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Foreword

Elaine Werby

University of Massachusetts Boston, elaine.werby@umb.edu

Donna Haig Friedman

University of Massachusetts Boston, donna.friedman@umb.edu

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Foreword

Elaine Werby

Donna Haig Friedman

The idea for this special issue of the Journal came from Jim Canavan, former director of Community Teamwork, Inc., and we welcome the opportunity to collaborate with the Massachusetts Community Action, Inc., to mark this historic milestone.

“I come to you today with a call to arms for this Nation’s unconditional war on poverty.” These words of President Lyndon Johnson in 1964 marked the beginning of an extraordinary national effort to harness the vitality, imagination, and creativity of citizens in working to eradicate poverty. The Economic Opportunity Act called for the creation of community action programs to be developed and implemented by community action agencies with “maximum participation of the poor.” Those of us who remember and were involved in those early days of the Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO) and the community action agencies can speak of our sense of excitement and hope. So much seemed possible; funding was generous; social change seemed achievable. Forty years have brought many changes in the program, some imposed by legislation, others by the times. This volume offers perspectives on the social, political, and economic environment in which community action agencies, as well as other nonprofits, have worked over this time span. Other articles outline issues facing nonprofits generally, as well as Massachusetts’s community action agencies in particular.

In the lead article, Barney Frank remembers his first encounter with community action in those early days, and offers an appreciation of its value, even to its extension globally. While there may be different views of community, Hubie Jones reminds us that the community action programs have taught us what is required to build and sustain viable communities. With this background, two stimulating articles challenge our ideas about the current structure of our society and its meaning for disenfranchised citizens: Mimi Abramowitz and Judith Kurland document fundamental political shifts that have taken place in the past forty years that impact the missions, strategies, and effectiveness of the nonprofit sector. Abramowitz traces the rise, fall, and most recent transformations of the U.S. welfare state as a result of threats to

Elaine Werby is senior fellow at the Center for Social Policy (CSP) at University of Massachusetts Boston. Donna Haig Friedman is director of the CSP.

profitability for the “haves” in a capitalistic economy, leaving in their wake unresolved “market inequalities.” Kurland examines the phenomenon of devolution in the United States over the past forty years, with an eye to its pervasive impact on the nonprofit sector, state and local government, and those who are struggling for economic survival in our country.

Chuck Collins cites evidence of increasing inequalities between the most wealthy persons in the United States and the majority of U.S. citizens, a result of both public and corporate policy changes over the past forty years. John McDonough zeroes in on Massachusetts’s progress in healthcare. He highlights the state’s role as an innovator within the United States, and points out lessons learned from setbacks sustained over the past several decades. Looking ahead, he identifies specific opportunities for the state to accomplish the goal of healthcare coverage for all. Forty years after child poverty in America shocked and horrified Robert Kennedy, Congress, President Johnson, and U.S. citizens, leading to the “War on Poverty.” Deborah Weinstein asks the critical question: “How have children fared?” She documents progress as well as our nation’s and our community’s unfinished business for children. Noting the increasing importance of work in U.S. anti-poverty policy and given current labor market trends, business imperatives, and the work experience of low-income workers, Françoise Carré argues for a radical shift in policy if paid employment is truly to be the primary vehicle out of poverty for low-income households in America. Randy Albelda tackles the critical intersection of work and family life for low-income families in Massachusetts. Her essay complements others in this volume in which the disconnects between the demands and rewards of paid labor and of family work, that is, caring for children, elders, and/or disabled family members, are juxtaposed. Bruce Hirschfield and John Sciamanna analyze the factors that have led to significant accomplishments in childcare and suggest current challenges that must be addressed by policymakers, advocates, and parents if this progress is to be sustained. Recognizing the importance of higher education as an anti-poverty tool, Robert Woodbury examines the nation’s and the state’s progress in realizing the goal of the Higher Education Act of 1965, highlighting advances followed by two recent decades of setbacks. Elaine Werby traces changes in and consequences of federal rental assistance policies over the past forty years. Michael Stone exposes a continuing housing affordability crisis facing low-income families with children, elders and particular racial/ethnic groups in the United States. Taken together, the Werby and Stone essays provide sobering evidence of the extent to which our nation has failed to realize the 1949 Housing Act’s goal of “decent housing for all Americans.”

A series of essays documents the increasingly multicultural social environments within which community action agencies work. Miren Uriarte and Philip Granberry analyze the intersection of immigration and social policy in the United States, and the effect on immigrant communities in Massachusetts.

Jorge Capetillo-Ponce explores social and political controversies associated with increasing multiculturalism, through a case study of public debates surrounding bilingual education in Massachusetts. Paul Watanabe, Michael Liu, and Shauna Lo powerfully demonstrate that there is no monolithic version of “Asian” people in Massachusetts. There are differences in income, language, education, cultural traditions, and immigration patterns that distinguish the various groups that make up this population. These three essays suggest challenges for community action agencies in the future. For example, what does citizenship really mean in a richly textured, multicultural community context that includes immigrants who contribute to the economic and social community but are not American citizens in an official sense? How can nonprofit organizations, like community action agencies, adequately serve the myriad ethnic/cultural groups within their surrounding communities? Is there a need for, and what is the role for, distinct and separate organizations designed, led, and staffed by persons of the same racial, ethnic, and linguistic backgrounds as those being served?

Next, authors offer challenges for the nonprofit sector in promoting organizational and systems change to effectively meet community and family needs. Pablo Eisenberg exhorts nonprofit leaders to act out of a sense of a broad mission that extends beyond organizational self-interest and takes seriously the sector’s critical advocacy and “citizen mobilization” role in “strengthening government,” in promoting a reinvention of philanthropy, and in insuring integrity of sector through enhanced “public accountability.” Gus Newport honors the nonprofit sector for its unique role in ensuring family and community well-being in the face of predictable free market and government failures, while challenging the sector to do all it can to avoid being part of the problem it is trying to solve. Alice O’Connor exposes subtle and powerful forces led by the conservative right in the United States that have impacted public opinion, as well as social welfare policy and philanthropic giving. In their seminal book of 1967, *Dilemmas of Social Reform*, Peter Marris and Martin Rein wrote of the challenges of bringing about social reform in the United States, and their observations remain pertinent today.

In the final section of the issue, MASSCAP Executive Director Joseph Diamond discusses the advocacy activities of community action agencies. Jim Canavan, former Director of Community Teamwork, Inc., a community action agency in Lowell, provides an account of the range of programs run by the CAA’s and the challenges faced by his community action colleagues and all who care deeply about winning the war against poverty.

Interspersed throughout this issue are Voices of Community Action — the voices of executive directors, board members, and staff. Some are personal reflections; others describe their work or tell of the struggles of those who live with poverty. All speak to the commitment of service and change, to personal development and growth, and to the worth of their work. Their stories are

matched in the testimony of those who have received services or participated in community action programs. All of these stories bear witness to the importance of what happens on the front lines among leaders, board members, staff, and participants in community action agencies as they work to improve the quality of life for families and communities. Much can be learned from the forty-year experience of community action and the social, economic, and political environment of those years, and we hope that this volume provides some insights as we move forward together in our commitment to social change. ❁