GIVING

by Corrie Pelc

Without the help of Community Action Partnership of San Luis Obispo County, Nichole Carlin says she wouldn't have been able to achieve her dream of running a child care program.

The Templeton resident feels grateful to Community Action Partnership because the organization helped her afford child care for her two children while she attended school and pursued a degree in early childhood education. As a single mother with little income, Carlin qualified for the Subsidized Child Care Program through Child Care Resource Connection Program. CCRC offers families, like Carlin's, assistance with child care payments by connecting them to programs and resources in the community that can help them afford care and provide a better life for their children.

"I don't think I would have my degree in early childhood education if it wasn't for CAPSLO, because I don't know if I could have worked full time, [gone] to school, and been a good mom at the same time," Carlin says. "I think school would have been put on the back burner if it wasn't for their program."

Thanks to the nonprofit, Carlin completed her degree and is now the successful owner of Lil Eagles Child Care, through which she still uses some of the CCRC's programs to benefit the children in her care.

The Child Care Food Program helps Carlin provide nutritious meals for the children in her care by offering help with menu selection and trainings. "We have certain guidelines that we follow to help ensure that we're giving the kids nutritious meals rather than just simple stuff," she explains. "And they have a reimbursement that comes back to us if we follow all of their guidelines."

Carlin's favorite CCRC program is the Toy and Resource Lending Library, which allows her to switch out toys in her facility on a monthly or weekly basis. "It's great for family child care because we don't have as much space as centers do, and so it gives me an opportunity to switch out for extra toys or bigger toys that we don't necessarily have room to store when we're not using them," she explains. "It gives me the opportunity to give the kids something new."

Carlin also takes advantage of trainings CCRC offers to child care providers — she says she attends every training offered, and has even attended some trainings multiple times.

"Going to all the classes helps the children



Photo courtesy of Nichole Carlin

developmentally, which in turn makes them more successful as they go throughout school, which helps the community," Carlin explains. "And the knowledge that I learned I can pass on to the parents."

"I don't think I would have my degree in early childhood education if it wasn't for CAPSLO . . ."

Nichole Carlin

The trainings give Carlin ideas on how to expand her family child care and teach her children about certain topics, such as the environment. She is adding a certified outdoor classroom to her facility. "With that, I've been able to pass on the knowledge of the environment with the parents, and the kids will have time," she says.

Carlin believes Community Action Partnership is an organization the community cannot do without. "It's a program that's much needed for lower income families because they couldn't necessarily get where they need to be without that program," she says. **CP**

Direct Services & In-Home Services

Direct Services and In-Home Parent Education is a voluntary child abuse prevention program covering San Luis Obispo County. The program helps families who are struggling to meet basic needs, and **creates a stable and safe environment** for their children by providing assistance with food, clothing and parenting education. The program also assists with resources like household cleaning and hygiene products, beds and cribs for children, appliances and minor home repairs.

Referrals come from the Department of Social Services and families are matched with an educator advocate to assess the family's and children's needs. The Direct Services and In-Home Services program aims to strengthen and support families to **eliminate and prevent child abuse and neglect**.

SEASON OF CHANGE

by Barry Wisdom

When Giovanni Aragon was 4, his father brought him and his brother, Jose, from their native San Salvador to Lamont in California's Central Valley. His mother, Flor, joined them a few weeks later.

Aragon and his brother were homesick and uncertain in their new world. Even worse, their parents worked all day in the fields picking grapes and watermelon.

"We were used to being with my mom and my dad," the now 31-year-old says. But the two boys' uneasiness was mitigated when they enrolled in Migrant & Seasonal Head Start, a school-readiness and child care program for low-income families.

"It was my first school setting of any kind," Aragon says of the center that continues to support children from birth to age 5. "They gave us three meals a day, we got to play and laugh

"It was my first school setting of any kind."

Giovanni Aragon

and the teachers were great."

Participating in a Head Start program, as a young boy uprooted from his native country, made a distinct impression on Aragon and was a huge help to his family as they struggled to make ends meet.

As one of its many services, MSHS staff also identified a speech development problem and saw that young Aragon received necessary therapy.

Aragon is now "paying it forward" by serving as a supervisor at the same MSHS center that took him in 27 years ago.

Administered by the Community Action Partnership of San Luis Obispo County, which oversees several other Child, Youth & Family Services (CYFS) programs including Head Start,

State Child Development Programs and the Child Care Resource Connection, MSHS is part of a curriculum of care that fulfills a vital need.

"The Head Start world is a comprehensive program," says Bill Castellanos, director of Migrant & Seasonal Head Start. "Today's Head Start requires parent involvement, training for parents, and dental and medical screenings."

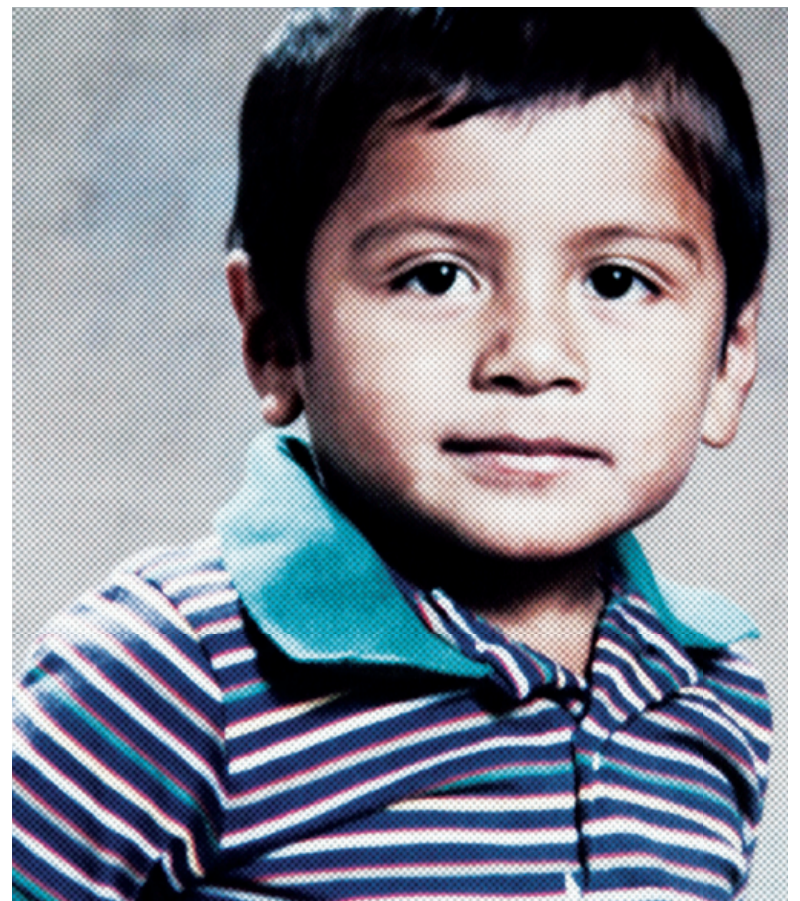
"We offer mental health services, a strong nutrition program, special needs services. And we're not all these individual silos — we try to all work together."

"The wonderful thing about working with Head Start is all the resources pulling together," Head Start/Early Head Start Director Debra Welch says. "We're very passionate about our work and it truly makes a difference," Welch continues. "Most importantly, [our participants] bring so many gifts to the table — we all have to listen to their dreams and visions."

Since being founded 21 years ago, MSHS has grown from a child-care program that supported the employment of people, like the Aragons, in the agricultural and service industries (some 350 children received services at the start), to a school-readiness program aiding more than 2,100 children from birth to 5 years old.

CYFS State Child Development program is similar to MSHS, but is open to a larger population that includes low- to moderate-income families (primarily from the agriculture industry). The program operates in six counties (Kern, San Luis Obispo, Monterey, Fresno, Orange and San Joaquin) and runs seasonally, when the migrant community has work.

Another difference is that services to children ages 0 to 12 may be provided at no cost, or on a sliding-fee scale by the CYFS program. Parents experiencing school- or work-related child care needs are responsible for paying a portion of the subsidized costs. **BW**



Photos courtesy of Giovanni Aragon

Migrant and Seasonal Head Start

The Migrant and Seasonal Head Start program is a school readiness child care program for children, birth to 5, from low-income families who earn a majority of their wages through agriculture and harvesting work. The program is free and operated by Community Action Partnership of San Luis Obispo County.

Like Head Start and Early Head Start, the program is **child-focused with an emphasis on the child's overall well-being**. Children enrolled in the program receive two healthy meals and a snack that is low in sugar, fat and processed food. The program also offers mental health services.

The Migrant and Seasonal Head Start program of San Luis Obispo County was designed to meet three educational needs: **increase school readiness, build confidence and self-esteem, and empower children for the future**. The program operates in eight counties: San Benito, Monterey, San Luis Obispo, Santa Barbara, Ventura, Orange, Kern and Fresno.

Q&A

by Mike Blount

WITH BIZ STEINBERG

Elizabeth “Biz” Steinberg began her time in Community Action as a student in child development at the University of Wisconsin–Madison. Upon graduating in 1972, she moved to California and worked for five years in child care programs, special education classrooms and oversaw an infant/toddler program for low-income families. Steinberg joined the Community Action Partnership of San Luis Obispo County (then the Economic Opportunity Commission) in 1978 as a Head Start Education Coordinator and a year later, she became the Head Start Director. In 1984, the Board of Directors selected Steinberg to be the new CEO for the Community Action Partnership of San Luis Obispo County. With her background in early childhood development and 34 years of experience, Steinberg continues to strive to make a positive impact in the lives of those in need in San Luis Obispo County.

What made you want to work for community action agencies?

I thoroughly love the challenges of meeting the needs of our low-income residents in partnership with our business community, faith community, volunteers and local government. Every day is different. I am still involved because of the successes of the people we serve that happen every day, every month and every year. The people who motivate me to use the resources and planning to help achieve our mission of self-sufficiency.

What are the most pressing needs in San Luis Obispo County right now?

The most pressing needs in San Luis Obispo County are the growing challenge of homelessness, lack of affordable housing, higher than average cost of living rates, need for quality child care and adult day care to name a few. San Luis Obispo County is a microcosm of communities across America — especially after the recession of the last few years. Community Action Partnership

is a community advocate on behalf of the low-income community.

What are some of the things the San Luis Obispo Community Action Partnership is doing to mitigate those problems?

Community Action Partnership is working as a collaborative partner in different ways depending on the issue. We serve as the lead agency on the development of a new Homeless Services Center. This effort depends on the business community, faith community, local and state government, nonprofit community of People's Kitchen and the Friends of the Prado Day Center. Over the next few years, funds will be generated to consolidate the Prado Day Center and the Maxine Lewis Memorial Shelter into one comprehensive homeless center.

At Community Action Partnership, we have career development as a key goal for all staff — 43 percent of our current employees began as a participant in a program. We offer opportunities for people to volunteer, do internships, and I serve on the Work



“Every day is different. I am still involved because of the successes of the people we serve that happen every day, every month and every year.”

Biz Steinberg, CEO of CAPSLO

Force Investment Board representing the agency as the Community Service Block Grant representative.

Increasing the quality of early care and education programs for low-income families is a major strength of Community Action Partnership. We find ways to knit together federal Head Start dollars with State funds to offer full day programs. Parents can then be more able to seek employment and secure a job to help their family

How has Community Action Partnership been able to tackle problems differently than a national organization would?

Community Action Partnership is at the local, day-to-day level in the community — we are on the ground in every community that we serve. We see the real people who need our services. We live in the communities we serve. We are governed by a local Board of Directors that represents

the entire community — publicly elected officials, private sector and low-income sector. This structure was set up in the early days of Community Action — I believe it is the key to why Community Action is still so successful, 49 years after the signing of the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964. A national agency would be rooted at the national level first — sort of a time delay that could not be as nimble and flexible as our organization can be at the local level.

Why is it important that CAAs exist?

Community Action Agencies must exist to work innovatively in almost every county in America to focus on alleviating poverty at the local level. No one agency is the same — each is locally designed to meet the unique needs of the local community. Creative approaches to institutional change are necessary to help improve the quality of life for all residents within a community. **MB**



BRINGING FATHERS INTO THE MIX

by Sukhi Brar

When it comes to parenting, moms are the primary caretakers for a family's children. In many cultures "mom knows best." Her kisses can soothe any boo-boo or aching belly and her chocolate chip cookies fresh out of the oven are better than anybody's. But what about dad?

The Community Action Partnership of San Luis Obispo County has been focusing on this question for the past nine years through its Supporting Father Involvement Project. The Family Support Services Division was interested in finding ways to help fathers become more involved in raising their children. Community Action Partnership believed that focusing on ways to involve fathers in the family would improve child development and parental relationships.

For the study, couples met in groups once a week for 16 weeks with marriage and family therapists. Parents were measured on satisfaction in their relationships, stress and depression. Trained Head Start teachers were brought in to provide childcare while parents attended the sessions.

The curriculum targeted positive communication and identifying stress and depression. There was also a section on community support, which focused on how the couples were connected within their communities and how they

were being supported as a family, a mother, a father and a couple, as well as positive parenting strategies and father involvement.

In breakout sessions, fathers spent time with their kids. Surprisingly, this was often the first time many of the fathers had been challenged to be with their children without the mothers present.

After the 16-week program was completed, researchers reevaluated each couple. Eleven months later, each couple was reassessed to measure any progress as a result of the program. About five groups per year were conducted with an average of 10 families per group. The study lasted for nine years, leading to over 400 couple-participants.

"I want people to know if you improve couples' communication skills, a child's behavior will improve."

Melinda Sokolowski, Family Support Services Director

The study revealed that a couple's satisfaction became stronger, they were more likely to stay together and more likely to get married after the groups (if they weren't

already). Parents' depression and anxiety decreased due to the intervention. Fathers reported they were more satisfied with their lives and had a better understanding of their parenting role. Fathers also said their communication with their partners improved. These factors combined, improved how the couples were parenting. This effective co-parenting led to a decrease in the children's negative behaviors.

"I want people to know if you improve couples' communication skills, a child's behavior will improve," says Family Support Services Director Melinda Sokolowski. "Parents are more satisfied and the family has a better chance of staying together and sticking together, which is a positive outcome for the child."

Because of the program's success, several counties in California and the Canadian government decided to start using the curriculum developed in the study. Community Action Partnership recently sent staff to Canada to train therapists on implementing the program.

"Even though our project with groups is over, our mission and our vision is still in place, so we can be a resource and a support for other agencies," says Sokolowski.

Given the widespread program success, the nonprofit seeks to institutionalize this program into local, regional and statewide partnerships with the goal of substantive change within public and private organizations to think of fathers as caretakers, too. **SB**

COMMUNITY ACTION PARTNERSHIP OF SAN LUIS OBISPO COUNTY

Programs

Community Action Partnership of San Luis Obispo County provides a variety of comprehensive assistance and family development programs to foster a vibrant community.

- ▶ **Adult Day Center**
- ▶ **Child, Youth & Family Services**
 - Head Start & Early Head Start
 - Migrant & Seasonal Head Start
 - State Child Development Program
 - Child Care Resource Connection (CCRC)
- ▶ **Homeless Services**
 - Prado Day Center
 - Maxine Lewis Memorial Shelter
 - Case Management
- ▶ **Family Support Services**
 - Direct Services & In-Home Parent Education
 - Services Affirming Family Empowerment (SAFE)
 - Positive Opportunities for Parenting Success (POPS)
 - Innovative Play Therapy
 - Family Advocates and Health Navigators
- ▶ **Energy Services**
 - Weatherization
 - Home Repair
 - Utility Assistance
- ▶ **Health & Prevention**
 - The Center for Health and Prevention (reproductive health care clinics)
 - Liberty Tattoo Removal Program
 - Teen Academic Parenting Program (TAPP)
 - Health and Prevention Education Program
 - Mobile Adult Wellness and Prevention Screening



Head Start administrators Bill Castellanos and Marilyn Leonard receive awards for their commitment to quality and outstanding service for the Migrant and Seasonal Head Start Program.

Photos courtesy of CAPSLO

What You Can Do to Help

DONATE! VOLUNTEER! Community Action Partnership relies on the generosity of donors and volunteers to provide essential programs which support individuals and families on their path to self-sufficiency.

Visit www.capslo.org
to learn how you can help improve someone's life.

Community Action Partnership
of San Luis Obispo County, Inc.

1030 Southwood Drive, San Luis Obispo, CA 93401
(805) 544-4355, www.capslo.org



CAPSLO staff members are dedicated to serving the needs of their community through various programs from Head Start to Health Education.