Jack Lanier, who turned around the Quin Rivers community action agency, retires

By TAMMIE SMITH Richmond Times-Dispatch

When Jack Lanier, a former VCU professor and former chairman of the state Board of Health, took the job as executive director of the administratively troubled Quin Rivers community action agency four years ago, he knew he had a lot of work ahead.

The previous executive director had resigned, and instead of appointing an interim director, the board of directors was meeting twice a month to manage the New Kent County agency.

The board was out of compliance with its membership makeup based on guidelines from its key funding source, the federal Community Services Block Grant program.

Lanier had experience in turning around troubled nonprofits. For instance, in 2009, he was hired to run the Richmond Behavioral Health Authority, which at the time was facing a leadership crisis.

After four years on the job at Quin Rivers, Monday was Lanier’s last day with the community action agency.

He retired, leaving the agency with a board that is in compliance, a community needs assessment survey that provides a framework for the agency’s programs, and a new executive director, Lisa Gibson. Gibson was a supervisor at the Virginia Department of Social Services.

The agency now has working relationships with the leaders of all the communities it serves, said Anne M. Mitchell, president of the Quin Rivers board and director of King William Social Services.

That’s largely because of Lanier, a retired Virginia Commonwealth University professor with a doctorate in public health.

Lanier “has established relationships with boards of supervisors, county administrators, town managers, school division superintendents and others who respect him and thus have trust in the programs of the agency,” Mitchell said.

“Dr. Lanier was truly a networker so he knew a lot of people outside the circle who could help the inner circle,” said the Rev. Vance M. Jones, vice president of the Quin Rivers board.

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Quin Rivers, founded in 1970, gets its name from the five rivers that form the boundaries of the agency's service area.

Quin Rivers and other community action agencies like it were born out of President Lyndon Johnson's declaration of a “war on poverty” in 1964.

From that declaration came the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964, which created a network of local agencies to serve low-income populations.

In 1968, more than 1,600 community action agencies operated. Today there are fewer — but still more than 1,000, according to the National Community Action Partnership.

“We are not a good elevator speech. We find it very hard to just say this is what we do because what Quin Rivers does may be very different from what's done in Southwest Virginia or Northern Virginia,” said Jim Schuyler, executive director of the Virginia Community Action Partnership, an association representing the interests of 31 nonprofit private and public community action agencies in the state.

“That was as intended. They were set up to do a community needs assessment on a regular basis and adjust their mix of programs and services based on that,” Schuyler said.

“They are kind of the go-to agency in the community that is working to combat poverty, and they're doing it in a broad way,” he said.

Quin Rivers programs include housing and financial counseling and parenting workshops; Project Discovery, focused on education; and Project Hope, focused on preventing domestic violence and sexual abuse. Project Hope marked 20 years last year.

“There is a common misconception that violence of any kind does not happen in rural areas,” said Helen Mays, underserved populations outreach specialist and case manager with Quin Rivers.

“During my time at Project Hope, I have learned and seen otherwise. Myths like this one, along with the lack of access to services for domestic/sexual violence survivors in rural communities can be challenging due to geographic isolation.”

Most community action agencies have a more diverse mix of funding — public, private, corporate, foundation and volunteer time, Schuyler said.

Lanier said Quin Rivers' approximately $2 million annual budget has not changed much in recent years, but the agency has been able to provide services to more people.

“What we have been able to do is get a lot of in-kind services, volunteers,” Lanier said. “The good news is (the budget) hasn't decreased.”

Schuyler praised Lanier's “care and stewardship” of Quin Rivers and his statewide advocacy for community action agencies generally.
“He has helped the network statewide achieve many positive results in the General Assembly over the past few years. He has certainly been a statewide leader for us,” Schuyler said.