

History of Community Action

What is Community Action?

In 1964, The Great Society, as envisioned by President Lyndon Johnson, was a sweeping plan to improve the lives of all Americans, regardless of their circumstances. Inspired by President Kennedy and his New Frontier, Johnson pledged to fulfill his promise of equal opportunity for all by enacting several comprehensive changes within the federal government. In August of that same year, the Economic Opportunity Act was signed into law by President Johnson creating the nationwide Community Action Network.

The War on Poverty

In 1963, shortly before he was assassinated, President Kennedy had asked his economic advisors to draw up some proposals to address the problem of American poverty. Johnson took up this charge after he succeeded Kennedy as President. In Johnson's first State of the Union address on June 8, 1964, he called for an unconditional war to defeat poverty. He expanded and revised the proposals given to Kennedy and developed the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964. The act included a variety of initiatives:

1. Head Start
2. Job Corps
3. Work-Study program for university students
4. VISTA (Volunteers in Service to America) - a domestic version of the Peace Corps
5. Neighborhood Youth Corps
6. Basic education and adult job training
7. CAPS (Community Action Programs) - CAPS turned out to be the most controversial part of the package, as it proposed the "**maximum feasible participation**" by poor people themselves to determine what would help them the most. CAPS were a radical departure from how government had run most social reform programs in the past.



President Johnson signing the EOA, August 1964

The Economic Opportunity Act was innovative legislation, but it received only about \$1 billion to divide among the various programs and remained critically underfunded. By 1966, Congress appropriated \$4 billion for the programs.

The Start of Community Action

Community Action was a bold idea, especially for the federal government. It handed over control to the local level, so that programs were geared specifically for target population needs. This concept, "maximum feasible participation", represented a new paradigm in the government and many sectors were wary of its innovative ideas. President Johnson selected a member of President Kennedy's inner circle to head up the newly formed "Office of Economic Opportunity" –Sargent Shriver.

Shriver was head of Peace Corps in the Kennedy administration and married to Kennedy's sister, Eunice. He had proved himself to be a capable leader and President Johnson admired his abilities. President Johnson, legendary for his acumen in recruiting key personnel, offered the position to Shriver and would not take no for an answer. Shriver was installed as the first head of the OEO in October 11, 1964 and leapt into action.

Unfortunately for Shriver, he simply did not have adequate funding to begin the process of addressing national poverty issues. However, he assembled an impressive team of advisers, including Michael Harrington, author of *The Other America* and began to implement new policies and actions to resolve these issues.

Community Action was modeled after two fairly successful urban renewal projects, one undertaken by the Ford Foundation and the Mobilization for Youth, a program aimed at juvenile delinquency. Inspiration was also taken from the "Back of the Yards" program

in Chicago, which was developed by Saul Alinsky, considered the father of “community development”. It should be noted that Alinsky became very critical of the OEO as it developed. The key component was that low-income citizens played an active role in program design and administration, or “maximum feasible participation”. The Economic Opportunity Act was amended (known as the Green Amendment) in 1967 to mandate the board structure of community action agencies, which complemented the earlier Quie Amendment which required the tripartite representation, including low-income participation.

In 1981, President Reagan introduced the Block Grant, which dramatically changed the way federal funding was distributed. Programs including Community Action, would now receive funding through the State Office of Community Action/Services and would be under more intense scrutiny than previous administrations. Illinois Community Action now worked more closely with the Illinois Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity to implement the Community Service Block Grant (CSBG) and worked to build a strong partnership to provide robust services to Illinois’ low-income residents.

Over the past several years, federal funding to support the Community Service Block Grant has been challenged. President George W. Bush denounced Community Action programs as being static. However, Community Action remains an important safety net for many vulnerable individuals and families. Beginning in 2001, Community Action has improved their reporting through the Results Oriented Management and Accountability (ROMA) framework and continuously seeks ways to improve outreach and services. The National Community Action Partnership now encourages all Community Action Agencies to embrace the National Standards of Excellence as a pathway to improve and empower agency operations.

The guiding principle of maximum feasible participation continues today in Community Action. Local Community Action boards are tripartite, in other words, have representation from all segments of the local community including their low-income clients.

Why Community Action?

Community Action equips low-income citizens with the tools and potential for becoming self-sufficient. The structure of program is unique – federal dollars are used locally to offer specialized programming in communities. It is a coordinated effort to address the root effects of poverty and to, ultimately, move families and individuals to self-sufficiency.

This work is not easy and demand is always shifting and changing. Over the years, the federal government has changed as well. The funding is now part of the Block Grant System, which allows for the flexibility and specialization of unique programs. Poverty is viewed as a systemic problem and Community Action is a systems approach to resolving those issues. There are now over 1000 Community Action Agencies throughout the United States and Puerto Rico.

Community Action Agencies (CAAs) promote self-sufficiency, not dependency. Among their three key assets are:

- FLEXIBILITY - The Community Services Block Grant, which supplies the core CAA funding, is unique; it is flexible, and it primarily funds local investments in services, facilities and partnerships which are particular to the CAA's home community. By adding to and altering government programs' "one-size-fits-all" programming, a community can provide its low-income members the right mix of assistance, encouragement, and incentives to become self-sufficient.
- IMMEDIACY - CAAs are located in the areas of greatest need, managed and staffed by community residents and often open far into the evening. Therefore, when a family or an individual faces a crisis, their CAA is able to respond quickly with targeted forms of assistance appropriate to the situation; these may well include the mobilization of help from many of the CAA's private sector partners, volunteers, and faith-based groups.

The goal is to promptly stabilize a family, and thus avoid the long-term consequence of costly dependency. However, Community Action also has the capability to sustain long-term involvement in a family's progress to self-sufficiency, as well as in the development of the low-income community.

- COORDINATION - A bedrock principle of Community Action is that resources of all kinds need to be integrated so they can be used in combination to solve community and individual problems. CAAs manage more than \$5.6 billion in public and private resources annually, serving more than 9.3 million low-income persons; the CSBG-funded staff goes into the community and to other government sources to bring in not only leveraged funds but also hundreds of thousands of local volunteers.

So, in other words:

The Community Action Method is:

- Prioritizes prevention
- Addresses the causes of poverty
- Involves the Community
- Improves the Community
- Creates Opportunity
- CAA response to clients/customers is:
- Flexible

- Coordinated
- Directed to Long Term Client Development

Typically, the programs and services coordinated, enhanced and offered to the community by its CAA include all or some of the following:

- TO HELP AND ENCOURAGE CHILDREN AND YOUTH: Head Start, Literacy Programs, Dropout Prevention, After School Enrichment and Tutoring, Teen Centers, Recreation and Sports Programs, Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants & Children (WIC), Well-Baby Clinics, Summer Enrichment Programs, Summer Food Programs, Child Care Food Programs, Pregnancy Prevention, Character Education, Substance Abuse Education, Prevention & Counseling, Summer Youth Employment Programs, College Counseling and Placement.
- TO SUPPORT THE WORKING POOR: Child Care, Adult Education, GED Preparation, Job Training and On-The-Job Support, Job Search Assistance, Job Placement, Job Creation, Small Business Development, Loan Funds, Senior Community Service Employment, Displaced Homemaker Programs, Budget Counseling, Internet Training and Access.
- TO SUPPORT THE POOR FACING CRISIS: Homeless Shelters & Drop-In Centers, Utility Deposits, Eviction Prevention, Domestic Violence Programs & Shelters, Transitional Housing, Food Pantries Energy Crisis Assistance & Shelter, Emergency Food Baskets, Emergency Clothing, Supplies, and Services - including Medical & Legal Volunteer Help.
- TO SUSTAIN AND HONOR THE ELDERLY: Meals on Wheels, In-Home Care Programs, Senior Centers, Senior Day Care, Foster Grandparents, Congregate Meals, Medical Transportation, Volunteer Chore Services.
- TO STRENGTHEN THE WHOLE FAMILY: Comprehensive Family Development Support, Nutrition Education, Parenting Education, Community Gardens and Canneries, Food Stamps, Health Clinics, Weatherization Assistance, Energy Assistance, Rental Assistance, Home Ownership Programs, Community Centers, Individual Development Accounts.
- TO STRENGTHEN THE WHOLE COMMUNITY: Low-Income Housing Development, Economic Development and Support for New Business Ventures, Mobilization of Community-Wide Safety and Crime Prevention Initiatives, Consumer Education and Fraud Prevention, Community Reinvestment Act Partnerships, Support for

Groups Working on Neighborhood Improvements, Support for Dialogue and Planning among all Sectors of the Community.

Unique Characteristics of Community Action Agencies

- **BOARD STRUCTURE** - CAAs are required to have a tripartite board consisting of equal parts of local private sector, public sector, and low-income community representatives. This structure brings together community leaders from each of these groups to collaborate on developing responses to local needs. This allows for Maximum Feasible Participation in both the creation and administration of Community Action programs.
- **VOLUNTEER SUPPORT** – The CAA network is one of the largest users of volunteer services in the country. In FY 98, CAAs reported that volunteers contributed more than 27 million hours of service, equivalent to more than 13,000 full time employees.
- **LEVERAGE FOR OTHER RESOURCES** – Every Community Service Block Grant (CSBG) dollar spent leverages nearly \$4 of state, local, and private contributions combined. The CAA network administers a total of nearly \$5.6 billion in federal, state, local and private resources.
- **INNOVATIVE SOLUTIONS** – CSBG funds give CAAs the flexibility to design programs that address needs specific to individuals and the local community and to identify specialized resources that fit these needs.
- **LOW ADMINISTRATIVE COSTS** – CAAs have very low administrative overhead costs (on average, between 7 and 12 percent). Resources are invested directly in the community and families, not in bureaucracy.
- **COMPREHENSIVE AND RESPONSIVE** – CAAs respond quickly when a family or individual is in crisis to avoid costly long-term problems. The highest priority is placed on helping people achieve permanent self-sufficiency. In addition to emergency assistance, a major portion of CSBG expenditures is for coordination among various programs. Integrated service delivery is tailored to individual circumstances.
- **COMMUNITY AND FAMILY PROGRAMS** – CAAs provide services that address the full range of family needs – from Head Start and other education and child development programs, to youth and adult employment and training, to services for seniors and the frail elderly. Services are generally coordinated through a case manager or family development specialist. Other CAA programs are

designed to strengthen the local economy and develop the community's infrastructure under the guidance of community leaders.

- REACHING MILLIONS OF AMERICANS – CAAs provide services to more than a quarter of all Americans living in poverty and to several million more families with incomes only slightly higher than the poverty threshold every year. 2.8 million low-income children are among those served.