

ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY ACT AMENDMENTS OF 1967 1463

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To criticize OEO and to recommend a number of changes in the programs and policies of this agency is by no means to deny the very substantial accomplishments of the Office of Economic Opportunity. Perhaps most significant among its achievements has been its sponsorship of several hundred Community Action agencies, some of which have provided exciting and real opportunities for poor persons and their selected representatives to participate in a variety of community programs including Neighborhood Action Councils, Neighborhood Service Centers, Credit Unions, Headstart and Day Care Centers, etc. There is no question that the Community Action Program authorized under Title II of the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964, provided the impetus for significant positive changes in the nature of these services, their location, and the types of persons involved in the dispensing of same. Thus, for example, these programs have sought to decentralize and more effectively coordinate social welfare services. They have been in the vanguard of the movement to develop a wide variety of non-professional job opportunities as Headstart Aides, Public Health Aides, Neighborhood Aides, etc.

Despite these very real accomplishments, the Economic Opportunity Act is a misnomer, and the agency established to wage the massive "War Against Poverty" declared by the President in 1964, has been prevented from the beginning from seriously carrying out this mission. Rather than authorizing direct ways of improving the economic status of poor persons through jobs, better housing, and economic support programs such as family allowances, the OEO Act primarily offers a cluster of welfare, training, and educational services. Although Title II permitted sponsorship of income and job producing Neighborhood Economic Development Corporations, few such enterprises have been launched with OEO funds. The small business program authorized under Title IV of the Act is a notable casualty. This program was crippled by means tests restrictions which virtually ensured its failure.

After the widely broadcasted promises of a War Against Poverty, the failure of local Community Action Programs to provide jobs, improved housing, and tangible economic opportunities has sometimes led to a kind of contamination and distortion of the programs and services which were provided. Often, as a consequence of the scarcity of new opportunities, the most vocal and active members of the Poverty Communities have sought and found jobs with Community Action Agency itself. As Headstart Aides, or as Public Health Aides this did not matter. But, when these persons were sent forth as Community organizers, Community stimulators, etc., seeking to build Neighborhood Boards and stimulate "Community Action," the response of many of their neighbors not so fortunate to have had their economic circumstances so immediately and strikingly improved by the poverty program, has ranged from apathy to cynicism.

In the absence of large scale programs providing substantial investment for the development of jobs, new housing, and other tangible community improvements, a selfish scramble of the new available new jobs is to be expected. However, this fact hardly creates the climate out of which efforts to organize volunteer groups of the indigenous poor for altruistic community action can develop.

The amount of money made available for locally designed and sponsored programs has been substantially reduced to provide funds for pre-packaged programs directly administered by OEO. Some of these such as Headstart, have proven popular if but tenuously connected to any realistic and tangible concept of economic opportunity, while others such as the Job Corps, can be proven to be almost completely irrelevant to the needs of the persons for whom they are intended. As one observer has commented, "The Job Corps may be a good market for industry, but it is not working very well for the youngsters who are barely getting into the army" (after a course of training in a Job Corps Camp). Estimates of per capita cost of the Job Corps program have ranged as high as \$11,000. It would have been interesting to see what an enterprising street youth with volunteer guidance from a mature businessman could have done with that amount of money in setting up a neighborhood business venture. Conceivably, several of them could have pooled their \$10,000 economic development grants to establish a youth canteen, street academy, day care center, or family camp which would have not only provided the type of training opportunity available at Job Corps Camps, but could have also become the foci for community development efforts.