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MASSCAP and the CAA Role in Advocating for Change

Joseph Diamond

The Massachusetts Association for Community Action, Inc. (MASSCAP) and its twenty-five member agencies act as advocates for change to meet the purpose articulated in the legislation creating them, the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964: “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.” This language synthesizes the notion of equal opportunity with the goals of self-sufficiency by asserting, for the first time in law that poverty exists and that it is possible to eliminate it.

Today there are over 1,000 community action agencies in the United States and state community action agency associations in almost every state. Here in Massachusetts, our community action agencies serve approximately 400,000 people through advocacy and a variety of programs including, but not limited to, workforce development and education, IT access and training, small business creation, early child care and education programs, , nutrition programs, senior services and youth programs, emergency food assistance, health services, homelessness prevention, affordable housing creation; home heating assistance, and weatherization assistance.

Our role in advocating for change is also based, in part, on the purpose of the Community Services Block Grant (CSBG), the source of our current core federal funding: “to provide assistance to States and local communities, working through a network of community action agencies and other neighborhood-based organizations, for the reduction of poverty, the revitalization of low-income communities, and the empowerment of low-income families and individuals in rural and urban areas to become fully self-sufficient.” Each MASSCAP member agency brings a set of beliefs, relationships, talents, and experiences as we, together, marshal our collective resources to work for changes in state and federal policies to help vulnerable people, to strengthen

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families, to build communities, and to foster economic self-sufficiency. We speak for the people we serve as we empower them to make their own way in the world. As Joseph Berry, reminds us in *A Voice for Nonprofits*, like legislators, nonprofit agencies “speak for, act for” and “look after the interests” of those who, for a variety of reasons, are not able to carry out many of the tasks of advocacy, such as appearing at legislative hearings.

While many of our advocacy efforts are focused on state policies and administrative regulations, in our efforts in the federal arena we are joined by our fellow organizations in other states. As the head of the Minnesota Community Action Association put it, “associations play a fundamental role in advocating for change. It is our role to put the ‘action’ back into community action.” The Executive Director of the Washington State Community Action Partnership, himself a leader of a recent initiative petition that tied the state’s minimum wage to the cost of living, pointed out “we learn about the effectiveness of our programs, which allows us to be even better advocates — to speak for the people we serve. We should be the kind of advocates that can make it so that people who work full time do not have to live in poverty, and that we in community action, over time, have less and less to do as more and more people become self-sufficient.” This perspective takes into account the creative tension between administering programs and advocating: one informs the other.

The programs we administer are based on those detailed in the CSBG Act: emergency services; employment and education services; housing search; income management; nutrition services. All programs and services are directed toward achieving self-sufficiency. In recent years our member agencies have expanded their activities in new and exciting directions, but always with the goal of improving the lives of those we serve. (In the article that follows, Canavan details some of these new directions.) Our advocacy efforts, then, are informed by our ability to document the outcome of our work, one client at a time. Each community action agency is required to report on the outcomes of its programs. With these data, MASSCAP and the other state associations can assess how they have changed lives, how their approaches may need to be changed, and how federal and state policies as well may need adjustment.

The changes MASSCAP has advocated for are united by a common goal: to improve the lives of low-income and working people. Often collaborating with allied organizations, we have developed and/or supported several initiatives in the past several years. A partial list includes the following:

- Working with several allied organizations and electric utilities, MASSCAP advocated successfully to include protections and savings for low-income and working people in the law that deregulates the supply of electricity;
- MASSCAP identified a flaw in the method of distribution of the Workforce Training Fund that restricted the flow of these resources to community based organizations: after MASSCAP developed legislation and met with

the state board that manages the fund, Workforce Training Fund resource distribution began to include small community based organizations;

- Working with allied early care and education groups, MASSCAP has advocated for additional resources for early care and education programs that help low-income and working families;
- As part of its overall workforce development effort, which includes policy work and research, MASSCAP is part of a Small Business Advisory Council set up as part of the 2003 economic stimulus package;
- Recently, MASSCAP, working with several state legislators, successfully advocated for state resources to be allocated for fuel assistance.

In addition to these actions, we support the adoption of the Massachusetts Self-Sufficiency Standard, issued by the Women's Union, which would change the way we think about income and what it takes to get by in Massachusetts today. Our support for this standard, like our other advocacy efforts, resonates with our role as agents of change and is based on our knowledge of the lives of the people we serve, an understanding of what programs and approaches work, and our obligation and ability to speak for our clients.

The following vignette is an example of MASSCAP's advocacy efforts:

It was close to midnight and the Massachusetts House of Representatives was about to finish debate on the governor's vetoes of some amendments in the FY2000 budget. The last veto to be considered was a provision supported by MASSCAP that would help thousands of low-income and working people cover the cost of heating their homes.

With only ten minutes to go before midnight, an unanimous House override restored the provision that allows households earning up to 200 percent of the federal poverty level to receive federal fuel assistance, also known as the Low-Income Heating Assistance Program. This action was immediately followed by the Senate vote overriding the governor's veto.

The override followed weeks of lobbying by MASSCAP's legislative agent, its executive director, and members. The overall goal of the amendment to raise the eligibility level for fuel assistance, was to bring the program to more people, recognizing that as the cost of commodities like fuel increases, households with limited incomes are less and less able to cover that cost. The underlying conviction was that the federal poverty level no longer reflects the income it takes to get by.

The change in that specific policy has helped thousands of people across the Commonwealth, and our support for it speaks to the comprehensive nature of our role in advocating for change. Based on our unique understanding of the people and communities we serve, we develop and advocate for, often working with allied organizations, changes in broad social policies or in discrete elements of programs that will either directly help the people we serve achieve self-sufficiency or help us to better serve them.

The origin of community action agencies rests in their role as advocates. We are committed to that mission and to that role — fighting for vulnerable people across the Commonwealth, speaking for them, representing their hopes and dreams until the time that they realize those dreams.✿