

3308 ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY ACT AMENDMENTS OF 1967

We hold that poverty is no longer forced upon us by the fact of scarcity. The Interreligious Committee declares:

"that the minimum economic goal of the United States must be adequate food, clothing, housing, medical care, education, and social security for every individual and family. The achievement of this goal requires vigorous and positive action, both by all levels of government and by a multitude of private groups and individuals serving according to their abilities and opportunities."

We of the Interreligious Committee have been pleased by the vigorous beginning by the Office of Economic Opportunity in meeting its responsibility to eradicate poverty among the poor of this country. We wholeheartedly subscribe to the findings and declarations of purpose of the Congress of the United States as stated in Section Two of the Economic Opportunity Act of 1944:

"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."

We have been impressed not only by the stated goal, but by the initial steps taken toward the achievement of that goal. The multiplicity of programs, reaching all age groups and the vast diversity of needs among the poor, have been not only conceived but rapidly put into action. While fully supporting the objectives of the Economic Opportunity Act and while acknowledging that an honest and sincere start has been made to eliminate poverty in our nation, we recognize that some of the hopes which were raised by the passage of this legislation could not be fulfilled, and thereby, frustration and criticism of the Office of Economic Opportunity have been created. Much of this criticism is not realistic. Although we can understand and sympathize with those who show impatience, we are concerned, that the results of criticism and impatience be constructive. We believe that criticism should lead to greater progress rather than less effort. It has been unfortunate, and a setback to the war on poverty, that many programs have had to be curtailed or eliminated because of the lack of funds. These funding cutbacks have undermined programs, lowered the morale of staff, and in general, created antagonism among the poor.

We believe that the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964, as amended, has resulted in the building of solid foundations from which further gains in the elimination of poverty can be realized. The programs under this Act made possible by the policy of our government and legislation passed by the Congress, are to be seen across the country. The community action agencies out of which come many of the programs for the elimination of poverty represents the "launching pad" from which new thrusts must come if poverty is to be eliminated.

In many communities across the country religious groups are cooperating in programs made possible by the Economic Opportunity Act. We have firsthand knowledge of the effectiveness of many programs. We have seen first hand the ability of poor people, when given a chance, to take leadership roles in developing their own programs. We are pleased by positive results of Headstart, Upward Bound, Legal Services, VISTA, and the Job Corps.

We are confident that the present structure of the OEO provides the necessary focus under which the above mentioned programs, as well as others, can best be carried out. The Office of Economic Opportunity should be the single agency of government charged with coordination and ongoing comprehensive assessment of all anti-poverty programs within the federal government. It is imperative, from our view, that the mandate to the Director of the Office of Economic Opportunity to be responsible for all anti-poverty programs must be fully implemented. In other words, the OEO should be the one agency of the federal government which carries the basic responsibility for our national effort to eliminate poverty.

One of the major reasons for our belief that the OEO should continue to function as it has in the past is that it provides a champion for the poor and it is much more likely to attempt new and innovative programs than older established agencies. We have been impressed by the Headstart programs and their involvement of the poor in leadership capacity. We are convinced that efforts toward self-determination in community action programs have been very effective in a number of areas. We have seen the results of innovation and experimentation which have provided positive programs toward the elimination of poverty. We support the excellent achievements of the Job Corps in attempting to deal with almost impossible problems.