

# A “BRIEF” HISTORY OF COMMUNITY ACTION (1964 – 2026)

## 60th Anniversary

*Presented by Angel Zambrano, Austin Public Health/Neighborhood Services Unit  
4.4.2026*

# Community Action Network

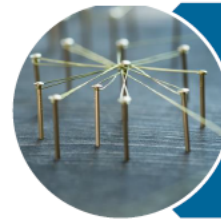
## Community Action Agencies



Connect individuals and families to approaches that help them succeed



Promote community-wide solutions to seemingly stubborn challenges



Share expertise with national, state, and local leaders looking for evidence on what works

# An Era of Hope, Opportunity, Change

- **Wednesday, August 28, 1963:** During a 200,000-person civil rights rally in at the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C., Martin Luther King, Jr. gives his famous I Have A Dream speech.
- **Tuesday, September 10, 1963:** 20 African-American students enter public schools in the U.S. state of Alabama.
- **Monday, October 14, 1963:** The term "Beatlemania" is coined by the British press.
- **November 06, 1963 :** Vietnam War begins following the November 1st coup and murder of President Ngo Dinh Diem, coup leader General Duong Van Minh takes over leadership of South Vietnam.

# An Era of Hope, Opportunity, Change

- **Friday, November 22, 1963:** In Dallas, Texas, US President John F. Kennedy is assassinated, Texas Governor John B. Connally is seriously wounded, and US Vice-President Lyndon B. Johnson is sworn-in as the 36th President of the United States.
- **Tuesday, May 19, 1964:** Vietnam War - The United States Air Force begins Operation Yankee Team.
- **Friday, May 22, 1964:** U.S. President Lyndon B. Johnson announces the goals of his Great Society social reforms to bring an "end to poverty and racial injustice" in America.
- **Friday, June 12, 1964:** South Africa sentences Nelson Mandela to life in prison.
- **Thursday, July 2, 1964:** **U.S. President Lyndon B. Johnson signs the Civil Rights Act into law.**

# President Lyndon B. Johnson & The War on Poverty

- The history of Community Action is intertwined with:
  - ❑ The War on Poverty
  - ❑ The Great Society
  - ❑ The Civil Rights Act of 1964

During his 1964 State of the Union address, President Johnson announced:

*“This administration today, here and now, declares unconditional **War on Poverty** in America.”*

# The Great Society

*“For in your time we have the opportunity to move not only toward the rich society and the powerful society, but upward to the Great Society.*

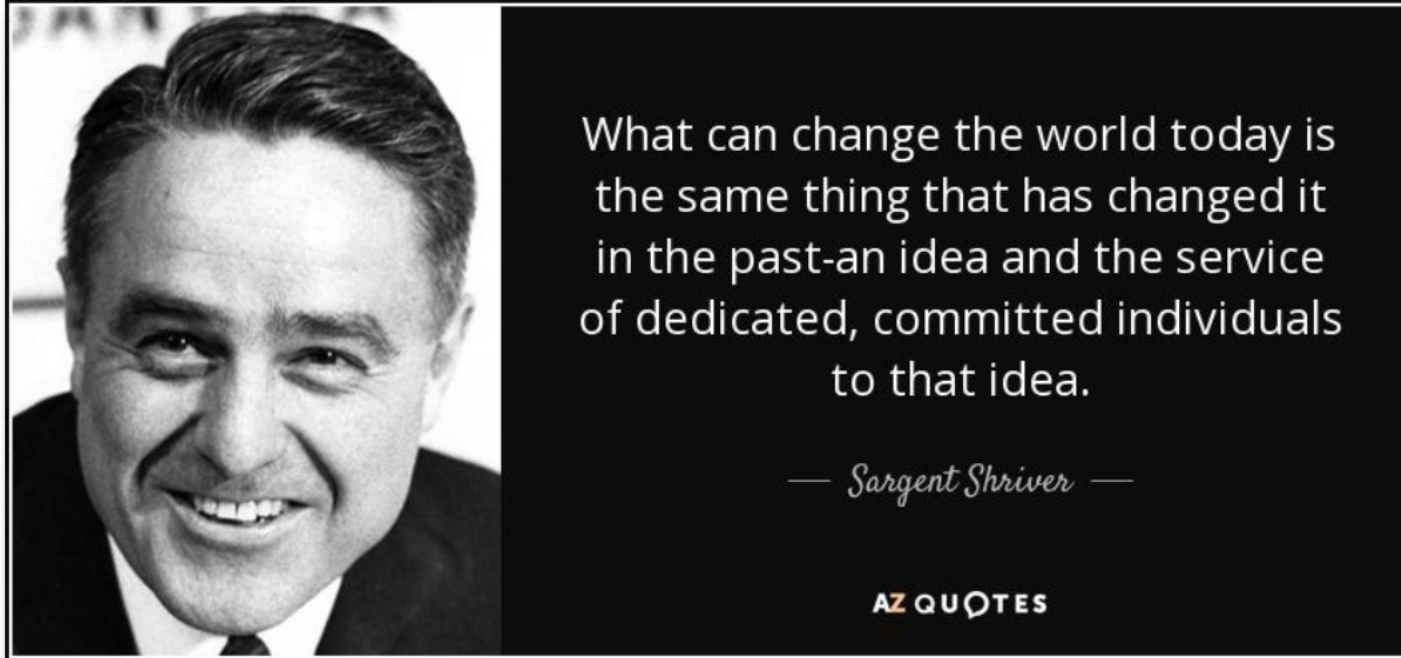
*The Great Society rests on abundance and liberty for all. It demands an end to poverty and racial injustice, to which we are totally committed in our time. But that is just the beginning.”*

~ President Lyndon B. Johnson

# The War on Poverty - 1964



# Sargent Shriver, Chair, Poverty Task Force



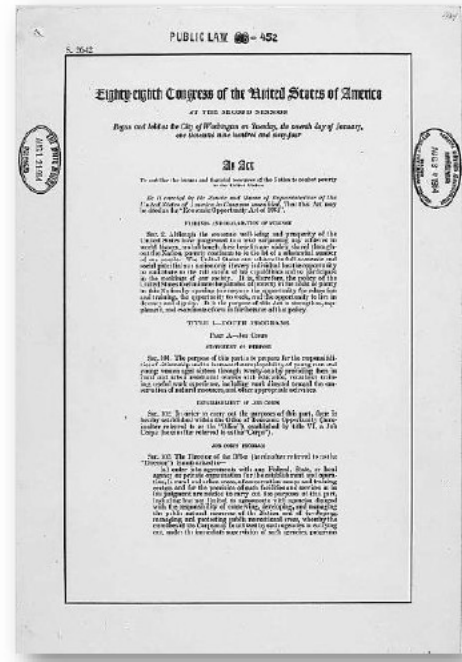
# Sargent Shriver and the History of the Community Action Movement Clip

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eelJu0\\_Z-ZU](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eelJu0_Z-ZU)

# Economic Opportunity Act of 1964

- The vehicle for accomplishing Johnson's Great Society was the EOA of 1964.
- Sargent Shriver drafted the language for the EOA of 1964.
- The legislation passed and was signed into law on August 20, 1964.
- Johnson asked Shriver to assist him in setting up the new Office of Economic Opportunity.

# August 1964-Signing of the Economic Opportunity Act



# Economic Opportunity Act of 1964, cont.

Economic Opportunity Act of 1964; Public Law 88-452 August 20, 1964

To mobilize the human and financial resources of the Nation to combat poverty in the United States. *Be it enacted by the Senate and House of Representatives of the United States of America in Congress assembled.* That this Act may be cited as the "Economic Opportunity Act of 1964".

FINDINGS AND DECLARATION OF PURPOSE SEC. 2. ...**The United States can achieve its full economic and social potential as a nation only if every individual has the opportunity to contribute to the full extent of his capabilities and to participate in the workings of our society.** It is, therefore, the policy of the United States **to eliminate the paradox of poverty in the midst of plenty in this Nation** by opening to everyone the opportunity for education and training, the opportunity to work, and the opportunity to live in decency and dignity. It is the purpose of this Act to strengthen, supplement, and coordinate efforts in furtherance of that policy.

# Economic Opportunity Act of 1964, cont.

- A cabinet level office was established, the Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO).
- This office was to coordinate all of the federal governments anti-poverty efforts and programs.
- It was also to be a laboratory for program development.

# Economic Opportunity Act of 1964, cont.

Some of the program created under the EOA of 1964 include:

- VISTA
- Job Corps
- Neighborhood Youth Corps
- Head Start
- Adult Basic Education
- Family Planning
- Community Health Centers
- Congregate Meal Preparation
- Economic Development CDCs
- Foster Grandparents
- Legal Services
- RSVP
- Legal Services
- Neighborhood Centers
- Summer Youth Programs
- AND MORE!

# The Great Society: Vision to Reality

- Johnson proposed an expansion in the federal government's role in domestic policy. In addition to the Economic Opportunity Act, Congress enacted:
- Two major civil-rights acts (1964 and 1965)
- Two education acts (1965)
- Legislation that created Medicaid, and Medicare

# Community Action Agencies

- OEO accomplished its purpose through:
  - Development and funding of community organizations
  - Creation of State Offices of Economic Opportunity (SOEO) to involve Governors in the War on Poverty
- The OEO established a direct federal to local relationship with local communities

# Community Action Agencies, cont.

- A delivery vehicle was needed at the local level
- Enter Community Action Agencies...
  - A concept.
  - A public or private organization.
  - A community process.
  - A vehicle to make change.
  - A mission

# The Mission of the CAA

- The EOA defined the purpose of a CAA\*:

*...to stimulate a better focusing of all available local, State, private, and Federal resources upon the goal of enabling low-income families, and low-income individuals of all ages, in rural and urban areas, to attain the skills, knowledge, and motivation to secure the opportunities needed for them to **become self-sufficient**.*

*\*Most CAAs are private nonprofits but some are organized as public agencies.*

# Community Action is Different

- Flexible
- Accountable
- Local Needs Assessment
- Tripartite Board Structure
  - 1/3 Democratically selected from low-income community – **Maximum Feasible Participation\***
  - 1/3 Elected Officials
  - 1/3 Private Sector

\*Big city mayors charged that maximum feasible participation of the poor “*undermined the integrity of local government*”

# Community Development Commission/Tripartite Board

- Purpose: The purpose of the board is to advise the Council in the development and implementation of programs designed to serve the poor and the community at large with an emphasis on federally funded programs.

# Community Development Commission Duties

- Collaborates with each other to develop responses to local needs.
- Structured in compliance with the CSBG Act: 1. (Tripartite Board)
- Has written procedures (Bylaws) that document a democratic selection process for low-income board members adequate to assure that they are representative of the low-income community.
- Has bylaws reviewed by an attorney every 5 years.
- Meets in accordance with the frequency and quorum requirements and fills board vacancies as set out in its bylaws.

# OEO and Community Action Support Begins to Diminish

- Critics increasingly complained that the antipoverty programs of the Great Society were ineffective and wasteful.
- After only 4 years, the Community Action network was experiencing growing pains and commitment from President Johnson waned.

# Enter President Richard Nixon

Nixon attempted to...

- Develop a guaranteed minimum income for low-income people,
- **Defund** the Community Action Agencies, and
- **Dismantle** the Office of Economic Opportunity.
- Nixon transfers a number of programs from OEO to other federal departments to administer.

# Turbulent Times for OEO

**1969:** Nixon appoints **Donald Rumsfeld** as Director of the Office of Economic Opportunity. Rumsfeld surprises and is basically supportive of OEO and works to improve its efficiency. Rumsfeld hires **Dick Cheney** and **Christy Todd Whitman** as assistants. Rumsfeld publishes CAA mission guidance.

**1973:** Nixon appoints Howard Phillips as OEO Director. Phillips sends telegrams to CAAs telling them to complete affairs and close down by June.

Phillips was unsuccessful, due to court rulings, and the President does not take Phillips recommendations to veto EOA legislation to heart. Phillips resigns 1974.

# Rumsfeld Guidance

- *To stimulate a better focusing of all available, local, state, private, and Federal resources upon the goal of enabling **low-income families**, and **low-income individuals** of all ages in rural and urban areas, to attain the skills, knowledge, and motivations and secure the opportunities needed for them to become **self-sufficient**.*

# Rumsfeld Guidance, cont.

- *In developing its strategy and plans, the CAA shall take into account the area of greatest community need, the availability of resources, and its own strengths and limitations. It should establish realistic, attainable objectives, consistent with the basic mission established in this Instruction, and expressed in concrete terms which permit the measurement of results. Given the size of the poverty problem and its own limited resources, the CAA should **concentrate its efforts on one or two major objectives where it can have the greatest impact.***

# Community Services Block Grant (CSBG)

- Community Action originated with President Lyndon B. Johnson's War on Poverty and the Economic Opportunity Act, which established the Community Action Program (CAP).
- Through CAP, public agencies and private nonprofits called Community Action Agencies were formed to promote self-sufficiency and respond to immediate social and economic needs within their communities.
- In 1981, CAP and several other funding streams were consolidated into the Community Services Block Grant (CSBG)

# CSBG con't

- 90% of the CSBG funds were to be used at the local level by CAAs
- States had the responsibility for monitoring CAAs and could spend up to 5% of the State's CSBG allocation for administrative purposes. The remaining 5% was designated for State discretionary anti-poverty funded activities.
- Any portion of the two 5% pools not spent for their purposes would revert to the CAA eligible entities or be returned unspent.

# Idealism Continues to Diminish

- In the 70s public attitudes and political attitudes moved toward blaming the poor for their problems. The poor were more and more portrayed as lazy and a tax on the broad public.
- In the 80s and into the 90s public welfare policy and politics became more focused on changing values and behaviors.
- **Newt Gingrich**, Speaker of the House during the Clinton years supported the largest increase in Community Action funding ever while supervising the cuts in many other federal social programs.

# President's Support for CSBG

- **President George Bush:**
  - CSBG continuously slated for elimination. It is seen as a duplicative program without results.
- **President Barack Obama:**
  - In State of the Union asks for a sizeable decrease in CSBG (50%)
  - *Although it supports the important goals of the CSBG program, the Administration proposes to reduce funding in order to meet fiscal targets...*

# President's Support for CSBG

- **President Donald Trump:**
  - In his Federal Budget, proposes to eliminate CSBG funding altogether.
- **President Joe Biden:**
  - The Administration supports the poverty-fighting goals of H.R. 5129, the Community Services Block Grant Modernization Act of 2022, to provide states, territories, and Tribes with resources for critical community services. This legislation will reauthorize the Community Services Block Grant (CSBG) for a decade and help ensure that communities have the tools they need to fight poverty and build economic mobility.
- **President Donald Trump:**
  - In his Federal Budget, proposes to eliminate CSBG funding altogether.

# CSBG 2026 and Beyond?





# Thank You!

*"Ours is not the task of fixing the entire world all at once, but of stretching out to mend the part of the world that is within our reach. Any small, calm thing that one soul can do to help another soul, to assist some portion of this poor suffering world, will help immensely."*

Clarissa Pinkola Estes



# Thank You

*“There is a time when the operation of the machine becomes so odious, makes you so sick at heart, that you can’t take part; you can’t even passively take part, and you’ve got to put your bodies upon the gears and upon the wheels, upon the levers, upon all the apparatus, and you’ve got to make it stop. And you’ve got to indicate to the people who run it, to the people who own it, that unless you’re free, the machine will be prevented from working at all!”*

Mario Savio