

# The War on Poverty in Austin

A Brief Discussion



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**Photo: David L. Hackett and Robert F. Kennedy, 1956**

# Legislative Origins

The War on Poverty Began with enactment of the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964. The law established the federal Office of Economic Opportunity and launched the following programs, as well as others:

- VISTA (Volunteers in Service to America)
- Job Corps
- Neighborhood Youth Corps
- Head Start
- Adult Basic Education
- Family planning
- Community Health Centers
- Congregate Meal Preparation
- Economic Development
- Foster Grandparents
- Legal Aid
- Neighborhood Centers
- Summer Youth Programs
- Senior Centers

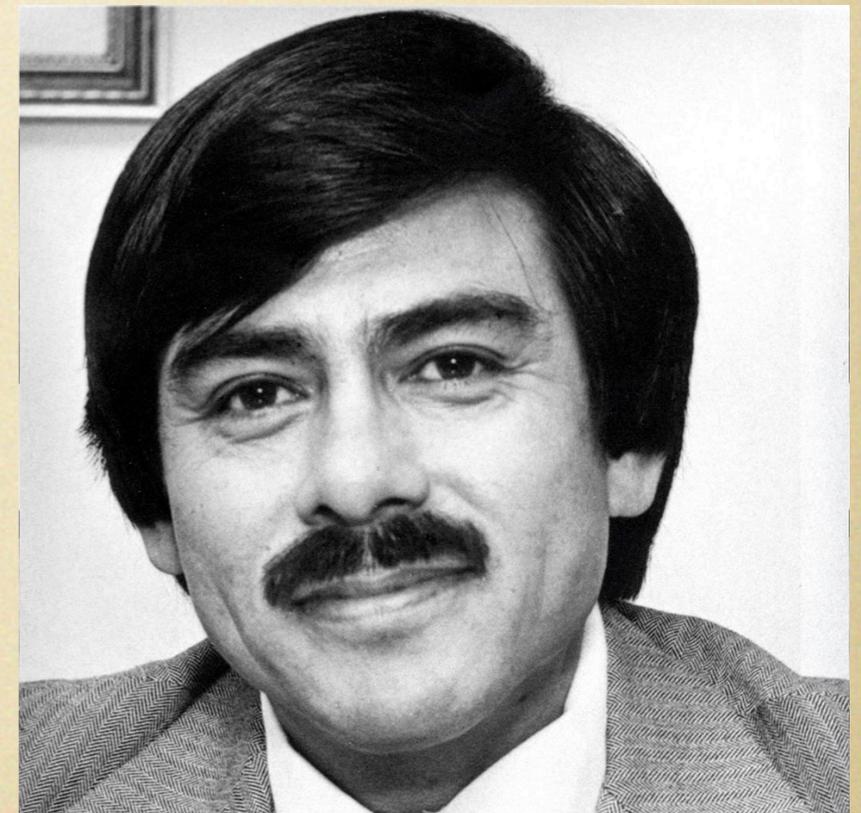


# Community Action Agencies

- The EOA established over a thousand of Community Action Agencies(CAA's) at the local level to implement Great Society programs.
- CAAs varied greatly, with some being non-profit groups, some being city agencies, and some community-controlled groups. By 1968 there were over 1,600 CAA's covering two-thirds of the nation's counties.
- The EOA was notable in administrative terms because Congress bypassed state and local governments to fund community groups directly.
- However, economic opportunity offices were also created at the level of state government as a means of involving the governors in Great Society poverty programs.
- Governors could veto inappropriate grants subject to override by OEO director Sargent Shriver, though the governors lacked the right of prior approval. It was not uncommon for southern governors to veto OEO grants only to be overridden by Shriver. In fact, Shriver overrode almost all vetoes.

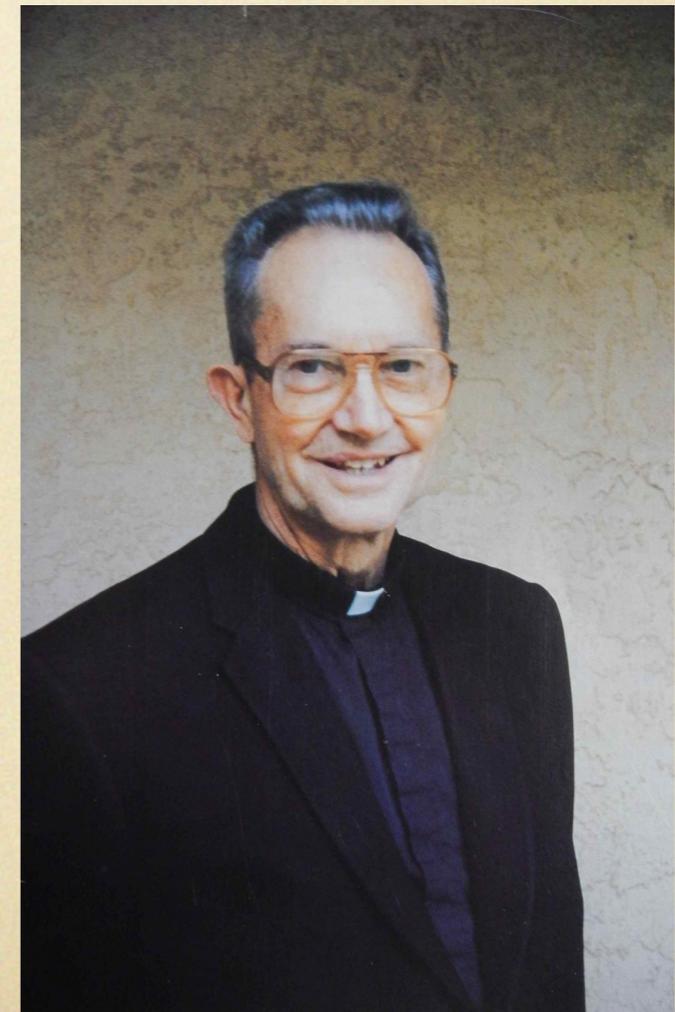
# “Maximum Feasible Participation”

- The EOA required the poor have "maximum feasible participation" in poverty program planning.
- CAAs sought participation by the poor by opening storefront and neighborhood centers. Such centers helped train a new generation of community activists and leaders. These individuals were also recruited into the ranks of federal poverty program administration. One noteworthy example: John Treviño, the first Hispanic member of the Austin City Council.
- As this new power base developed, some mayors and other political leaders were threatened and successfully lobbied Congress to earmark new funds into "National Emphasis Programs" specified by Congress. The NEP requirements effectively undermined the discretion of CAA's to allocate funds. As Congress's influence grew, the commitment of the president to the OEO declined.



# Montopolis, “Poverty Island”

- State and city officials were not keen on using War on Poverty money to tackle Austin’s longstanding community needs.
- The War on Poverty pioneer in Austin was the late Rev. Fred Underwood of Montopolis’ Dolores Parish who had dubbed the Montopolis community as “Poverty Island” shortly after arriving in 1962.



# The Montopolis Community in Action

- The Montopolis Community Center opened on May 1, 1964. Father Underwood used his extensive knowledge as a builder and mortgaged his church to get the money to construct the building after the city council told him that the city did not have any money to address the community needs in Montopolis.
- MCC (Montopolis Community Center, Inc.) formally incorporated in 1965. It was one of the first CAA's in Austin.
- The Montopolis Day Care Center opened the same year, using funding from the OEO. It furnished quality daycare for up to 70 children, ages 3 through 5.
- The first public transportation network in Montopolis, known as "Poverty Island Transportation" was operated for three years by the MCC. Sargent Shriver personally came to Austin to take one of the first rides on the bus.
- The Montopolis Youth Corps furnished job training for school dropouts and "juvenile delinquents." It produced an 80% reduction in crime in Montopolis and was so successful that the federal Department of Labor requested that it be extended throughout the city and four surrounding counties.
- Rev. Admiral DeWitty of St. Edward Baptist Church and many of his parishioners also did important community work in Montopolis, such as serving as commissioners for the federal Model Cities program.

# “Maximum Feasible Participation”

- The Green Amendment of 1967 stipulated that local elected officials had the authority to designate the official CAA for their areas. Only after such official recognition could the OEO fund a CAA. Although over 95% of existing CAA's were certified under the Green Amendment, there were major big-city exceptions in which community-based CAA's were replaced by mayor-controlled CAA's or public agencies.
- Similarly, the Quie Amendment of 1967 stipulated that one-third of CAA boards be composed of elected officials and another one-third be composed of private sector representatives, thereby limiting representation of the poor to a minority position (one-third).

# The Death of the OEO

- Under the Nixon Administration, a number of OEO programs were transferred to the Department of Health, Education and Welfare and to the Department of Labor.
- After his 1972 reelection, Nixon's 1973 budget dropped funding for the Community Action Program of the OEO. Howard Phillips was appointed as OEO director with instructions to dismantle the agency. Lawsuits, however, forced the president to expend funds appropriated by Congress and Phillips resigned.
- Under the Ford administration, the Community Services Amendments of 1974 terminated the OEO and created a replacement agency, the Community Services Administration (CSA). Many OEO employees simply changed places in organizational charts. CAA's continued to be funded until 1981. New program thrusts included housing rehabilitation, home insulation, and environmental projects like solar greenhouses and community gardening.

# CSBG

- The Community Services Block Grant (CSBG) was passed in 1981, rescinding the Economic Opportunity Act as well as the Green Amendment. However, CAA's recognized by the CSA were made eligible for CSBG funding. The program was housed in the Department of Health, Education and Welfare, now known as the Department of Health and Human Services.
- Funding was reduced under the Reagan administration as a new system of eight block grants consolidated some 200+ federal programs. In September, 1981, the CSA was abolished and 1,000 CSA employees were fired. Nonetheless, CAA's continued and in fact increased as a percentage of counties covered by CAA's (now estimated at 70%-80% of all U. S. counties).

# “Citizen Participation”

- The concept of maximum feasible participation by the poor has devolved into “citizen participation plans” which furnish a veneer of community involvement while minimizing actual community control.
- The emasculation of the VISTA program and restrictions placed upon the legal aid portions of the War on Poverty set the precedent for these actions.
- It’s what allows city officials to mendaciously declare community input “valuable” while ensuring that poor people themselves will not ever be able to exercise true decision making authority over government programs supposedly designed to assist them.
- Consequently, there is now a lot of money in poverty. And poor and pigmented people are not adequately represented in the leadership of these non-profits and agencies.
- Many of them now support public housing demolition instead of revitalization. Rosewood Courts is one noteworthy example.



CITY OF AUSTIN  
NEIGHBORHOOD HOUSING AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT (NHCD) OFFICE

## CITIZEN PARTICIPATION PLAN

### A. PURPOSE

Participating Jurisdictions (PJs) that receive U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) entitlement grant funds must develop a Citizen Participation Plan (CPP). The CPP describes efforts that will be undertaken to encourage citizens to participate in the development of the City's federal reports: 5-Year Consolidated Plan, annual Action Plan, and the Consolidated Annual Performance and Evaluation Report (CAPER).

The CPP is designed to encourage the participation of city residents in the development of the federal reports listed above, particularly those residents who are predominantly low- and moderate-income. The CPP also encourages local and regional institutions and other organizations (including businesses, developers, and community and faith-based organizations) in the process of developing and implementing the 5-Year Consolidated Plan and related reports. The City takes appropriate actions to encourage the participation of persons of minority backgrounds, persons with limited-English proficiency, and persons with disabilities.

The City of Austin is committed to compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, as amended. Reasonable modifications and equal access to communications will be provided upon request. The City of Austin does not discriminate on the basis of disability in the admission or access to, or treatment or employment in, its programs and activities.

The City of Austin considers it the right of all Austin's residents to have the opportunity to provide input and comment on the use of public funds and the community's needs related to affordable housing and community and economic development.

The CPP applies to five areas of planning for the use of affordable housing, community and economic development made possible through HUD funding:

- 1) The 5-Year Consolidated Plan;
- 2) The annual Action Plan;
- 3) The Consolidated Annual Performance and Evaluation Report (CAPER);
- 4) Substantial amendments to a 5-Year Consolidated Plan and/or annual Action Plan; and
- 5) Amendments to the CPP, itself.

The City of Austin's program/fiscal year begins October 1 and ends September 30. In order to receive entitlement grant funding, the U. S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD)

# Do We Finally Wish to Get Serious?

- The War on Poverty worked. Poverty in America went down by almost 40%. In communities such as Montopolis it worked tremendously well.
- Democracy works. When properly funded and supported poor communities themselves have shown themselves to be tremendously resourceful.
- Make the Community Development Commission a Sovereign Board!

“Very often a lack of jobs and money is not the cause of poverty, but the symptom. The cause may lie deeper in our failure to give our fellow citizens a fair chance to develop their own capacities, in a lack of education and training, in a lack of medical care and housing, in a lack of decent communities in which to live and bring up their children...

Poverty is a national problem, requiring improved national organization and support. But this attack, to be effective, must also be organized at the State and the local level and must be supported and directed by State and local efforts.”

President Lyndon B. Johnson, January 8, 1964

