In 2016, AEOA saw a change in leadership when long-time Executive Director, Harlan Tardy, retired in March. Paul Carlson was selected as the new Executive Director. Previously, Paul served in a three-part position as AEOA’s Deputy Director, Human Resources Director, and the Employment and Training Director at AEOA. Paul also serves as the Executive Director for Kootasca Community Action that serves Itasca and Koochiching Counties. Paul grew up on the Iron Range, did his undergraduate work at UMD, and holds a master’s degree in management from the College of St. Scholastica. Paul also serves on the Minnesota Community Action Association Board, the Workforce Investment Board, and the Virginia Community Foundation Board. Paul is a member of the Arrowhead Human Resources Association, Laurentian Chamber, and Iron Range Economic Alliance. Paul is active in his free time with home remodeling and maintenance; fishing; hunting; gardening; and spending time with family, children, and grandchildren. He also sings with “the Choralaires,” a men’s group that has donated thousands to community charities. Paul is excited about the prospect of working with AEOA’s committed Board and staff and carrying on the important work of the Agency. Beyond several major projects currently underway, he is interested in looking at ways to improve customer services and outcomes and ensuring continuous improvement through better alignment of resources and development of more creative partnerships. Paul believes strongly in personal and civic responsibility. “We all have a role to play in building, shaping, and growing healthy and vibrant communities.”
The Rutabaga Project

AT THE INTERSECTION OF LOCAL HEALTHY FOOD AND AFFORDABILITY

The local foods movement is gaining steam all over the country, but that train usually bypasses low-income people who are experiencing food insecurity. Food insecurity and limited access to healthy food are growing issues among AEOA client/customers. Community Needs Assessments have shown a troubling pattern. The people we serve worry that their food will run out before they can buy more, rely heavily on Food Shelves, and are often unable to purchase fresh fruit and vegetables. Many would like to grow food but face obstacles to doing that.

Funded by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) through Minnesota Extension, the Rutabaga Project was jointly developed with the Iron Range Partnership for Sustainability (IRPS) and in partnership with the Virginia area SNAP-Ed Educator. Rutabaga's intent has been to hear from the low-income community regarding their struggles to access healthy, local foods and their ideas about overcoming those obstacles. Rutabaga engaged low-income citizens in three Virginia city neighborhoods and had conversations with over 40 people.

Along the way, Rutabaga developed significant partnerships with Essentia Health, the City of Virginia, the Virginia Housing and Redevelopment Authority (HRA), and St. Louis County. Solutions implemented to date have included AEOA becoming the Food Support/Stamps (EBT) processor at the new Virginia Farmers’ Market; creation of “Gardens-in-a-Box” at locations across the city; neighborhood community-supported agriculture (CSA) shares, and Growing Together Virginia Community Gardens. Currently funded through January, 2017, AEOA is hopeful of sustaining Rutabaga in order to implement more solutions.

Did You Know:

- AEOA employs over 350 staff
- Maintained an average budget of over $30 million for the past three years
- Is one of Minnesota’s 100 largest non-profit agencies

Community Needs Assessment

LISTENING TO THE PEOPLE WE SERVE

AEOA had the opportunity this year to again survey people who struggle to make ends meet and learn about their greatest concerns and perceived strengths. Every three years, Community Action Agencies conduct community needs assessments to learn more deeply about the lives of those we serve. In 2015, 221 community members were surveyed—171 in face-to-face interviews and 50 senior citizens over the phone. As with past community needs assessments, credit and debt, employment and income, and transportation rose to the top of the list of concerns. Some of the concerns that came up that aren’t quite as obvious include, lack of access to dental care—36% of families with children were denied dental care; living with disabilities—33% of families with children reported that one of more of their children had a diagnosed disability, and an additional 19% suspected a disability; finding child care—40% of families reported that finding money for child care was a problem. For senior citizens, health is a great concern, with 49% indicating that their health presented problems. A large majority of seniors surveyed eat alone, and 48% need assistance with household chores. Survey respondents want the opportunity to improve their lives, with two-thirds wanting to further their education. Over half (51%) want to earn a one- or two-year degree, and 37% would like to earn a four-year degree. Twenty-five percent want to earn their high school diploma or GED. Consistent trends that have been noted from 2003 include a struggle with enough money to pay bills, the need for car repair funds, the desire to further one’s education, not enough money to fix their homes, getting off of public assistance but having to go back on. Regarding strengths, the people we serve are remarkably resilient. When asked what are the greatest gifts of their households, the top four answers were family, love, support, and a house.

Ivy Manor

AN HISTORICAL REHABILITATION DESIGNED TO IMPROVE LIVES

A project in development for over three years, AEOA was awarded roughly $7.9 million by Midwest Housing Equity Group, Bremer Bank, Minnesota Housing Finance, and Greater Minnesota Housing Fund to acquire and rehabilitate the Ivy Manor, located in downtown Virginia. The Ivy Manor development will comprehensively rehabilitate 33 current apartments and create 22 subsidized permanent supportive housing units for individuals with on-site support services and community space.

This development is a partnership with Range Mental Health Center (RMHC), Range Transitional Housing (RTH), and the Virginia Housing and Re-development Authority (HRA) to insure operating and supportive services capacity. RMHC will be the on-site service provider, along with RTH, while the VHRA is providing rental subsidies for the units. Lloyd Management will be the property management firm with an on-site caretaker available to tenants.

Built in 1923, Ivy Manor retains much of its original configuration, finishes, features, and charm. While the existing structure and exterior masonry is in very good condition, most of its building systems and finishes are in need of replacement or updating. The proposed work seeks to retain historic fabric. Revealing and refinishing currently concealed original hardwood flooring and bathroom ceramic tile is anticipated where feasible. A community room, office space for Case Managers, and updated laundry facilities will be added.

“But like ivy, we grow where there is room for us.”