The War on Poverty: Where Do We Stand Today?

President Johnson’s War on Poverty was launched more than 40 years ago, in 1964. The years that followed were a fertile time for people who sought change at the very roots of our civil system.

Some of the ‘War’s’ most powerful legacies are the Community Action Agencies (CAAs), created by the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964 and authorized by the Community Services Block Grant Act. These CAAs have had an enormous impact on the lives of millions of people; the goal has always been to reduce poverty through education, empowerment, training, advocacy, revitalizing homes and neighborhoods, encouraging self-sufficiency—giving a leg up.

My own housing career started in the Fauquier County Community Action Agency in Warrenton, Virginia. Over two years we built five homes using Department of Agriculture programs. It also gave me a close connection to CAAs which continues today.

My goal in devoting this issue of My View to CAAs is to share what I’ve learned about their evolution over the past four decades, through individual stories in communities across Washington State. I was particularly interested in how these organizations got started, where they are now and where they’re headed, and how they’re addressing the needs of their communities.

CAAs provide services to more than 13 million low-income people annually in 96 percent of U.S. counties. There are nearly 30 CAAs in Washington State; I regret I don’t have the space to talk about the accomplishments of all of them.

One of the greatest strengths that CAAs offer to their communities is the breadth of services they’re able to provide. They have the ability to integrate resources, to approach individuals’ needs holistically in an effort to help them construct long-term solutions—not just temporary fixes.

Their longevity is important, too. Over the years, these organizations have been able to grow deep roots in their communities, getting to know their evolving needs and building relationships. The articles that follow profile three CAAs, in Bellingham, Seattle, and Walla Walla, and one OIC, the Yakima-based Opportunities Industrialization Center of Washington, which is completely in tune with the spirit of CAAs as agents of positive change.

Still Fighting the War on Poverty—in Bellingham

Kay Sardo calls herself a "Silverback." In the wilds of Africa, that’s the gray-backed gorilla whose experience, wisdom and resourcefulness make him the respected leader of the troop. In Kay’s case, it means she’s been engaged in the War on Poverty since its inception and continues to lead the fight today as executive director of the Opportunity Council in Bellingham, Washington.

The Opportunity Council administers Head Start, as well as programs to feed, clothe, house, and help people find jobs in Whatcom, San Juan and Island counties in northwestern Washington State. The Council was founded in 1965—they will be celebrating their 40th anniversary in November—and Kay has been at the helm in Bellingham since 1995.

STARTING UP HEAD START

Kay’s perspective is fascinating because she literally was there at the beginning. She worked at the Bank Street College of Education in New York City when that institution was developing the original guidelines for the federal Head Start program. As Kay
recalls, “Head Start came out of the work that women did during the Second World War, developing childcare cooperatives to help the mothers who had gone to work to support the war effort. A lot of knowledge was gained about early childhood education, which became the basis for the design of Head Start.”

After that she worked at the Community Action Agency in New York City as assistant commissioner for programs. In the mid-sixties, historic moments were coming in quick succession. Kay remembers that John Kennedy was developing the outlines for the "Great Society," prior to his assassination. One of Lyndon Johnson’s first actions on assuming the presidency was to meet with Martin Luther King, Jr. and assure him that the war on poverty would be one of his highest priorities. He kept his word, passing the Civil Rights and Economic Opportunity Acts in 1964 and the creation of Medicare, the Voting Rights Act and founding the department of Housing and Urban Development in 1965.

HELPING PEOPLE FIND A VOICE
Looking back on these programs and the role of community action agencies in implementing them, Kay says, “We have a history of being the safety net for low-income people, but also having boards where low-income people were being trained to have a voice in their community.”

Of course the War on Poverty involved the allocation of a huge amount of money. In addition to Head Start, there were other massive programs like VISTA and the Neighborhood Youth Corps. Not surprisingly, issues quickly arose involving the allocation of monies and oversight of programs. The Green Amendment, passed in 1967, mandated the inclusion of local elected officials on the boards making the funding decisions. This continues today. The boards of community action agencies are one-third local citizens, one-third low-income people, and one-third elected officials. Although the Greene Amendment reduced the autonomy of the CAAs, Kay prefers to focus on the good that resulted: “In the effort to help low-income people help themselves, it doesn’t matter who’s in charge. One of the advantages of having elected officials on our board is that they learn what works and what doesn’t in helping low-income people. I can depend on our elected officials to speak for low-income people because they’re able to talk with them when they attend our board meetings.”

The next big challenge came in the 1980s. The Reagan administration instituted a system of block grants, which effectively reduced support for domestic social programs by 25-30%. Characteristically, Kay finds the silver lining here as well. In this case, it was the opportunity to develop a strong working relationship with CTED. “This was a change and a challenge,” Kay asserts. “CTED took it on and they are a wonderful partner for us. When I came here, one of the first things I did was to meet them in Olympia, and I was greeted with open arms.”

VOLUNTEERS AND PARTNERS
To supplement government money, Kay says that smart utilization of local resources is the key to making the programs work. For example, Everett Sanders, the first director of the Opportunity Council, came out of retirement to assume the reins. This is actually fairly common: Skilled individuals taking on community action responsibilities as a post-retirement project.

Utilization of volunteers is a key component at all levels. In Head Start, parent volunteers often learn to read and write English while they are helping in classrooms. The Opportunity Council’s feeding program, Maple Alley Inn, has had the same people volunteering their time for more than 20 years. The community also makes a big volunteer commitment to its school children, donating school supplies “to make sure that nobody in Bellingham goes to school the first day without a backpack and the appropriate supplies.”

Collaboration with religious institutions is also important. Kay points out that Head Start’s philosophy is to locate itself in the heart of communities; in practice, this means the program frequently operates out of neighborhood churches. In Bellingham, the Opportunity Council organized a coalition of more than 30 congregations to form the Interfaith Community Health Center, which is...
now an independent entity.

Businesses also are available as partners. The restaurants in Bellingham work with the Opportunity Council annually in the “Dine Out For Maple Alley Inn” initiative. During this period, the restaurants contribute 20% of their receipts to Maple Alley Inn. The community pitches in by patronizing the restaurants. “You can’t find a place in the parking lots, and the lines stretch out the door.”

The Commission, too, has had a role in supporting Opportunity Council efforts. In 1998, we helped finance Dorothy Place, a 21-unit transitional housing facility for women and children who are survivors of domestic violence. We also assisted the Opportunity Council’s efforts to purchase and refurbish their own administrative building. This was a particularly gratifying project as their old headquarters were on an upper floor in a building that wasn’t even ADA accessible.

HELPING PEOPLE HELP THEMSELVES
As you hear Kay tell her story, you realize why community action agencies have managed to survive—and succeed—over four decades. As Kay herself puts it: “The best part of being a Silverback is you get to look back on what has been achieved. The initiatives launched in the ’60s really have come to fruition. Every time I hear the voices of my fellow community action directors, I hear a reflection of that original energy directed toward helping people who want to help themselves.”

Karen Ekdahl is executive director of the Bellingham Childcare and Learning Center, which partners with the Opportunity Council to provide HeadStart and Early HeadStart programs for families in Whatcom County.

Walla Walla’s Blue Mountain Action Council is a prime example of how much good can come to a community from broad-based efforts that reach across traditional boundaries. Founded in 1966 by concerned citizens, advocacy groups, local churches, and political leaders, BMAC has expanded its reach since its early beginnings. But this community action agency continues to pursue the same basic goals—that of alleviating poverty and its impacts, advocating for community members who need support, and encouraging greater levels of independence and self-sufficiency, where possible, from the many people who get that support.

Walla Walla County’s population for example has seen significant growth and is headed toward 60,000.

“One of the beauties of living in a smaller community, and being one of the major partners in trying to assist others, is that we have access directly to resources, or we build partnerships with other organizations that have those resources,” Steven says.

From the very beginning, BMAC, which serves Walla Walla, Columbia, and Garfield counties, has had an emphasis around employment and training. During Steven’s tenure, BMAC has expanded its focus in many ways. “Certainly, our sophistication and pro-

Coming Together: Walla Walla’s Blue Mountain Action Council Helps Bring Out the Best in Its Community
Coming Together: Walla Walla’s Blue Mountain Action Council Helps Bring Out the Best in Its Community, continued

fessionalism have improved,” says Steven. “But we’ve always had a role in advocating for lower-income people on all three levels—the community level, across the state, and nationally—on behalf of issues that affect them.”

FOCUS ON HOUSING HAS GROWN
Since the early 1990s, housing concerns have gotten increasing attention from BMAC’s leadership. Reports Steven, “In 1994, the board and staff did some strategic planning and spent the better part of a year training consultant facilitators. We reached out throughout the community, and spent a lot of time listening to partners, community players, residents.” The consensus they reached was that there was a strong need for BMAC to play a role in special-needs housing. Under that rubric is included addressing homelessness, along with the needs of developmentally and physically disabled people, low-income seniors, and the chronically mentally ill.

Housing remains a big focus of BMAC’s agenda. Its board just spent the last two meetings talking exclusively about affordable housing.

BMAC’s first venture into constructing housing took place in 1997. This duplex, the King Shelter, is still used today as a shelter for the homeless. That housing was the first of BMAC’s current 10 duplex properties—20 homes—that have been built or purchased for special-needs housing. BMAC works closely with Valley Residential, another local nonprofit, that leases and manages some of these properties and cares for the developmentally disabled individuals who reside there. In addition, BMAC, with the help of HUD financing and other partners, just completed an 8-unit apartment building to house people with chronic mental illness.

And initial talks are underway concerning helping to sponsor an Oxford house, a self-governing home for recovering alcoholics transitioning back into the community and the workforce.

Currently, BMAC is also working with approximately 15 families to help them to transition out of homelessness. BMAC is able to assist these families for up to two years with decreasing financial involvement, providing rental homes. The goal is to help wage earners to integrate back into the community, with a job or sufficient training to obtain a job—“to move on to self-sufficiency,” says Steven.

Another important focus for Steven and BMAC is working with people to improve their current housing. Nearly a decade ago, BMAC launched a revolving loan program to help homeowners rehabilitate their homes. These modest loans range in interest from 0-3%. “The notion here,” Steven describes, “is that the most affordable housing that individuals have is where they currently live. We want to make sure that it’s livable, comfortable—and that it retains value.”

The work has ranged from putting in foundations to replacing roofs, upgrading electricity, and fixing bathrooms. Well over 100 loans are currently in place. Washington State has been a supportive partner of this program, as well as the Donald and Virginia Sherwood Trust, a local community trust.

Steven is quick to credit Jon Martin, who was the housing services director at BMAC before taking a housing-related position at Opportunity Council in Bellingham last year. “We worked together for about 24 years, and he played an integral role in many of Blue Mountain’s housing efforts.”

STRONG PARTNERSHIPS
Steven emphasizes the importance of strong partnerships in all of Blue Mountain’s endeavors. He points to the local school system and three nearby colleges, along with WorkSource Walla Walla, DSHS, the Walla Walla Housing Authority, as well as other government organizations and private nonprofits. “We could not do it without our...
partners. From our county commissioner leadership to county departments to other nonprofits. The city of Walla Walla, our largest municipality, plays a very positive role,” he says.

“We’ve developed strong working relationships with many organizations, some of them over the past 25 years and more. Some of the same individuals are involved as well. I’ve worked with the president of Walla Walla Community College, Steven VanAusdle, all 28 years I’ve been with BMAC. It’s that kind of informality that makes this a nice community, and it helps to cut through bureaucratic processes or time delays.”

Encouraging volunteerism is also very important to BMAC’s mission. Volunteers work in BMAC’s literacy program, legal assistance program, food distribution services for eight local pantries, and food drives. BMAC is a contractor with community and national service through Washington State for AmeriCorps. BMAC’s volunteer ombudsmen visit, resolve complaints, and advocate on behalf of residents of nursing homes and other long-term care facilities.

In all, BMAC averages about 55 different contract funding sources per year in its many programs, in addition to United Way funding, private donations, and other kinds of community support.

What lies ahead? “In many respects,” Steven concludes, “it’s a very exciting time. Sometimes the challenges of decreased funding and added needs bring out the best in people. I think that’s the opportunity we have locally—to come together.”

One of the challenges of directing a community action agency is the near certainty that, sooner or later, you’ll face cuts in the support you receive from the federal government. Then you’re forced to scramble, to become more efficient, do more with less, and locate other sources of funds. To survive over a long period of time requires tenacity, and nobody exemplifies this quality more than Henry Beauchamp, executive director of OIC of Washington.

In fact, one of Henry’s great stories is about how Dr. Leon H. Sullivan, founder of the first OIC in 1964, reacted to news of revenue sharing under the Nixon Administration. According to Henry, Dr. Sullivan said, “I don’t care what they do with the money; they can take it and throw it in with the sharks. If they do, we’ll get out there and swim with the sharks to make sure OIC gets its share of the money.”

**“Swim with the Sharks”: Opportunities Industrialization Center of Washington**

**HENRY BEAUCHAMP**
Executive Director, Opportunities Industrialization Center of Washington

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**FOUNDING YAKIMA VALLEY OIC**

One aspect of tenacity is knowing how to seize an opportunity when it presents itself. Henry’s early career included stints at a community action agency, Job Corps and then as director of Southeast Community Center, a multi-service center in Yakima. A colleague in Olympia provided an introduction to Jim Williams, director of Seattle OIC, which happened to be hosting the OIC national conference that year. Henry attended, heard Leon Sullivan speak … and the rest is history.

“I liked his methodology. I liked his delivery. I liked what he had to say,” Henry recalls. “In particular I liked the concept of...”

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self-help. A hand up, not a hand out. Dr. Sullivan had a real passion for people; he believed that the people we serve always come first.”

Inspired by Sullivan, Henry didn’t waste any time: “Before I left that meeting I made an inquiry as to how we could get an OIC in Yakima.” Fortuitously, Henry’s interest was kindled just at the time when the Department of Labor had allocated $10 million to establish 40 new OICs around the country. In September 1970, Henry became the director of the 100th OIC in the U.S., Yakima Valley OIC, with a $156,000 grant to provide job training for unemployed or underskilled workers in the area.

Obviously, the scope of work expanded over time. Under Henry’s leadership, Yakima Valley OIC evolved to provide services in the Tri-Cities, Moses Lake, Wenatchee, Ellensburg, Cle Elum, Sunnyside, Mt. Vernon, and Seattle. As a result, the agency changed its name to OIC of Washington in 2003.

OIC, CAA, LPA: WHAT’S THE DIFFERENCE?
At this point, you may be wondering why I am writing about an OIC in a newsletter dedicated to community action agencies. The question has a two-part answer.

First, both CAAs and OICs are dedicated to helping poor people become more self-sufficient. Perusing the OIC of Washington’s mission statement makes it clear that the goals and strategies are identical for all intents and purposes: “The Mission is to help in the elimination of unemployment, poverty, and illiteracy so that people of all colors and creeds can live their lives with greater dignity. The Mission includes the provision of educational and human services, also economic development, and services to secure and provide safe, decent, and affordable housing to eligible participants and residents in the state of Washington.”

Second, OIC of Washington is, in fact, connected to the CAA network in its role as a Limited Purpose Agency (LPA) administering grants for the Office of Community Services (OCS). Henry assumed this responsibility in 1986 when OCS eliminated its regional offices and needed local assistance. Typically, this started out as a small assignment—$100,000 divided between three recipients—but grew over time.

Today, OIC of Washington operates 24 separate programs with an operating budget of $12 million. The main emphases are employment training and affordable housing. But the agency also operates food banks and health clinics, and provides energy assistance, conservation training, weatherization, minor home repair services and lead paint remediation. OIC of Washington also operates a farm-worker training program and a nursing home, which are registered as separate entities.

QUALITY HOUSING
OIC of Washington got involved in housing about eight years ago, when the director of the Yakima Housing Authority became ill and requested assistance. The project in question was a Youthbuild grant, which required the agency to train high school dropouts in construction, and make sure they received a GED at the same time. In accepting the responsibility, Henry recalls, “we said, ‘If we’re going to build housing, we want it to be good enough that we’d live in it ourselves.’ Our philosophy is to build something decent, to do it the right way, so people will have newfound dignity in the housing stock they now enjoy.”

A MODEL FOR SUCCESS
OIC of Washington has a staff of 186 individuals, plus an additional 150 working at the nursing home in Seattle. By every measure, it is one of the largest agencies of its kind in the country.

However, Henry feels that size isn’t the best measure of their success. He’s more concerned with quality—and the outcomes experienced by individuals in the programs. He takes great pride in recognizing young people who have graduated from OIC training programs to get good jobs. There are some remarkable stories: two dropouts who put in the work and were able to get jobs at Microsoft; another who became an electrical engineer; and most telling, a former gang member who went on to become a surgeon. OIC of Washington has been recognized as having one of the top-performing job training programs in the state, and they’ve received national kudos as well.

Chris Link, Director of Housing and Weatherization, OIC of Washington, visits the “Excel High School.”
For the vast majority of us, a home means far more than a roof over our heads. Home is also inextricably caught up with being part of a community—a place where we count for something, and where we share values. This is what lies at the core of El Centro de la Raza in Seattle. Like its sister CAAs, El Centro does much for the good of its community in terms of a host of service areas that meet basic needs for lower-income people, including housing, education, nutrition, healthcare, and childcare.

But this organization’s philosophy takes the notion of community and care much further. El Centro de la Raza is an actual, physical community, a center for its constituents to go to and participate in forums and classes, and connect with needed services. And, probably more to the point, this organization’s principles embody a very strong identity—that of champion of human rights, champion of multi-racial unity, and champion in particular of the Latino community.

In other words, if you’re going to fight a war on poverty, you have to address poverty’s root causes. You have to involve yourself in, in El Centro Executive Director Roberto Maestas’ words, “extraordinarily diverse areas—human rights, civil rights, policy advocacy, human services, culture.”

You also have to be tireless and tenacious. “You name it, we do it, it’s a three-ring circus. It’s the best way I can describe it,” Roberto laughs.

EL CENTRO’S ORIGINS IN VIETNAM WAR-ERA ACTIVISM
If you lived in or near Seattle in the fall of 1972, you probably remember how El Centro de la Raza got its start. El Centro was born when a few dozen frustrated idealists occupied an abandoned elementary school in Seattle’s Beacon Hill neighborhood for three months.

“I was the director of an anti-poverty program that got eliminated,” Roberto recalls. “The Nixon administration had to make a major decision. I think it’s relevant to us today: Do we continue the war on poverty, or do we continue the war in Vietnam? They chose the war in Vietnam. They froze hundreds of anti-poverty programs because the budget wasn’t there. Our response to it was to dramatize the contradiction. And I think after 33 years, history has absolved us—in terms of having taken the building and said: ‘We want to create a truly multi-racial center for people of all races,’ which is what El Centro de la Raza means.”

When Roberto and the other protesters occupied the building, they didn’t have a cent or a government mandate. And they had no idea what the authorities would do. “All we brought was a yearning to build community. To create a sense of belonging, focused primarily on the practically invisible Latino community, but with a clear sense that we were all in this together.”

After successfully winning final approval from Seattle’s mayor, El Centro’s leaders had a huge task ahead in what Roberto jokingly calls “this huge three-story white elephant.”
My View

From Kim Herman, Executive Director

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El Centro de la Raza: Still True to Its Roots, continued

Striking murals grace the walls of El Centro de la Raza. The organization is currently undergoing a complete renovation of its 100-year-old home.

We didn’t know a lot about administration. None of us who led the occupation had the formal education to create an infrastructure.” But, based on El Centro’s philosophical tenets, volunteers and staff have continued to build a responsive organization. After 33 years, El Centro’s reach is considerable. This is an abridged list of the organization’s current services to the community:

- **Human Services**: housing and rental assistance, transitional housing, food distribution programs, senior programs, basic healthcare plans, advocacy, translation services.

- **Education and Skill Building**: classes and programs in homeownership education and financial literacy, economic development, job creation and training, English as a second language, job readiness, US citizenship.

- **Child and Youth Programs**: after school care, mentoring, poetry classes, child development programs, parenting classes, youth leadership programs.

But it’s a fourth functional area of El Centro’s work, that of community building, that truly sets it apart. The center hosts and exhibits art, and sponsors forums and nationally and internationally known speakers on topics that connect with its mission—such as the struggles faced by developing countries, ethnic and racial equality, peace, empowerment, justice. El Centro also hosts delegations to and from other countries. And its leaders are dedicated to grassroots organizing, social education, and voter education and registration.

**ADVOCACY FOR CORE VALUES**

For Roberto, in one sense at least, relatively little has changed since El Centro’s founding. The organization’s core principles, hammered out early in its history, are frequently revisited. “We do not allow ourselves to forget our history—the history of this organization,” he says. “We repeat, reexamine, dialogue continually. We are convinced if people don’t know where they’ve been, they cannot know where they are—much less where they’re going.”

El Centro’s 12 core principles continue to serve as its moral compass. From a practical standpoint, the principles are useful because they give all stakeholders a very clear sense of El Centro’s mission and core values. They also give Roberto the mandate to speak for the organization on legislative issues without having to check in constantly with his board. He cites last month’s vote by the King County Council on a proposed tax levy for services limited to veterans as an example. The levy was divisive, and a coalition of social service providers and churches spoke out against it, including El Centro.

“We examined that proposal, and concluded, by reviewing the principles of our organization, that it didn’t fit,” Roberto says. “To single out a sector for a special levy—the argument was not compelling enough for us.” Where is El Centro headed? “We’ve been talking about it a lot,” Roberto affirms. “We think that the highest priority for the next decade is for communities of color to build a political coalition that focuses primarily on holding elected officials accountable. Because we are a 501(c)3 organization, we can’t endorse candidate X over Y. But we have an ad hoc committee that has been putting out a recommended ballot.” Roberto believes that it’s critical for community-based organizations to educate their constituents about the legislative candidates who are the most committed, responsible and effective—and who will advocate for their concerns.

Roberto and El Centro are also dedicated to encouraging a new generation of leaders and advocates through classes, mentoring, and recognition. In 2002, the organization held a major celebration to mark its 30th anniversary. The theme was “Honoring the New Generation of Leaders.” They singled out 30 young people who have been influenced by El Centro de la Raza and are giving back to their community. “Our most valuable asset is our volunteers,” Roberto affirms. “From students in college and high school, elders, retired people, children—people of all ages are critical to our achievements and our survival.”

The Washington State Housing Finance Commission is a publicly accountable, self-supporting team dedicated to increasing housing access and affordability and to expanding the availability of quality community services for the people of Washington. No taxpayer dollars were used to produce this document.