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Community Action in Massachusetts

Jim Canavan

In 1962 Michael Harrington's *The Other America: Poverty in the United States* dropped on Washington, D.C. like an unwelcome relative. Although successive administrations and Congresses long had ignored the oppressive poverty that characterized the nation's capital, poverty in the rest of the country was "out there," and the welfare state pretty much took care of anyone in need. That self-deception withered under the hard facts and cold research in Harrington's book. At last, poverty, in a formal way, was on the public agenda. Soon would come the social unrest attendant to racism, poverty, an unpopular war, and a stagnant economy. Harrington had charged that, "For the urban poor the police are those who arrest you. In almost any slum there is a vast conspiracy against the forces of law and order." Soon that reality would manifest itself in urban riots, strikes, and massive civil rights and anti-war demonstrations.

President John F. Kennedy reportedly was appalled by *The Other America*. Planning his campaign for re-election through 1963, Kennedy included in his itinerary a trip through Appalachia to see for himself those who, in Harrington's words, were "socially invisible to the rest of us." But first, the campaign would swing through Dallas.

Elsewhere in this journal other writers have chronicled what happened next. Congressman Barney Frank, among others, eloquently has described his history with community action from a number of perspectives. And his analysis that community action "is as valuable a principle on the international level as it has been domestically," is both prescient and precise. In Massachusetts, community action agencies (CAAs) have been especially active and effective in addressing the causes and consequences of poverty; much can be learned from the successes and failures of the Commonwealth's twenty-five CAAs; some have survived, many have thrived, and some have failed outright. Across the state, while many of us are beginning our evenings with dinner and a drink, CAA boards of directors, executive directors, staff, and volunteers are meeting to develop new strategies for dealing with the poverty in their neighborhoods.

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In short, the strength of community action in Massachusetts has been with the people who make it all work.

Initially, at least in the minds of some, CAAs (or Community Action Programs — CAPs) simply would organize local boards of directors and operate programs funded by the federal government. Funds would flow directly to the local agency, bypassing state and local government. (This changed with the block grant programs of the early 1980s; currently, few programs are funded directly from the federal government to local, community-based organizations, for example, Head Start, and President Bush wants to change that to a block grant to the states as well.) Eventually, CAAs would be the presumptive grantees for fuel assistance, weatherization assistance, the Community Services Block Grant (CSBG), Head Start, and some programs with specific constituencies, such as the Retired and Senior Volunteer Program (RSVP), and Foster Grandparents. Over time, and for a variety of reasons both specious and rational, many federal programs have been spread out over a wider array of nonprofit and for profit agencies. Today, except for being faithful to the tenets of community action, a “typical” CAA in Massachusetts defies a generic description. Instead, the strength of a community-based organization governed by a tri-partite board of directors — composed of representatives of low-income people, the private sector, and the public sector — free to make its own decisions, is realized by designing and operating programs and local initiatives that address specific, and sometimes unique, local needs. Hubie Jones, Pablo Eisenberg, and Gus Newport respectively touched upon the interdependence of peoples, the need for both “brains and guts” in governance and advocacy, and the need for nonprofits, in Newport’s words, not to “become party to the ongoing poor condition of the community.” CAAs embrace this challenge.

For instance, in an ambitious, blue-collar community like Greater Lowell, the local CAA, Community Teamwork, Inc. (CTI) must itself be ambitious and entrepreneurial. CTI operates programs and initiatives under nearly one hundred federal, state, local, and private contracts. CTI employs about five hundred people and brings approximately \$50 million new dollars annually into the local economy. The agency operates housing and shelter programs throughout northeastern Massachusetts, and administers child care referral programs southward into the Blackstone Valley. Significantly, CTI offers fiscal and other “backroom” services to smaller nonprofit agencies on a sliding fee scale (many groups pay nothing). Thus, a small, single-purpose agency can take advantage of CTI’s corporate structure for payroll, audit, human resources, fund development, and capacity development — all of which fits into CTI’s mission of helping low-income people achieve self-sufficiency.

Serving Cape Cod and the islands of Nantucket and Martha’s Vineyard, the Community Action Committee of Cape Cod and the Islands, Inc. (CACCI) takes a different tack. While actually operating relatively few programs itself, CACCI has assumed a strong advocacy role. Using its CSBG

funds to empower its constituents, CACCI effectively has created programs for other agencies to operate or, in some cases, CACCI will create and support a new non-profit to undertake a specific mission. On the Cape, leaner is not meaner — just more efficient.

Westward, in Berkshire County, the Berkshire Community Action Council (BCAC) reflects the third sector culture of that area. In Berkshire County, the nonprofit culture trends toward small, single-purpose agencies; where a super agency like CTI might be viewed with suspicion, BCAC thrives on local partnerships. While operating important energy conservation and fuel assistance programs throughout the Commonwealth's westernmost communities, BCAC also provides a transportation service vital to the economic, medical, and social health of rural Massachusetts. Again, the mission of community action in the Berkshires is well-served by staying within the local scale.

Throughout Cape Ann, where the traditional fishing industry has been decimated by overfishing and poor regulation, ACTION, Inc. has complemented its traditional programs with a workforce development program designed to help displaced fishermen train for and relocate to other industries. Working with Boston's Sailors Snug Harbor, ACTION continues to refine its program offerings to meet the often dynamic needs of Gloucester's troubled fishing industry. Additionally, ACTION staff continues to play a unique role in designing and researching new methods and technologies to conserve energy, especially in residential heating. ACTION staff effectively has advocated at the state and federal levels for policy changes that would help low-income people conserve energy and enjoy improved access to utility-sponsored energy conservation programs. Cooperating with the twenty-five member agencies of the Massachusetts Community Action Partnership (MASSCAP), ACTION has taken the lead statewide on bringing the latest energy conservation programs and technologies to low-income people in Massachusetts.

In this Journal, Bruce Hershfield and John Sciamanna review four decades of growth and change in child care. Across Massachusetts, one-third of all child care is provided by CAAs, allowing parents to find employment, confident in the knowledge that their children are thriving in safe, secure environments with programs that promote development, education, and social interaction. Massachusetts community action agencies have lead the way in developing creative practices that allow the "blending" of state, federal, and local resources to support family-friendly child care programs in a variety of settings. CAAs in Massachusetts have invested millions in state-of-the-art child care facilities, and have shared their expertise with other not-for-profit child care agencies throughout New England. In Lawrence, for example, Greater Lawrence Community Action Council (GLCAC) has developed an attractive child care center in the downtown, bringing jobs, services, and the energy of children to downtown Lawrence. CAAs are active partners in their local Community Partnerships for Children; in some cases the CAA is the lead agency.

As Michael Stone has written, “Housing affordability is thus central to the dilemmas of inequality and insecurity confronting our society.” Every CAA in Massachusetts has taken on the issue of affordable housing; once again, each agency has responded in a way best suited to its respective community. Valley Opportunity Council (VOC), serving Chicopee and Holyoke, has developed dozens of affordable single room occupancy (SRO) units. South Middlesex Opportunity Council (SMOC), based in Framingham, has taken on the challenge of serving homeless individuals across the state. ABCD in Boston has developed marvelous housing in the North End, Dorchester, and across the city. CTI and SMOC administer rental assistance programs across dozens of cities and towns; in 2002 CTI created a subsidiary, Common Ground Development Corp., to develop new housing and rehab older multi-family units across northeastern Massachusetts. South Shore Community Action Council (SSCAC) created and spun-off a regional non-profit housing agency to serve all of southeastern Massachusetts. CAAs operate Youthbuild programs, partner with Habitat for Humanity, often lead their local Continuum of Care, and continue to fight to preserve state-assisted public housing. The list goes on, but until the federal government returns to its role as provider of housing for the poor, the need simply will not be met. Housing is virtually the only public good that is available almost exclusively through the private market. CAAs, along with community development corporations, many of which were founded and continue to be supported by CAAs, struggle in vain to keep up with demand; until a publicly funded production program, at the appropriate scale, is developed, people will continue to suffer shelter poverty.

From Boston to New Bedford and Fall River, from Cape Ann to Cape Cod, from the Merrimack Valley to the Pioneer Valley, in cities and suburbs, the twenty-five community action agencies in Massachusetts work together to help low-income people move toward self-sufficiency. In Massachusetts every community is served by a community action agency; every family or individual eligible for help has access to a CAA. The twenty-five executive directors make up the board of directors of the Massachusetts Community Action Partnership (MASSCAP), which develops policy and program initiatives at the state and federal levels. MASSCAP’s workforce development committee works with the regional Workforce Investment Boards on issues relating to dislocated workers, workforce development, and one-stop career centers. MASSCAP’s information technology committee has been the leader statewide in developing policies and programs, and hosting conferences to address the “digital divide,” the phenomenon that tends to leave low-income people behind in accessing technology; virtually every CAA in Massachusetts has led a local initiative to address this issue. MASSCAP’s policy and planning committee, working with a consultant and a legislative agent, has been out front with successive governors and legislatures in promoting ideas designed to ameliorate poverty in Massachusetts. MASSCAP’s early care and education committee effectively has advocated on behalf of children; working closely with the state’s Office of

Child Care Services (OCCS), MASSCAP has been successful in addressing issues of quality and rates in child care.

Obviously, I could go on. For the past four decades, from housing to hunger, from child care to elder services, CAAs in Massachusetts have labored mightily to improve the quality of life for our low-income neighbors. The central issue is poverty. We have accomplished much, but our record is not perfect. Occasionally we have allowed executive directors to drag their agencies down with them. From time to time a board of directors will shirk its two fundamental duties: oversee the fiscal health of the agency and supervise the executive director; on a few occasions the results have been disastrous, and poor people were not served well as a result. Every once in a while our ambition gets the best of us, we lose sight of the mission, and we go astray. But the strength of community action, as noted here and elsewhere, is the people, and the people — the boards of directors, the staffs, the volunteers, and the communities we serve — will work hard to build strong agencies that remain true to the mission. Today, our twenty-five executive directors are the real deal — hard working, smart men and women with great ideas and tremendous energy. They are supported by committed boards of directors, and the work is carried out by battalions of dedicated, underpaid workers and an army of generous, great-hearted volunteers.

Forty years ago a president had a dream. President Johnson would create a Great Society, “a place where the meaning of man’s life matches the marvels of man’s labor.” This special issue of *The New England Journal of Public Policy* has provided a look back on how well we’ve done with that dream. As we go to press the U.S. Census Bureau has officially added 800,000 children to the poverty rolls, even as the federal government continues to use an outdated measure of poverty. The official War on Poverty never really has amounted to anything more than a skirmish, but President Reagan was wrong when he said, “We had a war on poverty, and poverty won.” Where it counts — on the street, in the neighborhoods, in the schools, on the job — the struggle continues. In Massachusetts, our community action agencies have helped improve the quality of life for tens of thousands of people, and we’ve created an opportunity for the poor to participate in the decisions that affect their lives. As a nation we have yet to achieve that Great Society, but on the local level we’ve built some pretty great neighborhoods, and we’ve come up with some pretty good ideas. We’ve helped people achieve self-sufficiency. We’ve strengthened families and we’ve built bridges between the public sector, the nonprofit sector, and churches. As Senator Edward M. Kennedy has reminded us, “the work goes on, the cause endures, the hope still lives, and the dream shall never die.”

Forty years — and we still have so much to do. 🌸