

*spotlight on*  
**POVERTY and OPPORTUNITY**  
THE SOURCE FOR NEWS, IDEAS AND ACTION

**Fighting Poverty through Community Action**

James Abro

Last fall, I volunteered to help dig irrigation ditches for a greenhouse in the Kula [urban farm](#) located in Asbury Park, N.J. Last year – its first year of operation – the community-run farm provided more than 300 pounds of freshly grown organic produce to its sister enterprise, the [Kula Café](#).

When we finished working, we walked over to the cafe. While we were there, a story-telling session was taking place. Both the urban farm and café are funded and sponsored by Interfaith Neighbors, a non-profit organization founded in 1988 to address the growing problem of homelessness. One of its members was reading to a group of about a dozen pre-school children from low-income families, all of whom were from the mostly black and Hispanic neighborhood.

It occurred to me while watching them that, statistically speaking, if these children grow up in the same racially polarized and economically disadvantaged neighborhood that their parents did, then a large percentage of them will experience gun violence and homicides, drug use and addiction, prostitution and incarceration.

I think we owe it to them to resurrect the Community Action Programs that were created in the 1960s to proactively address income inequality and de-facto segregation in low-income communities.

In 1964, when President Lyndon Johnson declared a War on Poverty, his advisers were aware of the inherent social dangers in generational patterns of poverty and racial polarization in rural areas and inner cities. So when it came time to draw up the [Economic Opportunity Act](#) (EOA) it included the formation of a [Community Action Agency](#) (CAA).

CAA was designed to address the specific social and economic problems facing low-income people with direct funding of community action programs. As a result, funds for CAA community action programs were required to make “maximum feasible participation” (MFP) of people living in low-income communities a priority. EOA policymakers rightly determined that people living in [acute financial distress](#) knew best what programs and policies would help others like them to achieve economic sustainability and self-sufficiency.

The War on Poverty, however, was not waged in a vacuum. It was launched during a period of intense domestic social upheaval—from civil rights protests, assassinations, and rioting, to anti-war demonstrations and violent clashes with police and the National Guard. Many in Congress feared investing government money in places where there was social unrest, which of course is where it was needed most—then and now.

Fear never makes a good footing for maintaining rational thinking or steadfast policy-making.

As a result, for the next several decades opponents of community action programs did everything in their power to undermine the purpose and implementation of the [Office of Economic Opportunities stated mandate](#): *stimulate a better focusing of all available local, state and Federal resources upon the goal of enabling low-income families and individuals of all ages in rural and urban areas to attain the skills and knowledge and motivation to secure the opportunities needed for them to become self-sufficient.*

Right out of the gate, in the late 1960s, Congress passed [Amendments](#) to the Economic Opportunity Act that reduced community administration of anti-poverty programs by requiring the establishment of boards of directors that were made up of local politicians and members of the private sector. They would then – with a two-thirds majority on these boards – oversee the administration of community-run programs.

[President Nixon's](#) 1973 budget dropped funding for OEO's Community Action Programs. Court suits, however, forced the president to spend funds appropriated by Congress. President Gerald Ford in 1974

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terminated the Office of Economic opportunity and replaced it with the [Community Services Amendment \(CSA\)](#). Although CSA maintained many of the successful programs created by OEO – such as Job Corps, Volunteers in Service to America (VISTA), Adult Basic Education, and others – CAA’s original goal of providing low-income people with greater opportunities to become economically self-sufficient and leaders in their own communities was all but abandoned.

President Reagan’s [Omnibus Reconciliation Act](#) was the final nail in the coffin for community based anti – poverty initiatives. The Act slashed funding for social programs. Congress then replaced direct federal funding for community action programs with block grants administered by states. The block grants too often ended up as a Trojan Horse sent in to destroy what was left of community-based anti-poverty programs, which it effectively did.

The absence of federal investment in community-based programs is at the heart of the social unrest we continue to witness in many low-income communities across America. An incidence of gross police misconduct may trigger violent reactions, but the root causes – economic and social disenfranchisement - were already there.

During the 1970s, I benefited directly from a CAA program: The Summer Youth Employment Program. When I would return home for the summer from an out-of-state college to the Newark area of New Jersey, I needed to find work. Jobs then, like now, were not easy to find. The place where I lived was equally populated by whites and blacks, but for the most part we lived in separate neighborhoods, worlds, cultures. These kinds of programs not only provided us with much needed work and wages; they also forced us to interact with one another.

Blacks and whites worked together for hours every day; something most of us would not have done otherwise. Plus, the work programs were run by members of our community. If anyone showed up for work with a poor attitude or shabbily dressed, they’d be chastised and sent home. It would not be politically correct, or even safe, for someone from outside the community to talk to inner-city young people like that. These community-based programs were crucibles for the kinds of change America needed then, and now. Not just as tools for revitalizing economic activity in economically disadvantaged communities; but, equally as important, for providing ways of enhancing social integration in racially polarized neighborhoods.

If Community Action Programs had been enacted when they were proposed there’s a good chance the violence that has erupted in places like Ferguson and Baltimore and Baton Rouge and other low-income communities might not have been so pronounced.

I feel we owe it to those who forged the Economic Opportunity Act and Community Action Programs to keep up their visionary work in our communities -- with or without government support and financing.

*James Abro is the author of Facing Homelessness. He is the founder of Advocate for Economic Fairness and [32 Beach Productions](#). He works locally with community-based anti-poverty groups, and nationally as an advocate for poor peoples’ rights. His articles have appeared in The Nation, Talk Poverty, Rebelle Society, Common Dreams and other media outlets He is an active member of the Kairos Center for Religion, Rights and Social Justice.*

For more information about Interfaith Neighbors’ economic renewal programs contact: [info@interfaithneighbors.org](mailto:info@interfaithneighbors.org).

Editor’s Note: This article is part of a new effort at Spotlight on Poverty and Opportunity to feature reported journalism as part of its efforts illuminate news and trends in the field to promote a bipartisan dialogue. To submit pieces, please contact Bill Nichols at [Nichols@TFreedmanconsulting.com](mailto:Nichols@TFreedmanconsulting.com).

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