Ozark Opportunities, Inc. (“OOI”) is a private, non-profit community action agency established in 1969. Our mission is to “partner with organizations, families, and individuals to provide services and empowerment opportunities for those with limited means to improve their quality of life.”

Our six-county service area includes Baxter, Boone, Marion, Newton, Searcy and Van Buren counties, encompassing nearly 4,000 rural and rugged square miles. Many families travel in excess of 50 miles to access services.

OOI is governed by a tripartite eighteen (18) member Board of Directors representing public, private, and low-income sectors. Each county in our service area is represented by three (3) Board members, one from each sector.

OOI offers several opportunities to low-income families, and all services center around two strategic commitments:

- Family Stabilization
- Empowerment

**Family Stabilization** is an overarching approach to working with individuals and families to get them stabilized or out of crisis— it is the crucial first step to getting people of limited means to a safe and stable situation to allow them to focus on the future instead of the crisis of the moment.

At Ozark Opportunities, **empowerment** means creating environments for individuals and communities that support self-sufficient, stable families. Breaking the cycle of poverty takes willpower and perseverance— when these qualities are combined with opportunities, people are empowered to lift themselves (and their families or community) out of poverty.

In 2013, **23,458 individuals received services** provided by OOI including: employment or work supports, economic enhancement, child and family development, family and community development projects, family stabilization and/or emergency assistance.
Ozark Opportunities, Inc. created 92 employment opportunities and provided approximately $770,000 in employee benefits that included medical, dental, retirement, legal, Air Evac, etc. OOI was also responsible for contributing five and a half million dollars ($5.5M) in economic activity in our local communities- supporting local businesses while helping our communities most vulnerable citizens: our children, our elderly, our disabled, and our impoverished.

Family Stabilization Programs include:

**Utility Assistance** The Home Energy Assistance Program (HEAP) is a federally funded program that helps low-income households cope with the high cost of heating fuel and electricity in the form of monetary assistance paid directly to utility companies.

**Crisis Intervention** This is a sub-program of the Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program that helps low-income households establish utilities (gas or electric) or to alleviate an energy-related emergency such as disconnected service, shut-off notice or depleted heating fuel.
**Food** *The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP)* is the periodic distribution of USDA surplus commodity foods. This year, the Boone County outreach office also received donated food from two other partners, *Windstream* and *FedEx*.

**Weatherization** Provides energy conservation and health and safety improvements to low-income homeowners. Measures completed allow occupants to maintain a more comfortable standard of living and use less energy. Clients who are 65 and above and on a fixed income are most affected by rising fuel costs.

**Empowerment Programs Include:**

- **SUCCESS** Assists individuals in obtaining or regaining self-reliance through educational classes and goal setting with a family development worker. It is a unique, life changing and individual-based program.

- **Head Start** Provides children from low- to moderate-income families an environment in which they may develop to their fullest potential intellectually, physically, emotionally, and socially. Benefits include health care, nutritional meals for the children, and social services for the family.

- **Community Development** Supports grassroots movements of people in our communities interested in improving the situation of low income individuals, families & their community.
Regularly, we are asked, “Does utility assistance truly make a difference?”

What many do not realize when someone applies for utility assistance is the degree of interaction between the individual seeking assistance and our staff.

There is a thorough interview process before applicants are approved for crisis assistance, and we see many of those receiving “regular” assistance as well. The interview process leads to referrals and a more holistic approach to helping those in hardship by addressing multiple needs instead of just the immediate energy-related one.

We utilize staff as valuable resources to assist those in need to improve their lives by helping them to access a coordinated web of services, instead of just the service they are applying for. This often overlooked resource (our staff) has been instrumental in assisting clients to leave abusive relationships, obtain employment, increase their education, improve their living conditions and even become self-reliant.

This program makes a difference!

Unfortunately due to the nature of this program – the large volume and perceived as a “hand-out”, we rarely see the indirect impact. Our resourceful and caring staff often see this as part of their job and not something ‘unusual’ or out of the norm to report.

“Thank you for all the nice things you do. The energy assistance allows me to pay my hospital bills and buy groceries.” - A direct quote from 70+ year-old widow.

- Of the 4000* households applying for non-emergency (regular) assistance, 71% were elderly or disabled and are often forced to choose between heat, food, or medications.
- 1000* unduplicated households applied for crisis assistance for help with a disconnects or to re-establish service. 42% were elderly or disabled and 48% had children in the home.
- Non-emergency average payment was $132.
- Emergency average payment was $225.
- $930,000 in client payments were made to local utility providers, including natural gas, propane and electric companies (with a majority to electric companies since the summer program is restricted to electricity only.)

*These are unduplicated household counts. For example this year households could apply for assistance twice; once in the winter and once in the summer.
The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP)

TEFAP is a program that provides United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) donated foods (commodities) available to organizations in order to provide nutritious foods to low-income households.

68% of applicants for nutritional assistance were elderly or disabled.

Commodities donated by the USDA may vary from time to time depending on which food products are available. Because of the nutritional needs of participants in the TEFAP program, most foods are purchased based on their protein value.

Foods normally available are peanut butter, canned vegetables, fruits, fruit juices, meats, and dry packaged goods such as rice, pasta, and beans or peas.

All of the commodities donated by the USDA must be certified by the USDA’s inspection services to assure specifications are met. Only high grades of meats, fruits, and vegetables are accepted. Foods are allocated on a quarterly basis.

This year, Windstream and FedEx donated foods to the Ozark Opportunities, Inc. Boone County outreach office in Harrison.

We are extremely thankful for all of the help we receive from community partners, and we were able to have the following impact:

- **TEFAP** 3,232 bags of foods assisting 3,137 people.
- **Windstream** and **FedEx** donated foods to help 281 people.
Weatherization Program

Established nationally in 1976 and funded by the federal Department of Energy (DOE,) weatherization provides insulation and other measures to make homes more energy efficient, safe, and healthy, reducing energy consumption and saving income. The agency may invest up to $6,904 in a home, free of charge, to those who meet income guidelines.

By participating in OOI’s Weatherization Program, 27 families now live in homes that are more energy efficient. These families are experiencing an average of 30-40% savings each month in energy dollars.

Weatherization Assistance can include one or more of the following measures for homeowners and renters. Services provided may vary by county.

Heating Efficiency Measures - designed to improve the operation of the heating system and may include a cleaning and tuning for the furnace, furnace repair, or furnace replacement. Also, the heating system duct system, which is the delivery system for heat throughout the dwelling, is sealed.

Conduction Measures – designed to reduce heat loss and gain from the interior/exterior of the unit by installing insulation. Insulation may be installed in the ceiling, walls, heat ducts, floor, and/or water pipes. Other measures installed if energy savings are determined, include but are not limited to repair or replacement of windows and doors.

Infiltration Measures - designed to reduce air leakage from the home. The purpose is to keep warm air in and cold air out.

Health & Safety - air quality testing, heating system diagnostic testing, and general site inspections are performed to identify energy-related safety issues that might exist.

Repair - that may be needed to help preserve or protect the material that has been installed and maintain the structural integrity of the home.

This year, state administration of the Weatherization Program moved from the Department of Human Services, Office of Community Services, to the Energy Office of the Economic Development Commission. With this change, weatherization services will now be provided by Black River Area Development, Corporation (BRAD) in our six-county service area of Baxter, Boone, Marion, Newton, Searcy and Van Buren counties. BRAD is one of six private, nonprofit community action agencies that provide weatherization services in Arkansas.

Black River Area Development Corp. (BRAD)
Kris Rose, Weatherization Director
1403 Hospital Drive
Pocahontas, AR 72455
(870) 892-4547
Empowerment Programs: Family Development

Once emergency needs are met, extensive family development can be the focus of our families in their journey to break the cycle of poverty and become self-reliant. Below are just a few of the impacts of these programs.

- **Employment**: 48% of those unemployed obtained a job, and 63% obtained in increase in employment income.

- **Education**: 14% obtained their GED’s, 9% obtained their college degrees, and 24% obtained pre-employment skills training.

- **Work Supports**: 59% obtained reliable transportation, 48% obtained health care services, 82% obtained safe and affordable housing, and 98% increased food security.

- **Participant Feedback**: 61% consider themselves more self-reliant, 60% report improved family functioning, and 65% now feel they are part of the community.

SUCCESS

The mission of SUCCESS is to assist participants to Succeed at Understanding and Conquering Challenges to Establish Stability and Self-Reliance.

SUCCESS is a program that helps individuals & families restore their sense of self-respect and hope and reclaim their dreams of a better life.

SUCCESS is a family-development program that promotes self-reliance and a healthy interdependence with the rest of the community (family, friends, neighbors, coworkers, social, educational, spiritual, and medical providers.) This in turn promotes an increased feeling of self-worth.

SUCCESS is unique in that it is based upon the individual and/or family. It is an investment in their futures.

How does SUCCESS work? This program is based on the needs and wants of the household. Individuals and families establish a partnership with a family development worker who assists in developing goals that will help them become self-reliant. A written Family Development Plan is created that identifies and builds upon a family’s strengths in order to pursue and accomplish the goals set by the family. We generally work with three (3) short-term goals at a time. Short-term goals are goals that can be accomplished within a six-month period. Long-term goals (goals that will take over six months) are encouraged and can be broken down into several short-term goals.

Participants have the opportunity to attend monthly seminars. Seminars cover a wide range of interesting topics and provide learning experiences in a fun and informal environment. Participants are encouraged to share thoughts and ideas.

What are participants saying about SUCCESS?

- “I have recommended the SUCCESS program to neighbors and friends!” Income has gone from 0 to $1,600 a month!

- “Goal setting has changed my thought pattern which has helped with stress. And goal setting is bringing us [our family] together.”

- SUCCESS… “very well organized, really amazing program. I learned a lot and would definitely recommend to people in need.”
Head Start

The primary objective for the Ozark Opportunities, Inc., Head Start program is to insure that children and families in our program are ready for kindergarten.

This is accomplished by our program acting as an advocate for children and their families through partnering at the individual, community, and state level to provide quality services.

The OOI Head Start program strives to provide a safe, healthy environment in which every child has the maximum opportunity and support in developing to his or her full potential. The child’s effectiveness in dealing with his or her environment will help foster social competence, which will aid with responsibilities in school and life.

Our goal is to provide a system to improve the quality of life for each child, commencing with the family unit. We strive to educate and promote social proficiency, while taking into account the interrelatedness of cognitive and intellectual development, physical and mental health and nutritional needs of each child.

- **264 children** transitioned into kindergarten.
- **85 children** were diagnosed with a disability and received appropriate services.
  - 38 speech or language impairments
  - 1 intellectual disability
  - 1 visual impairment
  - 45 developmental delays
- **87 parents** obtained employment.
- **51%** consider themselves more self-reliant.
- **37%** experienced an increase in employment income.

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**Did you know that it cost over $5,000 a year per child to provide the quality of school readiness education that Head Start provides for free**? Imagine trying to budget that amount of money to ensure your preschooler would be ready for Kindergarten!

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**14% have a 2 or 4 year degree**

**19% have some post secondary education**

**14% do not have a high school diploma or GED**

**53% have a high school diploma or GED**

Refer to page 3 for Agency wide education levels.
As part of our goal of promoting self-sufficiency in the community as well as in individuals, we support the development of other non-profit organizations. It is our belief that grass roots organizations are the most qualified to deal with local issues – after all, who better understands local issues than local people?

Sometimes, a person or a group of people will come to us for help with a new nonprofit. Other times, we see an unmet need in the community, and we look for people we think might be able to organize and effectively meet that need.

The services we offer vary. Some groups need help organizing, either formally or informally. We can provide literature and assistance with forming a nonprofit as either a 501(c)(3) or as a Unincorporated Nonprofit Association. We can help formulate an initial set of goals for the group, and we can help the group formalize those goals into a written action plan. If funding is an issue, we assist with identifying and applying for grants.

Most importantly, we offer encouragement – we encourage people to believe in their goals, and we encourage them to hang in there, even when things seem to be moving slowly or not at all, until those goals are realized.

If you have an idea for solving a problem in your community and you would like to act on that idea, please feel free to call us. Dreams don’t come true unless we share them and act on them!

Projects for FY 2013 were, and may be ongoing:

- **Nonprofit Startup and Support** (explained above.)
- **Volunteer Income Tax Assistance (VITA)**; pilot program held in Mountain Home where trained volunteers prepared taxes, free of charge.

- **HOME** grant application submitted to ADFA. This will be a homeowner-occupied rehabilitation program.
- **CHDO** Application submitted. This would allow partners that are public or private entities develop affordable housing. As a nonprofit designated as a CHDO these partners can receive double the funding that is otherwise available to developers often making the difference in whether or not an affordable housing project is able to “cash flow.”

- **OOI donated a building** (previously used as the Boone County outreach office) to the Fuller Center for Housing where volunteers rehabilitated the building into a house for a low-income family.
- **Entrepreneur Program** where small groups or individuals interested in starting their own business work with OOI staff through brainstorming stages through implementation.

“Looking back, I know I would have been overwhelmed at everything I had to do. Having it broken up into manageable chunks made the process fun instead of stressful… I love my new business. I am my own boss, and at the end of the day, I can look back on what I have done and see real results. I am doing something I can be proud of.”
We believe it is important to be active and engaged with our community and partners. Often, outreach workers change lives by being a resource or conduit for those in need to access services and resources available in the community that our agency does not directly offer.

The following story is a perfect example of this relationship between our staff, those in need, and community partners.

Frank came to the Veterans Affairs and was frustrated because he had made several attempts to meet the VA person with no luck. Empathizing with his mounting frustration, Susan (the Baxter County outreach worker) asked if she could help. Frank explained that he has several business affairs that require his DD14 discharge papers and that they had been lost.

Susan recalled that a representative of Senator Boozman’s office stated at a recent United Community Resource Council meeting that the Senator’s office is active in assisting veterans find lost papers, medals, honors, etc.

Frank was given the email address of the representative and the number for Senator Boozman’s office. Susan explained to Frank that the Senator is very interested in helping veterans in this capacity. Frank was surprised to hear about this and thought that only a VA agency could help.

In conversation, Frank also mentioned that he was having difficulty making ends meet. He did not draw food stamps or receive any other assistance. To help with his food needs, he picked up commodity foods and was referred to DHHS to apply for the Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program (SNAP). Susan provided directions to the DHHS office with an idea of the things he would need in order to apply.

About a week later, Frank stopped by the office to report that he had emailed the Senator’s office. The Senator’s office had contacted him, and a copy of his DD14 would soon be on its way. He would now be able to complete his housing application and his schooling papers. He wanted to thank the agency for the referrals and was surprised at how fast things were being taken care of.
There are times when our clients need services that our agency does not offer. This is where the close relationship between our family development workers and our community partners comes into play. It is through partnerships that we are able to share resources and services to better help people get back on their feet. The following story illustrates this collaborative effort.

Tammy, a Family Development Worker, noticed that when Tina attended monthly seminars at Ozark Opportunities, she was using a broken pair of eyeglasses.

It was obvious that Tina needed her glasses to read. She would put them on, read what she needed to, and then immediately take them off. Tina was very self-conscious and continued this on-and-off process throughout the entire seminar.

When Tammy asked Tina about her glasses, Tina said the prescription was very old and she knew she needed new ones but simply could not afford them. Tina had been seeking employment for months without success.

Tammy couldn’t help but wonder what impact not having a useable pair of prescription glasses was having on Tina’s job search.

After a bit of online research, Tammy located what she hoped would be assistance for Tina through the local Lions Club. At the time Tammy called the Lion’s Club, all available funds had been exhausted; however, the gentleman in charge of the program assured Tammy he would put Tina on a waiting list and contact her once the new budget year began.

True to his word, he did just that. He scheduled eye exams and made payment arrangements for new glasses for not only Tina but her husband as well! Not long after receiving her new glasses, Tina found a full time position as a dietary aide after having been unemployed for over two years!
Myra is a 37-year-old single mother of four, one of which has Down Syndrome. Myra became a mom at 16 and following the pregnancy became addicted to drugs, which resulted in a drug felony that now hangs over her head and limits her employment options.

Myra is quick to explain how grateful she is that all that is in the past and that she’s been clean for thirteen years. What is her motivation? It is heart wrenching...Myra is tired of her kids and grandkids attending school in old worn out clothes wearing shoes with holes in them.

Myra’s goals were to obtain her GED, start college courses, and to stop smoking. It only took her a month to complete her GED, and she immediately enrolled in college. She started attending North Arkansas College in August and has everything paid for with scholarships. Myra knows she has a hard road ahead raising her four kids and two grandkids but feels it is worth the sacrifice to obtain a college degree and improve her kids’ lives.

Myra’s get-it-done attitude and pride in her recent accomplishments will help her continue accomplishing the goals she has set. When (not if) she graduates, she would like to start her own business.

“The SUCCESS Program at Ozark Opportunities, Inc. has gotten me on track to accomplishing a dream. Without Jessica, my family development worker, I would still be in the same place. Instead, Jessica pointed me in the direction to obtain my GED and start college courses! People have told me several times that I do not need a college education…but I say I do because I can take an education with me wherever I go.”
Samantha enrolled in the SUCCESS program shortly after receiving **heating assistance** from Ozark Opportunities, Inc. this past winter. She had purchased a small building next to her mother’s residence and acquired a large number of pageant dresses with the intent of storing them at the building and reselling them.

While the idea certainly had merit, it proved very hard for Samantha to make any sales. Samantha lived several miles away from the building where the dresses were. Upon receiving a call inquiring about a dress, she would have to drive over to the building, determine what she had, and call the potential buyer back with the information.

Samantha’s mother lived next door to the building, but the inventory was not organized in any way that her mother could help out. One of Samantha’s goals was to create two inventory books that would include pictures of all the dresses, contain prices and be arranged by size.

When completed, Samantha would have inventory book at her residence, and her mother would have the other.

Tammy and Samantha **developed** a system in order to create the **inventory books**. Samantha would take the pictures, email them to Tammy and then Tammy would print out sheets for the books. Samantha had well over 100 dresses, so this took quite some time to complete.

Tammy delivered the last of the inventory sheets at the September seminar and now, not only is the inventory information readily available to Samantha and her mother, but working on this goal helped Samantha get her **inventory organized** at the same time.

Samantha is now ready for the **next step**: getting the dresses posted for **online sales**.
Margaret (an outreach worker) met Missy for the first time seven years ago. At that time, Missy was 40 years old, disabled, had no high school education, and had always lived in Van Buren County. Margaret recounted numerous times when Missy showed up for assistance with black eyes and multiple bruises. It was obvious she was in an abusive relationship.

Although physically and emotionally beat down, it was obvious Missy did not want to talk about it…yet. This past March, Missy again applied for and received Low Income Home Energy Assistance on the Regular winter program.

Fast forward a few months. Margaret also covers Searcy County and works out of the Marshall office on Tuesdays. During the Summer Crisis Program, which opened in August this year, Margaret was conducting the usual client interviews when she asked for the next person.

When the client presented her application, she said, “You don’t recognize me do you?” Margaret admitted she did not. This client went on to explain, “I am Missy, and you helped me a few months ago in March. The help you provided allowed me to save enough money to get away from my abusive husband and move into a low-income apartment in Searcy County.”

Margaret was shocked. In just a few months Missy had lost weight, got her hair cut and lightened, and simply looked wonderful! In order to break away, Missy had to leave everything behind. She had no clothes to wear and no coat for winter.

Margaret proceeded to call community partners, and within couple of days Missy had all the clothing she needed and several coats.

Partners included the First Baptist Churches in Marshall and Clinton, First Christian Church in Leslie, and an anonymous individual. We are grateful to our partners, without whose help we couldn’t have such an impact on families and communities!
On September 4, 2013, when the Crisis Program was almost over, Jane came into Margaret’s office for help with an electric shut-off notice. Once she completed the application, Margaret started the interview.

Upon reviewing the application, Margaret noted that Jane had been unemployed since 2009. Jane has three children but no child-support (she has applied, but the father evades Child Support Enforcement’s efforts to collect.) Jane gets food stamps, receives HUD and a small utility check.

Margaret asked how Jane was making ends meet. Jane explained that her mother gives her money and helps out as much as possible; however, this electric bill was over $300 and her mother wasn’t able to cover it.

Margaret followed up by asking why Jane did not work. Jane explained she couldn’t because of her son, Nathan, has brain tumors, and has had since he was six. He is 9 now. Every time Jane got a job, Nathan would get sick, be hospitalized, undergo multiple surgeries, and then she’d lose her job.

Once the paperwork for utility assistance was completed and their meeting was ending Jane mentioned she was supposed to take Nathan back to Little Rock Thursday. He was experiencing headaches again but she and her mother didn’t have the gas money to get him to his appointment.

Margaret could tell Jane was stressed and at her wits end so she called a partner (a group who wishes to remain anonymous) and explained Jane’s situation. The partner, in collaboration with Margaret, was able to pay for two trips to Little Rock for Jane and her son; thereby giving them a further step toward treatment...(and the story continues...)
CONTACT INFORMATION

FY 2013

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Head Start Centers

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Mountain Home I
1414 Post Oak Rd. (Rooms 1 & 2)
Mtn. Home, AR. 72653
Room 1 Phone: 870-425-2123
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Mountain Home II
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**Yellville-Summit**
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600 School Street
PO Box 82
Jasper, AR. 72641-0082
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**Western Grove**
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P.O. Box 116
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Searcy County Locations

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Head Start Centers

**Marshall**
204 Ruff Street
P.O. Box 1281
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**St. Joe**
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St. Joe, AR. 72675
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Van Buren County Locations

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Head Start Centers

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