

COMMUNITY ACTION AGENCIES

A HISTORICAL SYNOPSIS

In 1961, President John F. Kennedy's "New Frontier" included support for programs to prevent juvenile delinquency with the focal point, the President's Council on Juvenile Delinquency, chaired by Attorney General Robert Kennedy.

In New York City, the President's Council funded Mobilization for Youth (MFY) with the Ford Foundation and the City of New York. MFY organized and coordinated neighborhood councils comprised of local officials, service providers, and neighbors to develop plans to correct conditions which led to juvenile delinquency. It also enlisted the aid of School Board and City Council members to implement those plans.

It was called COMMUNITY ACTION, and it looked like an effective and inexpensive way to solve problems.

The Ford Foundation was funding other projects including one in New Haven, Connecticut, which recruited people from all sectors of the community to come together to plan and implement programs to help low income people.

MFY and New Haven are often cited as the "models" for a Community Action Agency.

With the assassination of President Kennedy in November 1963, President Lyndon Baines Johnson expanded the policy ideas initiated in the Kennedy Administration. In his message to Congress on January 8, 1964, President Johnson said:

"Let us carry forward the plans and programs of John F. Kennedy, not because of our sorrow or sympathy, but because they are right...This Administration today, here and now declares an unconditional War on Poverty in America...Our joint Federal-local effort must pursue poverty, pursue it wherever it exists. In city slums, in small towns, in sharecroppers shacks, or in migrant worker camps, on Indian reservations, among whites as well as Negroes, among the young as well as the aged, in the boom towns and in the depressed areas."

The "War on Poverty" was born. In February, R. Sargent Shriver was asked to head a task force to draft legislation. In August, the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964 (EOA) was passed, creating a Federal Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO) placed in the President's Executive Office. "Sarge" Shriver was named Director, serving until 1969.

The EOA included new education, employment and training, and work-experience programs such as the Job Corps, the Neighborhood Youth Corps, and Volunteers in Service to America (VISTA), the "domestic peace corps." Congress bypassed the state and local governments and provided for direct funding of community groups - the community action concept.

The Federal OEO was to lead the efforts of the War on Poverty and coordinate related programs of all other Federal agencies. So-called Community Action Agencies (CAAs) were created at the local level to fight the War on Poverty "at home."

CAAs varied from grass roots community controlled groups to those with experienced board members and a highly visible professional staff. Most were incorporated as private nonprofit organizations. A few were city agencies.

One provision of the EOA called for the poor to have "maximum feasible participation" in identifying problems and in developing solutions. Across the nation, CAAs opened neighborhood centers in storefronts, housing projects and other buildings in low income areas to identify people who needed help and to determine eligibility.

A new group of community leaders developed out of these neighborhood organizations voicing the concerns of the poor and insisting on change. The philosophy, the strength and the personal commitments of community action were formed during this period.

By 1969, many successful self-help programs had been initiated by OEO and the Community Action Agencies including Head Start, Family Planning, Community Health Centers, Legal Services, VISTA, Foster Grandparents, Economic Development, Neighborhood Centers, Summer Youth Programs, Adult Basic Education, Senior Centers, Congregate Meal Preparation and others.

During 1974 to 1981, CAAs continued to help communities and neighborhoods to initiate self help projects such as gardening projects, solar greenhouses, and housing rehabilitation. They additionally helped create and support Federally funded senior centers and congregate meal sites. Home weatherization and energy crisis programs were initiated in the 1970s.

In September 1981, Congress provided that all CAAs designated and recognized were eligible to be funded under the 90 percent pass-through requirement on the Community Services Block Grant.

Whatever the specific approach taken by individual states and the block grant, the number of CAAs has increased since 1981 from about 932 to 954; the number of counties covered by a CAA has increased from 2,300 to 2,700 of the nation's 3,300 counties; and the number of dollars administered by CAAs has increased from about 1.9 billion in 1981 to about 2.7 billion in 1989.

Budget cuts in poverty programs continue, but CAAs continue to provide a "hand up, not a hand out." The philosophy of eliminating "the paradox of poverty in the midst of plenty" remains the key concept that motivates CAAs today.

Below is a brief description of some of the publicly funded programs that were started by, developed under, or heavily influenced by the principles and operations of the EOA:

1. *Weatherization*
The Low-Income Weatherization Assistance Program (LIWAP, or WX) funds the purchase and installation of materials that reduce heating and cooling costs in low-income households.
2. *Low-Income Home Energy Assistance Program*
The Low-Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP) is the Federal government's major effort to help low-income households pay for the cost of home heating. LIHEAP funds are used to pay a portion of the bills for gas, electricity of oil.
3. *Head Start*
The goal of the comprehensive Head Start program is competency development. One outcome of this is to give preschool children the assistance they need to get ready for school and to function effectively in school. Most Head Start programs operate year-round and include several services to children and their families:
comprehensive health services, such as medical, dental and mental health related services,
nutrition program,
educational program,
social services, and
parental involvement.
4. *Temporary Emergency Food Assistance Program, or TEFAP*
The Temporary Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP) allocates commodity foods to states along with a modest amount of administrative funds to pay for their distribution. The commodity foods typically include dairy products (cheese, butter, dehydrated milk or eggs), grains and honey. The commodities come from the U.S. Department of Agriculture's farm price-support programs. States then distribute these food-stuffs through participating nonprofit agencies.
5. *Employment and Training Programs*
The Neighborhood Youth Corps and the Comprehensive Employment Program (CEP) were grounded in the EOA. Both evolved into the Comprehensive Employment and Training Act of 1972 (CETA) with local CAAs as the sponsor. In an effort to shift the balance of decision-making (about who was to be trained for what) to employers, Congress passed the Job Training Partnership Act of 1982. JTPA provides funds for training for disadvantaged youths and adults, summer employment and training for youth, and retraining services to dislocated workers.

6. *Work Experience, or Public Service Employment*
Congress sharply limited the amount of JTPA funds that can be used for stipends to pay people while they are in training or to pay them to perform public service. However, the Title II-B youth programs in JTPA, the Senior Community Service Employment Program under the Older American Act, and many rehabilitation programs still pay people while in training or for public service employment.
7. *Older Americans Act*
The Older Americans Act, passed in 1965 and amended in 1981, is the major vehicle for funding of services to the elderly. The Department of Health and Human Services allocates funds to the State Units on Aging (SUAs). The SUAs then contract with the Area Agency on Aging (AAAs).
8. *Social Services Block Grant*
The Social Services Block Grant (SSBG) channels federal funds to the States to provide certain types of specific social services. This block grant continues the social services initially funded under Title XX of the Social Security Act. The EOA heavily influenced the way that Congress shaped this piece of legislation in that Congress allocated some roles to the SSBG and left others in the EOA. This division of labor has been checked periodically by the General Accounting Office (GAO) who report that there is no significant duplication of effort.
9. *Federal Housing Programs*
The Federal Housing Act of 1968 provides for various federally-sponsored housing assistance programs. Among those ideas tested extensively under the EOA are: 1) a home ownership program which provides loans to low-income families to buy, build or rehabilitate homes; 2) a program for families and the elderly which makes grants of loans for renovation to meet health and safety standards; 3) a self-help housing program which counsels groups of low-income families on the construction and rehabilitation of their homes. All three of these are administered by the Farmer's Home Administration.
10. *Action Programs*
VISTA. Volunteers in Services to America was developed under the EOA. Long known as the "domestic version of the Peace Corps," VISTA provides a nominal stipend to people who go out to low-income communities and live there to assist in community development projects.

As for **Foster Grandparents**, low-income persons aged 60 and over provide companionship and guidance to mentally, physically, and emotionally handicapped children, children who are victims of abuse or neglect, and those who have other special needs. **Senior Companions** are low-income persons 60 or over who provide care and companionship to other adults, especially the frail elderly. Foster Grandparents and Senior Companions work 20 hours per week and receive a small stipend.

Retired Senior Volunteers provides opportunities for older citizens to use their talents and experience in community service. RSVP volunteers serve without compensation.

11. *Economic Development Programs*
The EOA was amended in 1967 to include a Title VII, the Kennedy-Javits Amendment, that provided funds to initiate economic development programs in low income communities. The key concept was that the community was to play a significant role in terms of ownership, making policy decisions, and receiving the benefits such as employment in the new ventures.
12. *Stuart B. McKinney Act Programs for the Homeless*
This is a relatively new program that provides funds for services to homeless individuals and families. Absolutely in the tradition of the EOA, it focuses on the "poorest of the poor." McKinney Act funds are used to pay for emergency shelter, food, clothing, transportation, and medical care. The Act also emphasizes development of transition housing and support services and permanent housing for people with disabilities.
13. *Legal Services*
The Legal Services Act of 1977 set up a separate national corporation to administer the program. Legal Services Attorneys in local offices provide representation in civil cases, such as divorce, bankruptcy, contracts and landlord-tenant issues. There are 325 grantees nationwide.
14. *Women, Infants, Children*
The WIC program grew out of the EOA and related activities. It provides food supplements and nutritional counseling to women prior to and immediately after the birth of their child.
15. *The Community Services Block Grant*
As the successor-in-interest to the Community Services Act and the Economic Opportunity Act, the CSBG channels about 322 million in federal funds through states to provide the core administrative component and service delivery programs operated by the nation's

Community Action Agencies (CAAs). Under state administration of the CSBG, new CAAs have been created and existing CAAs have expanded their coverage. The number of CAAs have increased from 932 in 1981 to 954 today, and the number of counties covered has increased from about 2,300 in 1981 to about 2,700 counties today.