Hidden among the rolling hills,...
...history, art and natural beauty of Bucks County there are 41,406 people living in poverty; 10,996 of them are children. They have lost their jobs, emptied their savings account paying medical bills, have been widowed or divorced. They are veterans, seniors, farmers. Some have grown up in poverty, “generational poverty,” and lack the skills and resources they need to move ahead.

They are our neighbors, our co-workers and our children’s classmates!

Our Mission

The mission of the Bucks County Opportunity Council (BCOC) is to reduce poverty and partner with our community to promote economic self-sufficiency for everyone in Bucks County. BCOC was created in response to the “War on Poverty” declared by President Johnson in 1965. We are the designated “Community Action” agency for Bucks County. As such, some federal monies are passed along to us for specific programs that we operate.

But the need is greater than what we can accomplish with current support.

As we have grown and learned what works in our county to fight poverty, we have stretched beyond our financial capacity to grow and reach everyone who needs our help. Currently, we are able to assist less than 30% of those in need of help to leave the stresses, indignities and day-to-day threats of poverty behind. The number of low-income people in Bucks County keeps increasing and the percentage of people living in generational poverty hasn’t changed significantly in 50 years.

BCOC has the experience and knowledge to combat poverty, both generational and situational. We are the leader in Bucks County in moving families from short- and long-term crisis and indignity to stability. Our results demonstrate that it is possible to move people out of poverty. We are limited only by our ability to expand our programs.
If you’re living on the edge, it is especially sharp in Bucks County...

Statistics understate poverty in Bucks County. The federal poverty level does not reflect the higher than average local cost of living in our county: housing, food, transportation. We can help our neighbors with a “hand up” by creating opportunities: jobs, education, coaching; a hand up, not a handout.

There are two kinds of poverty: Situational and Generational; both have devastating effects.

NANCY: FROM HOMELESSNESS TO ECONOMICALLY SELF-SUFFICIENT AGAIN

Nancy, a 58-year-old, educated woman, ran her own small, at-home business and was economically self-sufficient. About ten years ago, multiple factors, especially the housing crisis and recession, forced her to close her business. She immediately sought employment and worked a series of low-paying jobs, barely keeping her head above water. What she thought was a temporary situation turned into a humiliating, slow economic strangulation. She was left on the verge of homelessness. Even with assistance, for which she was thankful, Nancy was unable to afford to keep a roof over her head, eat properly, or pay her utilities.

Participation in the Opportunity Council's Economic Self-Sufficiency (ES) program helped Nancy solve both immediate and long-term financial needs. The opportunity to become economically self-sufficient also restored Nancy’s dignity. She held her head up high again, a full-fledged, productive member of society. She no longer laid awake at night, fearing a looming eviction or feeling shame that the neighbors would see her living without electricity. For Nancy, the ES program opportunity translated into power, hope and regained pride.

In Bucks County, a living wage for a family of three is nearly $25 per hour. Two parents, each working a full-time, minimum-wage job, earn only two-thirds of a living wage!
Situational poverty

Situational poverty, like Nancy’s, often happens when a crisis occurs in a family. A company closes or relocates, a job is lost to technology or sudden illness, a family falls apart, or a medical emergency wipes out savings. Families can fall quickly from stability to crisis, whether they had been living paycheck to paycheck or had considerable savings.

Generational poverty

Generational poverty is defined as families who continue to live in poverty for multiple generations. Grandparents were poor, mom and dad are poor, and their children will be poor. They know of no other way to live. Generational poverty is characterized by literacy and educational deficits that hamper decision-making and the ability to use nominally-available resources. Even paperwork may create hurdles: What does this mean? What if I don’t have the records for that?

On average, a child born in a poor neighborhood to parents of limited education and means has less chance to achieve than a child of similar capability and motivation born in a good neighborhood to educated, middle-class parents. They lack skills often learned from family, mentors and friends.

Opportunity is essential.

Jack Kemp, an economic conservative and former Housing Secretary, said, “The poor don’t want paternalism, they want opportunity.”

Pulitzer-prize winning Journalist Nicholas Kristoff, author of “A Path Appears: Transforming Lives; Creating Opportunity” suggests that we look at outcomes and policies as if we don’t know whether we’ll be born “to an investment banker or teenage mom, in a leafy suburb or a gang-ridden inner city, healthy or disabled, smart or struggling, privileged or disadvantaged.”
BCOC: Working everyday to move people from crisis to stability

For more than 50 years, the Opportunity Council has been successful in helping thousands endure, and, when we can, escape poverty through the following programs:

**Food Assistance**

BCOC partners with over 80 distribution sites throughout the county, including food pantries and senior centers. Additional partners help us obtain and distribute food to those in need. In 2016, for the first time, we distributed more than 1.1 million pounds of food, the equivalent of more than 269,000 meals.

- 59% of food insecure individuals in Bucks are over the 185% poverty level. That makes them ineligible for government food assistance, and dependent on charitable or private donations.
- The number of overall visits to Bucks County pantries keeps increasing.
- In 2015-2016, there were over 71,041 visits to pantries.

**Generous local organizations partner with us to feed our neighbors:**

- Applegate Farms has donated more than 250,000 pounds of organic meats, which equates to nearly 200,000 meals worth more than $400,000.
- Last year, Wegman’s in Warrington donated more than 25,000 pounds of food.
- Fruits and vegetables are collected and delivered weekly by volunteers of Rolling Harvest Food Rescue and Delaware Valley University’s Hope of the Harvest Charitable Garden.

Approximate location of some of the pantries we serve
Economic Self-Sufficiency Program (ES)

Since 1997, ES has helped 299 families graduate out of poverty, moving them from reliance on welfare subsidies to becoming contributing members of our community. Sixty-two graduates have gone on to become homeowners. Economic self-sufficiency is the answer to the challenge of getting people out of poverty. **For every $1 invested in an economic self-sufficiency graduate, $4 is saved in cash welfare subsidies alone.**

When clients commit to the ES program, they partner with a self-sufficiency coach, who helps them assess their situation and set goals. Often, the plan centers on the education and training needed to secure stable employment that pays a family-sustaining wage. Each plan also addresses childcare, healthcare, transportation, budgeting, financial literacy, and healthy supportive relationships. The average time required for graduation is nearly three years.
Wheelz2Work

Getting around Bucks County without a car is difficult, if not impossible; yet some of our self-sufficiency clients are faced with that challenge every day as they try to re-build their lives, travel to work or job interviews, or attend college. In partnership with Bucks County Community College and the Gene and Marlene Epstein Humanitarian Fund, BCOC is seeking donations of good, used cars that can be turned over to ES clients who have demonstrated a commitment to the ES program goals, but lack transportation. Donations are tax-deductible.

Tania: From struggling single Mom to working registered nurse

Tania was a single mom struggling to support her family on social security and child support. She learned about the Opportunity Council at a Head Start parent meeting. Tania felt that the ES Program would be a good fit. She had recently enrolled in classes at Bucks County Community College (BCCC) with the goal: become a Registered Nurse (RN). She completed the pre-requisite courses and was accepted into the clinical portion of the program where she excelled in Nursing 1 and 2. Then, her own medical setback forced her to withdraw from Nursing 3. She reapplied the following year, was accepted, but again became very ill.

With dogged determination, and a budget that ran on fumes, Tania reapplied again for Nursing 3. But, she was out of financial aid and student loans options. Tania was eligible for a unique scholarship through the Opportunity Council and BCCC called Gateway to Economic Self-Sufficiency, which assisted with tuition. Another opportunity, the Mason Fellowship, provided resources for transportation, food, and supplies.

Tania successfully completed Nursing 3 and 4, graduated from the program, and passed her licensure exam on the first try. She is now employed as a Registered Nurse.
Emergency Assistance

BCOC helps families in crisis, who are cold, scared and sometimes frantic. Through collaborative work with great partners - the Bucks County Housing Group, Family Service Association of Bucks County and Keystone Opportunity Center, the Bucks County Housing Link Hotline has streamlined services to families in housing crises. We have prevented 1,089 evictions.

Our emergency services team can prevent electricity from being shut off, and families from being evicted. In 2015-2016, BCOC helped 118 households repair or replace broken heaters. The $236,193 cost was paid directly to local, small-business owners with whom we work regularly because they treat our clients with professionalism and compassion.

The Weatherization Program

Home weatherization is a permanent solution for reducing energy costs for eligible families. We helped over 280 people in 2015-2016, also improving the health and safety of where they live.

In order to qualify for weatherization, homes often require repairs that are not government-funded. When we can, the Opportunity Council solves issues like mold remediation that can prevent weatherization work.

VITA - Volunteer Income Tax Assistance Program

Since 2004, VITA volunteers have prepared more than 9,000 free tax returns for people with low-to-moderate incomes. Money saved through refunds, credits, and preparation-fee savings, totaling $17.73 million, stayed in Bucks County’s economy. Returns helped clients save for emergencies and encouraged them to plan for future expenses. VITA has evolved into an access point for a variety of services and economic opportunity programs that help Bucks residents build savings, open bank accounts, review their credit score, receive financial coaching and more.
Expanding our Community Partnerships

As the lead anti-poverty agency in Bucks County, the Opportunity Council partners with other nonprofits; city, state and federal government agencies; local and regional businesses; colleges and universities; foundations; farms; and individuals to leverage our collective resources to serve those in need in Bucks County.

We welcome new ideas and opportunities for collaboration to help create family-sustaining job opportunities, and increase transportation, daycare, and other resources to move clients out of poverty permanently.

To grow the number of advocates/ambassadors equipped to address the issues of poverty in Bucks County, we offer our partners the “Bridges out of Poverty” workshop, an education and community engagement program. The program observes that growing up in the struggles of poverty impose mindsets and skill sets that are at odds with how the middle and upper classes learn to achieve.

Using the Bridges program and poverty simulations, we can increase public awareness of poverty and its effects, and support broader, multi-sector initiatives.

Our goal is to facilitate more coordination and collaboration among our partners to make it easier for clients to get necessary help without spending precious time and resources.
Custom Weatherization
Delaware Valley University, Doylestown
Direct Services Coalition- Central & Lower Bucks
Emergency Relief Association, Levittown
Energy Con, Inc.
Family Service Association, Langhorne
First National Bank of Newtown
Foundations Community Partnership
Foxwood Manor Apartments
Fresh For All - Grace Bible Church
Gene and Marlene Epstein Humanitarian Fund
Greater Works Food Pantry, Bensalem
Harvest Ministries Food Pantry, Bensalem
HealthLink Dental Clinic
Heaven's Bounty Food Pantry, Quakertown
Homelessness Continuum of Care of Bucks County (H-CoC-BC)
HUBBUB
Hunger Free PA
Hunger Nutrition Coalition (HNC) of Bucks County
Internal Revenue Service (IRS)
Keystone Opportunity Center, Souderton
Living Hope Community Church
Loaves and Fishes Food Pantry, Fairless Hills
Mary's Cupboard
Milk House Farm Market, Newtown
Morrisville Presbyterian Church
National Penn Bank
Neshaminy School District
New Britain Baptist Food Pantry, New Britain
New Hope-Solebury School District
No Longer Bound Food Pantry, Bristol
PANO
Penn Community Bank
Pennridge FISH Food Pantry, Perkasie
Leo and Peggy Pierce Family Foundation
Premier Contractors
Quakertown Food Pantry, Quakertown
Ray Litwin's HVAC
Rolling Harvest Food Rescue
Ron South HVAC
Salvation Army of Lower Bucks, Levittown
Salvation Army of Upper Bucks, Quakertown
ShopRite
S.H.A.R.E.
Solebury Orchards, Solebury
Soulful Blessings Food Pantry, Bristol
The Sprocket Foundation
St. Andrew's United Methodist Church
St. Isidore's Roman Catholic Church Food Pantry, Quakertown
St. Mary's Medical Center
St. Vincent de Paul Society at St. John Bosco Catholic Parish Center
TEFAP
The Intelligencer
The Lords Pantry, Ottsville
United Way of Bucks County
Upper Bucks Code Blue
Upper Bucks YMCA
Wawa
Wegmans, Warrington
Whiting Services, LLC
Women’s Advocacy Coalition
YWCA of Bucks County, Warminster and Bensalem
IN 2017, BUCKS COUNTY OPPORTUNITY COUNCIL BEGAN ITS 52ND YEAR FROM A POSITION OF STRENGTH:

- An extensive history of achievement, having demonstrated year after year the drive and ability to profoundly affect the lives of individuals and families.
- Solid financial footing with ongoing fiscal discipline and strong, well-managed reserves.
- Professional and experienced staff and leadership thoroughly devoted to the mission.
- A strong, active board, representative of the diverse interests of the community, including graduates of our own economic self-sufficiency program.
- Deep and wide respect within the community, especially among our colleagues who share our mission.

Our moral imperative is economic self-sufficiency, not just helping people better endure poverty.

Support the Opportunity Council.

For more than 50 years, we've been part of the solution. Help us increase the scale of what we do. What we do works, and we're good at it.

We need partners and investors, individuals, organizations, businesses and foundations to help us expand our programs in Bucks County. Like many non-profits with roots in the 20th century, we're too reliant on government funding. While that funding has been stalwart, it's no longer enough, nor flexible enough for the 21st century. The Opportunity Council is funded 75% by government sources; 25% by private sources including individuals, companies and private foundations. Government resources support some of our programs (for example, our weatherization program and to purchase some food), but growth will depend on finding new sources of funding.
Other Ways to Help!

• **HIRE OUR CLIENTS:** Provide internships, volunteer opportunities, and job shadowing for ES participants entering the workforce. Or partner with ES participants to provide employment opportunities through the CareerWorks program. Employers provide the job and we provide job supports: transportation assistance, coaching, resume writing and interviewing skills, preparation for work, childcare backup, work appropriate attire, general support for advanced training. Commitment is up to two positions annually.

• **VOLUNTEER:** Check our website at www.bcoc.org for a current list of volunteer opportunities.

• **FEED THE HUNGRY:** Donate food or organize a food drive in your company or community. Or work in Bucks County’s only charitable garden, Hope of the Harvest Garden at Delaware Valley University, harvesting fresh produce for local pantries. April through October. Commitment can be one, 2 hour work session or weekly. No financial commitment.

• **ADVOCATE FOR THOSE IN NEED:** Learn about poverty and its effect on our community. Attend a “Bridges out of Poverty” workshop and get involved.

• **ADOPT A CLIENT:** in our Economic Self-Sufficiency (ES) program to provide basic needs/essentials (such as gas, food, books) throughout his or her journey to self-sufficiency. Average commitment is $3,000 per family, per year.

• **SPONSOR A STUDENT:** for up to 3 years as he/she completes his/her education at Bucks County Community College through the Gateway Scholarship. Funds are contributed directly to Bucks County Community College and restricted to Opportunity Council Economic Self-Sufficiency participants. Average commitment is $3,000 to $12,000 over a 3 year period.

• **PREPARE TAXES:** Help low income families complete a tax return through our Free Tax program. Average commitment is 60 hours, January through April. No financial commitment.

We Need Your Help!

**DONATE:** Unrestricted financial donations and sponsorships provide us with the flexibility to respond and adapt to rapidly changing environments.

But there are many ways to support your community. For example, donate your used vehicle to Wheelz2Work, which provides private, reliable transportation to ES participants on education and employment tracks. Your used vehicle is tax-deductible at the highest value.
Michele: Ending the generational cycle of poverty

Michele first contacted the Opportunity Council because she was pregnant, not working, and her husband had left her. She was pretty much on her own and Christmas was approaching. The BCOC changed her life. She began working with a coach on a plan for self-sufficiency. It was a step-by-step process, not a quick fix, as she and her coach worked on getting transportation, earning her GED, and working on a training certificate. They also worked to build her confidence and her ability to overcome difficult situations.

When she graduated from the economic self-sufficiency program she and her family were independent. They had plans for the future. Thirteen years later, the difference the program made to her life and her extended family’s life is remarkable. All three of her children are college graduates and successful. One is a Staff Sergeant in the United States Air Force. In addition to Michele earning her GED, her two older brothers followed her lead, breaking the cycle of poverty for two more families.
please give
To get involved with the Bucks County Opportunity Council
and make a difference in Bucks County

Contact Joe Cuozzo, Director of Development
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www.bcoc.org