

War on Poverty - Community Action Agencies (1964-69)

The following story is about a program which started from the top at the U.S. government level but for a short period of time, brought about hope and progress from the bottom up in many communities around the country.

The War on Poverty is the unofficial name for legislation first introduced by United States President Lyndon B. Johnson during his State of the Union address on Wednesday, January 8, 1964. This legislation was proposed by Johnson in response to a national poverty rate of around nineteen percent. The speech led the United States Congress to pass the Economic Opportunity Act, which established the Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO) to administer the local application of federal funds targeted against poverty. The programs established by the Act were collectively aimed at eliminating poverty by improving living conditions for residents of low-income neighborhoods and by helping the poor access economic opportunities long denied them. The legacy of the war on poverty policy initiative remains in the continued existence of such federal government programs as Head Start, Volunteers in Service to America (VISTA), TRiO, and Job Corps.

I began working for the Office of Economic Opportunity in February of 1967. I worked out of the Chicago Regional Office. Below is an article I wrote in 1994 commenting on the 50th anniversary of the War on Poverty.

In the Beginning...A Forgotten Lesson of the Original War on Poverty

Poor people organizing other poor people to take control of their future—that is what the original War on Poverty was about. It was not about welfare payments or other direct income assistance.

One of the most significant successes of the first years of the War on Poverty was the strong emphasis on organizing and empowering people in poor communities to take control of many aspects of their lives (education, job opportunities and training, crime control, health care, and legal issues, to name a few). The original intent of the War on Poverty was to identify, train, and nurture the leaders and residents in low-income communities to mobilize and take control of their own destinies.

That kind of work was undertaken by local Community Action Agencies (CAAs) and it was so effective that it threatened the existing power structures.

One of the most dramatic images of successful organizing was in Chicago where I lived and worked in the 1960s. At the time, garbage was picked up once per week by municipal crews. However, if the weather was bad—not an unusual occurrence during winter in Chicago—garbage in the poorer neighborhoods was often not collected at all. Local community organizers—funded in part by War on Poverty community action agency grants—organized a protest. People brought their garbage downtown and left it on the sidewalk outside of City Hall. There were pictures in the papers and images on TV every day showing the growing piles of garbage bags outside of City Hall. It didn't take long for the City to change its operation and make sure that everyone got their garbage picked up every week.



Garbage Piled Up Outside City Hall in Chicago

Other successful community organizing efforts throughout the country included:

- ! Rent strikes to demand sanitary, heated, and safe living conditions*
- ! Migrant workers striking for improved living and work conditions*
- ! Programs to enroll seniors in the newly established Medicare program, combat isolation, and promote access to regular meals*
- ! Community designed mental health and substance abuse programs to fight addiction*
- ! Job-readiness training programs*
- ! Head Start programs which brought together families and the broader community to give children a better chance at success and future economic opportunity.*

Importantly, most of the people who did the organizing were poor themselves and lived in the communities that they were organizing. They had very strong leadership qualities and were well-respected by local residents. The local CAAs hired them and they worked within the communities to identify barriers to economic opportunity and to empower local residents to overcome these barriers.

Unfortunately, the success of community organizing and empowerment was seen as a threat to both urban/liberal and rural/suburban/conservative elected officials at every level of government. Congressional members, fearing these new leaders as well as activism in poor communities, gutted funding for this crucial element of the War on Poverty starting in 1969.

What this history suggests is that combatting poverty now and, in the future, should once again be built around poor people organizing to address the challenges that they see their families and communities up against every day.

While government is unlikely to fund these kinds of efforts, non-partisan, private foundations should indeed support this type of grassroots organizing. If it works as well now as it did 50

years ago, it would force all of our elected officials, Democrats and Republicans, to listen to all of the people, not just those who have the money and organizational power to influence legislation.

And the country as a whole would benefit. (End of Article)

As a Field Representative for the Office of Economic Opportunity, the communities which I worked with in Michigan were usually multi-county organizations surrounding a central city such as Muskegon, Battle Creek, and Kalamazoo, Michigan. I also worked with some totally rural CAAs.

It was just an education to see the diversity of issues different organizations identified as barriers to economic opportunity in their communities. Being a city boy from Chicago, I had no knowledge of and experience with poverty in rural areas. Just getting people together in far flung rural areas was a difficult thing to accomplish, particularly with senior citizens. I still remember working with a five-county CAA in the "Thumb" area of northern Michigan.

One of the projects people put together was establishing a senior center with transportation opportunities to get people to them and back home on a regular basis. The CAA brought together local businesses, governments, and not for profit organizations in the area who designed a program and raised their own funds to run the program. On one of my visits as a Field Representative for OEO, I went to the Senior Center to see what they were doing.

There were close to 75 people there that day. At the Senior Center, the people who came had the opportunity to have their health checked, get assistance in signing up for Medicare and Social Security benefits, setting up a bank account, and many other services which they could not access most of the time. As part of the day, they shared a lunch, and then they played some cards. They asked me to join them, which I did for a while. We played pinochle. And if I recall correctly, they beat the pants off of me. I had a wonderful time and still remember what a plus it was to these people's lives to have an opportunity to leave their often isolated homes and lives and get together with other people to share a meal, get access to services they needed, and just have some pleasant recreational times.

Another big success of the War on Poverty was the Head Start program. I helped communities get organized to have such a program and helped them obtain federal funding for it. Head Start programs began as summer enrichment programs but quickly became year-round programs. Head Start served both urban and rural communities. Again, as was the aim of the War on Poverty, it brought together a wide range of organizations to address the challenges of getting children ready to enter the regular school system. Head Start programs brought together and helped coordinate the efforts of educators, parents, health providers, not for profit social service organizations, and businesses so that low income children had the opportunity to improve their educational, health, and, in the long-run, their economic opportunities.

Some people thought then and still think today that Head Start was not a success and that it was and is a waste of tax dollars. I thought then and still do today, that no program is ever perfect and achieves all it wants to accomplish. But the images that stick in my mind are 4 and 5 year-olds coming to the Head Start school with smiles on their faces and being full of laughter as they got a good breakfast meal, opportunities to learn to read and start to understand basic math, and getting along with others in school work and in play. The children also got a healthy lunch. They received physical, dental, and eye exams, and necessary treatment when

necessary. Much of this testing and treatment was done by health professionals in the community on a pro bono basis.



Over the years since I helped Head Start programs get established in 1967 and 1968, I have often spoken at a number of colleges and universities about a variety of topics. If I have the opportunity to do so, I ask for a show of hands from faculty and staff of who participated in a Head Start program when they were a child. There are almost always people in the audience that got a head start on a successful life through the Head Start program. I am pleased that I had the opportunity to help start some of those programs.

Another War on Poverty program that I worked with was the Job Corps program. This program basically gave young men and eventually young women the opportunity to learn some specific job skills as well as the soft skills to get and succeed at a job. In addition to the job-related training that the young people received, the Job Corps participants were given the chance to get into a different environment than the poverty and violence in which they lived every day. Job Corps programs were set up at sites away from the poverty and violence which impacted these young people. For many, it was a fresh start at a Job Corps camp.

My job one summer was to walk the streets in Detroit and recruit young men to sign up to join Job Corps. We worked with the local Boys and Girls Clubs in the poorest neighborhoods in Detroit to identify young men who might benefit from the Jobs Corps program. I then set off on Woodward Avenue with a list of names and addresses and a handful of brochures, knocking on doors to try and recruit young men. I remember two things in particular about that door-knocking experience.

One was that I was the only white person in the neighborhood. People looked at me and wondered what some unknown, goofy 26-year-old white guy was doing in the neighborhood knocking on doors. That was also the reaction of most people who opened their doors when I knocked or rang the doorbell. It always reminded me of the old saying "The check is in the mail. I'm from the government and am here to help you. And I will respect you in the morning."

But most people were gracious to me when they opened the door. I always told them that the local Boys and Girls Club suggested that I stop by and talk with them about a new job training opportunity for which the young man or men in their household could sign up. The adults knew and trusted the Boys and Girls Club staff because many of the staff came from the neighborhood and/or the adults had been to events at the Clubs where their young men had played sports or where involved with other programs.

The second experience I will never forget is how powerful hope is, particularly when people have lost hope.

When I was invited into their homes, I was usually brought into the kitchen where the mother, grandmother, or aunt of the young man would ask me to sit down and to talk with them. Dads were usually not around when I knocked on doors. They were either working or not part of the household anymore. Though the adults I was talking with were skeptical when I started talking about the Job Corps program, they often started to see that this program might really be an opportunity for their son, or grandson, or nephew. They thought it could be an opportunity to not only learn some job skills but would also get the young men into a safer environment where the often gang-related violence in the neighborhood would not touch them.

I can still picture the slowly emerging look of hope which started to fill the eyes and faces of a grandmother and mother as they heard about the Job Corps program and thought this would really be an opportunity to give their young man a better chance to have a better life.

Hope and opportunity motivate all of us throughout our lives. People like me, not rich by any means, but someone who regularly has opportunity and hope as part of their lives, take such hope and opportunity for granted. People living in poverty and amidst violence do not experience many hopeful opportunities. They often do not see that they can affect positive change in their own lives and the lives of their families. But when they do see a real opportunity, they are energized to go after it for themselves and their families. That's what the Office of Economic Opportunity gave to many people. It gave them opportunity and hope. I have never forgotten those faces and what it meant to them. I have always tried to bring hope and opportunity to anyone and everyone I have worked with over the years.