



# Community Action as Durable Collective Power: Revisiting Maximum Feasible Participation's Legacies to Deepen Democracy Today

*Sophie Jacobson*

Empowering Democracy Initiative White Paper  
[www.democracyempowered.org](http://www.democracyempowered.org)

# Community Action as Durable Collective Power

---

*Revisiting Maximum Feasible Participation's Legacies to Deepen Democracy Today*

Sophie Jacobson, PhD

Empowering Democracy Initiative & Roosevelt Institute

July 15, 2026

## I. Executive Summary

Community Action Agencies (CAAs) are a durable, federally incubated network of community-based antipoverty organizations launched under the Community Action Program (CAP) of the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964 (EOA) and sustained today through the Community Services Block Grant (CSBG). Nearly 1,000 CAAs remain active nationwide; in FFY2023, 995 CAAs served 10.7 million low-income Americans (NASCSP 2023). They coordinate dozens of government programs, braid local, state, and federal resources, convene public and private partners, and translate regularly assessed community needs into action on antipoverty priorities.

This paper argues that Community Action is best understood as a durable federal experiment in cultivating collective power. CAP's central innovation was to change who had the organizational capacity, sustained institutional access, and political influence to shape antipoverty governance in American communities. The mandate of maximum feasible participation repositioned poor residents from passive recipients of aid to organized participants in developing, delivering, and overseeing programs meant to improve their lives.

Community Action's original power-shifting strategy was twofold. First, it broke entrenched state and local domination by introducing a direct channel for organized citizens—poor residents, specifically—to secure federal resources, credibility, and delegated authority outside traditional gatekeepers. Second, CAP sought to build bottom-up power by making participation materially possible, creating formal roles with real responsibility and paraprofessional career tracks that institutionalized lived experience inside implementation, and underwriting the constituencies through which poor communities could act collectively over time.

The puzzle is durability. Over the decades, political elites have repeatedly tried to claw back Community Action's resources and authority. These instrumental attacks and their aftermath reveal the power CAP had actually redistributed from elites to the organized poor. Congress restructured federal administration and spun off successfully incubated programs into legacy agencies. Presidents have used budgetary, administrative, and sometimes extra-constitutional tools to dismantle or defund the program. Yet the local network endures. On the ground, a largely original and nonprofit network of Community Action Agencies has persevered, professionalized, and repeatedly proven impossible to erase.

Network capacity and organizational durability should not be conflated with uniformly activated people power. Community Action has preserved antipoverty organizations far more consistently than it has organized poor people to deepen them.

Head Start parents are the clarifying exception. Through its center-based early childhood programs, Head Start organizes parents in ways that foster recognition of shared interests, pair routine family-engagement opportunities with internal democracy and hands-on practice in collective governance, and build partnerships with frontline officials. When public services are structured not only to deliver individual benefits but also to create community, they can cultivate people power—turning low-income parents into a durable constituency resourced and organized to deepen and defend the democratic institutions meant to serve them.

For materially important but politically thin services—like energy aid, weatherization, rent support, emergency assistance, and food aid—the key lesson is that collective power must be cultivated. Individualized services require supplemental scaffolding to resource and organize collective action around otherwise private transactions. The goal is not to make benefits harder to get. It is to make power easier to build around them.

The lesson is not deeper listening or faster delivery. Voice without power legitimates the status quo, while delivery without organization leaves people politically isolated. Democracy demands more: power-shifting policy must be purposefully designed to build organizational capacity and grant sustained institutional access, enabling ordinary people to exercise political influence over the decisions that govern their lives.

Recovering this history rewrites the lesson of Community Action. It was neither a brief, failed experiment in participation nor a model to replicate wholesale. It was an uneven yet durable experiment in using federal policy to break concentrated local control and build democratic infrastructure from below. Correcting the failure myth reveals a missed opportunity. Community Action is a living, federally supported infrastructure for collective power—with deep local roots, nationwide reach, and substantial capacity built over decades. The question now is how to reinvest in, reimagine, and reconstruct the existing CAA network to defend and deepen democracy today.

**Table 1. Key Community Action Laws, Institutions, and Terms**

| Term                                          | Description                                                                                                                                                                              |
|-----------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Economic Opportunity Act of 1964 (EOA)</b> | The War on Poverty’s cornerstone legislation that created the Office of Economic Opportunity and the Community Action Program and required “maximum feasible participation of the poor.” |
| <b>Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO)</b>   | The original federal agency situated in the Executive Office of the President that administered Community Action and made grants directly to local organizations.                        |

|                                                                                     |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Community Action Program (CAP)</b>                                               | The federal program that funded and governed Community Action. CAP was the program; CAAs were the local organizations.                                                                                                                                                      |
| <b>Community Action Agency (CAA)</b>                                                | A local antipoverty organization designated to serve a defined community or service area.                                                                                                                                                                                   |
| <b>Maximum Feasible Participation (MFP)</b>                                         | The requirement that poor residents play the most meaningful role in planning, operating, and evaluating local antipoverty programs.                                                                                                                                        |
| <b>Tripartite governance / tripartite board</b>                                     | The three-part CAA governing structure representing low-income residents, public officials, and private or community interests.                                                                                                                                             |
| <b>Green and Quie Amendments (1967)</b>                                             | Green gave mayors and governors formal authority to designate or replace CAAs; Quie formalized the tripartite board structure.                                                                                                                                              |
| <b>Community Services Administration (CSA) / Office of Community Services (OCS)</b> | CSA succeeded OEO in 1975 as an independent agency that continued direct federal administration of Community Action. Since CSA was abolished in 1981, OCS within the Department of Health and Human Services has been the federal home for Community Action under the CSBG. |
| <b>Community Services Block Grant (CSBG)</b>                                        | The categorical block grant created in 1981 that funds Community Action today, primarily through states, while reserving most funds for eligible entities.                                                                                                                  |
| <b>Eligible entity</b>                                                              | A local organization legally recognized to receive CSBG funds, usually an incumbent CAA or its lawful successor.                                                                                                                                                            |

## II. Introduction: From Participation to Collective Power

### Engagement vs. Empowered Participation

Democracy depends on meaningful public participation—governance by the governed. In this moment of authoritarian consolidation and eviscerated federal capacity, the United States will need more than procedural public engagement and consultative exercises that gather input without shifting power, revising policy, or establishing any accountability for changing the status quo.

Amplified calls to recenter people in federal policymaking squarely address a basic deficit: too little sustained, responsive engagement between the public and government (Maxwell 2025; Wilkins 2025). Better incorporation of Americans' lived experience can improve policy fit with the real problems ordinary Americans face, strengthen the legitimacy of solutions, and bolster badly eroded public trust in government (Garden-Monheit and Joseph 2025).

Constructive two-way engagement between citizens and the state is essential for a functioning government. But for a healthy democracy, it is not enough (Hertel-Fernandez 2025). Consultation with ordinary citizens may improve and legitimize policy; it does not, by itself, shift who wins and who loses when policy priorities are set, resources are allocated, and rules are enforced—or not. Without power, participation can collapse into ritual—an “empty” form most useful for legitimating the status quo without creating accountability for changing it (Arnstein 1969).

For purposes of this paper, meaningful political participation is backed by collective power—the organizational capacity and sustained institutional access ordinary people need to exercise political influence over policy outcomes that affect their lives. Simply put, collective power is the difference between a politics that lets people speak and a democracy with no choice but to listen. Collective power makes participation democratically meaningful.

### **More Voice and Faster Benefits Are Not Collective Power**

Contemporary reform efforts frequently center on more voice: broader outreach, deeper listening, and more opportunities for ordinary people to speak from lived experience. Two-way communication responds to a fundamental deficit. Government too often lacks sustained, responsive contact with the people most affected by its decisions. Better engagement improves the inputs available to policymakers.

But improved inputs do not change who has the power to make policy decisions.

Power-building participation turns lived experience and authentic community ties into durable collective power by building organizational capacity, creating sustained institutional access, and vesting ordinary people with real authority within governance and implementation. Together, those institutional arrangements shift political influence over policy outcomes toward ordinary people.

Voice without power legitimates the status quo. People are asked to testify, consult, advise, and share lived experience without gaining the organizational capacity, sustained institutional access, or political influence needed to change the decisions that shape their lives. People without power rarely mistake more chances to speak for countervailing capacity of their own. Well-intentioned elites too often do.

A second reform strand centers on faster, easier delivery: simpler applications, fewer administrative burdens, more automatic access to public benefits. These changes can reduce hardship and improve people’s material lives. Speed and ease are useful administrative goals, not democratic power. The question is not whether delivery is frictionless, but whether it politically incorporates people: creating relationships, shared stakes, institutional standing, and organized capacity around public provision. Frictionless delivery often moves in the opposite direction. It reaches people as isolated individuals and often makes the government’s role invisible altogether, as tax expenditures and opt-out benefits do.

Without purposeful supplemental scaffolding, frictionless automation can provide material help while undercutting a core democratic goal: building countervailing power for the people. Delivery without organization leaves beneficiaries politically alone.

A related abundance critique focused on state capacity rightly worries that public institutions too often cannot build, approve, coordinate, or deliver at the scale democratic repair requires. The response, however, is not to treat democracy as excess process or participation as a veto. It is to distinguish participation that merely slows decisions from empowered participation that extends the government's capabilities. Power-building participation does that by resourcing and organizing the people most affected as partners in addressing their own needs, coordinating resources, sustaining implementation, and defending public provision. Community Action is the historical case this paper recovers.

### The Overlooked National Experiment

What is almost always overlooked in participatory reform conversations is that the United States has been running a nationwide experiment in community-empowered participation for six decades and counting.

The Community Action Program (CAP), authorized under the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964, was not designed simply for service delivery. It intentionally sought to build durable collective power within marginalized communities through a radical—widely misunderstood—statutory mandate: maximum feasible participation of the poor (MFP). In practice, MFP meant democratically meaningful participation: structured responsibilities that gave poor residents real power in program design, delivery, and oversight.

Local organizing at scale was immediate. By the end of 1966, nearly 1,500 local organizations were participating in Community Action nationwide, federally recognized organizations by and for the poor (Masters 2014). Existing grassroots groups adapted to meet the Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO) grant criteria. Hundreds of new local entities emerged to take advantage of substantial federal resources, accreditation, and institutionalized leverage for the poor in tripartite antipoverty governance.

In communities with deep movement roots and large, disproportionately poor Black populations, Community Action repurposed legacy civil rights groups into localized poverty-fighting nonprofits (Andrews 2023; Orleck and Hazirjian 2011). On the West Coast, CAP helped catalyze new pan-ethnic identities and service-oriented organizing among Asian and Latino immigrant populations (Kim 2020, forthcoming). In total, nearly \$2 billion was channeled directly into Community Action Agencies during Lyndon B. Johnson's term (Bailey and Duquette 2014). These funds came from a newly created office

within the Executive Office of the President, removed from mainline agencies that had failed to sell LBJ on conventional ideas like a men's jobs program.<sup>1</sup>

Yet Community Action is widely remembered as a political failure—politically naïve, socially disruptive, and, above all, short-lived. That narrative hardened quickly, fueled by critiques from both the left and right. Progressives criticized the War on Poverty as too thinly funded to produce major antipoverty effects, too timid to challenge the organization of work, investment, and class power, or inclined to coopt poor people's disruptive capacities (Kravitz and Kolodner 1969; Katznelson 1989; F. F. Piven and Cloward 1978; Frances Fox Piven and Cloward 1993).

From the right and center, critics cast maximum feasible participation as leftist pseudoscience, politically destabilizing, and dependency-producing—an ideological throughline running from Moynihan's catastrophizing Black family breakdown to Governor-then-President Reagan's welfare queen, to Charles Murray's conflation of food aid with child abuse (Moynihan 1965, 1969; *New York Times* 1976; Murray 1984).

Five years into LBJ's antipoverty campaign, Daniel Patrick Moynihan's *Maximum Feasible Misunderstanding* helped fix the collective memory of an inevitably lost war. Moynihan accused a small group of social scientists of using the poor as a testing ground for flawed theories. Amid civil rights and race riots, the analysis linked social disruption and politically counterproductive conflicts to CAP's core theoretical misconceptions about poor people (Moynihan 1969; Orleck and Hazirjian 2011).

Subsequent scholarship reinforced this bounded interpretation as historical fact, with secondary research in economics, political science, and history commonly dating Community Action's death back to Reagan—if not Nixon—or even earlier, effectively reined in by Congress on LBJ's watch (Quadagno 1994; O'Connor 2001; Larochelle 2023).

Even a newer wave of revisionist research that recovers meaningful grassroots mobilization or long-run reductions in racialized poverty still treats CAP as a bounded historical episode, conceding the political-failure premise while emphasizing positive impact (Orleck and Hazirjian 2011; Bailey and Danziger 2013; Bailey and Duquette 2014; LaRochelle 2018; Orleck 2023).

### **The Durability Puzzle: A Power-Shifting Solution**

That conventional wisdom is difficult to reconcile with basic institutional facts. Today, roughly 995 CAAs remain active as CSBG "eligible entities," covering 99 percent of U.S. counties (NASCS 2023).

---

<sup>1</sup> Notably, the Department of Labor

Federal administration of the program has evolved since the Great Society, reflecting broader social-policy trends toward devolution, privatized risk, and an increasingly threadbare safety net. On the ground, however, a largely original network of poverty-fighting organizations has not merely persevered but evolved across political eras—diversifying funding and partnerships, professionalizing federal advocacy and political operations, and reinventing antipoverty strategies.

This durability is the empirical puzzle. A power-shifting perspective on democracy offers the key by differentiating between two kinds of backlash that the lost-war mythology collapsed into one.

Ideological critiques evaluated the program's ambitions—what Community Action's goals should be and whether the program was designed to achieve them.

By contrast, instrumental backlash sought to reclaim resources and authority that had been intentionally shifted from each community's traditionally powerful to the organized poor. Instrumental backlash targeted Community Action's governing architecture and funding channels—the collective resources that empowered poor communities' participation.

Early opponents' alarm is difficult to square with the idea that Community Action was politically neutralized almost immediately. If CAP had truly been defanged, sustained efforts to dismantle or constrain it—and the growing sophistication of the coalition organized to defend it—would be hard to explain.

This paper, therefore, reframes Community Action not as a cautionary tale but as a long-running federal experiment in institutionalized collective power. The central claim is not that CAAs are uniformly or optimally building power today. Rather, Community Action's survival through repeated efforts to claw back resources and authority suggests that federal policy can—and has—built durable infrastructure for collective power. Recovering that reality opens new possibilities for reconstructing American democracy today.

The paper distinguishes network and organizational durability from uniformly strong people power. CAAs have preserved a living network of antipoverty organizations more consistently than they have sustained organized poor constituencies capable of deepening their programs. That unevenness is no reason to dismiss Community Action's power-building potential; it is the design lesson the paper takes most seriously.

This paper draws on three kinds of evidence: changes in statutory and administrative design in Washington, organizational capacity and program continuity on the ground, and the persistent—yet incorrect—collective memory of Community Action as a failure.

The paper proceeds in eight steps. Section III situates Community Action as local infrastructure for collective action and explains its original break-to-build design. Section IV shows that successive retrenchment efforts did not dissolve the local organizational network, reframing Community Action's survival as a durability puzzle. Section V reconstructs maximum feasible participation as a theory of bottom-up collective power. Section VI illuminates when and why some services build collective power, using Head Start as the clearest example of politically incorporating delivery that cultivates community.

Section VII treats attempted clawbacks as stress tests of collective power, examining what opponents targeted, what organized defense emerged, and what ultimately endured. Section VIII draws cross-case lessons about durable infrastructure, underactivated people power, and the failure myth. Section IX translates those lessons into an agenda to reinvest, reimagine, and reconstruct. Section X concludes by returning to the democratic distinction between participation that gathers voice and public policy that helps ordinary people build power.

### **III. Community Action in Context: Institutional Design and Evolution**

#### **What Are CAAs? Local Infrastructure for Collective Action**

Community Action Agencies are best understood as local infrastructure for collective action. Their defining feature is neither any single service line nor simply their quasi-governmental role within designated service areas. It is their capacity to offset the start-up and sustaining costs of collective action.

Durable power depends on organization: staff, space, institutional memory, relationships, capacity to act across arenas and levels of government, enough resources to absorb setbacks and fight again. These are collective capacities that organized interests can sustain over time and that isolated individuals cannot (Hacker and Pierson 2014).

For six decades, federal funding has preserved such an infrastructure. In practice, CAAs coordinate locally tailored services, programs, and partnerships, including Head Start; energy assistance and weatherization; housing stability and homelessness prevention; emergency aid; employment and training; adult education and financial literacy; navigation and enrollment assistance; and other family and community supports. Today, the CSBG network includes roughly 1,000 CAAs serving nearly 11 million low-income Americans annually (NASCSP 2023).

CSBG's distinctive value lies not simply in direct program dollars, but in the rarity of what it funds: operating support and institutional overhead that program grants generally do not cover, including coordination and administrative costs that cut across particular program grants, service lines, and missions. In addition to rent and salaries, federal guidance explicitly permits CAAs to spend CSBG funds

for community assessments, public engagement in planning processes, and maintenance of referral and benefit-navigation systems (CSBG IM #37 Definition and Allowability of Direct and Administrative Cost Block Appropriation and Allocations 2000).

### **Catalytic Roles: Incubation and Coordination**

Community Action's legacy is routinely underestimated because the program is evaluated as if it were a discrete line item rather than as an institutional incubator and governance platform. Its catalytic effects operated in two distinct ways.

The first was at the program level. CAP functioned as an innovation and demonstration platform. Flexible funding and community control provided fertile ground where local initiatives could be piloted, refined, and, when successful, elevated into standalone national programs with direct federal authorization, appropriations, and administrative offices of their own.

While several major War on Poverty initiatives were written directly into the original 1964 architecture alongside CAP—most notably Job Corps and VISTA—others emerged in the immediate wake as OEO demonstrations or pilots. Head Start and Community Health Centers are the clearest examples; Legal Services followed a related path. CAP was not meant to own these programs permanently, but to leverage the community creativity, relationships, and capacity that made it possible to test, defend, and scale them. Administrative “spinoff” should not be mistaken for clean operational separation: many CAAs continued to administer Head Start on the ground, and the substantial overlap between Head Start and Community Action reinforced the network's durability and coalition strength.

Community Action's second catalytic function was infrastructural. From the beginning, CAAs were meant to do more than operate discrete services. They were territorially anchored antipoverty intermediaries: organizations that could convene partners, mobilize resources, connect residents to fragmented public systems, and translate recurring community needs into operational priorities. OEO made this function explicit in a 1970 instruction issued under Donald Rumsfeld, describing the CAA as having a “primarily catalytic mission”—in which the operation of programs was a principal activity but not the primary objective (Rumsfeld 1970). Service delivery was supposed to anchor a larger project of resource mobilization, institutional change, and sustained community response.

That coordinating role has grown more important over time as federal funding streams have become more braided and conditional. CAAs historically helped connect low-income communities to newly expanding public benefits, including Medicare, Medicaid, and Food Stamps. During Medicare's initial rollout, OEO's “Medicare Alert” project funded 463 Community Action Programs to employ older people part-time to reach hard-to-contact elderly residents in coordination with Social Security district offices.

The same intermediary function reappeared during the Affordable Care Act's early open-enrollment cycles. Some CAAs received formal navigator grants, while most others provided homegrown enrollment assistance because communities already regarded them as access points for fragmented public programs.

Read this way, Community Action is democratic infrastructure—a publicly supported institutional base through which communities can coordinate resources, sustain organization, and exercise collective power over the decisions that shape their lives.

### Community Action's EOA Origins: Cultivating Collective Power

*“Under the innocent-sounding title of ‘Community Action Programs,’ the poverty czar would not only have the power to finance the activities of such organizations as the National Council of Churches, the NAACP, SNCC, and CORE, but also a SNOOP and a SNORE, which are sure to be organized to get their part of the green gravy.”*

— Senator Strom Thurmond, *Economic Opportunity Act debates*, July 23, 1964

The segregationist senior senator from South Carolina proved prescient about how federally funded Community Action could advance a more equal, multiracial American democracy.

The Economic Opportunity Act of 1964 was signed in late August—weeks after the Civil Rights Act, and just under a year before the Voting Rights Act. Community Action was not adjacent to that reconstructive moment in American democracy. It was one of its clearest expressions: a federal challenge to entrenched local exclusion by shifting material capacity, institutional access, and thus political influence toward communities long denied all three. In doing so, CAP upended the Democratic Party's decades-long North-South deal, under which national social insurance could expand if racialized local control remained intact.

From the outset, OEO treated Community Action as a power-shifting intervention toward multiracial democracy, rather than a conventional service program. CAP and related Great Society funding streams gave federal administrators explicit leverage—to approve, delay, or withhold grants when state or local actors attempted to manipulate the process, stack boards with segregationist allies, or exclude meaningful Black participation (Orleck and Hazirjian 2011; Bailey and Duquette 2014; Cascio and Washington 2014).

This was most visible in the South, where “local control” typically meant racialized political and economic domination. But CAP's threat to entrenched power was broader: it challenged Democratic urban machines' patronage-based control in the Northeast and Midwest, as well as a welfare-hostile West Coast Republican governor with national ambition.

Southern political realignment and the post-1960s conservative shift in national politics were historically overdetermined; no particular piece of the Great Society can be singled out as the cause of this division. But CAP—like the civil- and voting-rights agenda—did shift resources and institutional access to

communities that had long been excluded from political, social, and economic power. That redistribution of power helps explain why Community Action repeatedly became a target for elites trying to claw it back.

Three linked mechanisms set Community Action apart from federal social programs before the Great Society and ever since.

First, CAP broke entrenched local monopolies over political, social, and economic power by creating a direct federal credentials-and-funding pipeline to community-based organizations, routing resources and recognition around traditional gatekeepers.

Second, CAP incorporated poor residents into governance and implementation. Formal responsibilities and paraprofessional career tracks brought community members' knowledge, relationships, and practical judgment into the institutions responsible for improving their lives.

Third, CAP underwrote organization, not just representation. OEO recognized that seats and services alone could not make a constituency out of scattered individuals. Poor residents needed organizations, community-building spaces, institutional partners, and information through which formal participation could become organized collective power.

Taken together, these design features made CAP more than an ordinary service program. They created a federally backed architecture for shifting resources, responsibilities, and local political leverage toward poor communities. Section V returns to how these mechanisms worked together as Community Action's theory of power-building for democracy: maximum feasible participation of the poor.

## IV. From Experiment to Enduring Infrastructure

The familiar story of Community Action is one of backlash and rapid defeat: CAAs riled up mayors, coincided with race riots, and were soon reined in by Congress. In this telling, Community Action's deconstructive first step failed quickly. Threatened elites won, LBJ retreated, and the War on Poverty's most democratic experiment was contained before power-building had even begun.

That story captures real conflict but misreads it. Empowering poor communities for political contestation was not a flaw but fundamental to Community Action's design. Congress did amend the EOA to give state and local officials new opportunities to assert control. The 1967 Green Amendment established a formal designation process, empowering mayors and governors to replace or reinstate incumbent organizations as the official CAA; the companion Quie Amendment formalized the tripartite board structure that most CAAs had already adopted. But conventional wisdom assumes the result without examining what actually happened on the ground.

When mayors and governors were required to move through a formal CAA designation process, more than 98 percent backed the incumbent Community Action organization already serving their communities. The CAP National Advisory Council's official annual report tallied just nineteen Green-era CAA takeovers against well over 900 incumbent recertifications (National Advisory Council 1969). That was fewer than the roughly two dozen CAAs that were public agencies before Green. Explicit congressional authorization for public CAAs therefore did not even double the public-agency share of the network, much less produce mass replacement of nonprofit Community Action agencies.

One interpretation is that many CAAs had already become effective working partners in their communities. Another is that local elites often chose not to provoke protest or organized resistance from the agencies and their constituencies. Either way, nearly perfect retention is difficult to square with the claim that Community Action had been politically neutralized. The basic institutional facts—near-perfect incumbent retention, continued contestation and bargaining, and long-run network survival—point in the opposite direction.

The Green Amendment is therefore better understood as attempted retrenchment that entrenched. The amendments gave local officials new tools of control, but the process did not result in mass displacement. Instead, it hardened the CAA network's territorial standing: one recognized Community Action Agency per place, not an interchangeable contractor pool, and an incumbent that had to be formally replaced through designated procedures. That quasi-governmental status outlasts the political moment that produced it.

Newark's United Community Corporation captures the more representative arc. It was among Daniel Patrick Moynihan's examples of Community Action gone wrong. Newark's white mayor, Hugh Addonizio, explicitly blamed Community Action organizers for helping create the conditions that culminated in the 1967 uprising. Nevertheless, UCC survived mayoral backlash. Three years later, Kenneth Gibson, one of UCC's founders, became the city's first Black mayor.

UCC survived a fiscal crisis, decades of administrative and political change, partnerships with the city, and further fights against it. It continues to operate as Newark's designated CAA. Its sixty-year history makes the simple failure story untenable. Rather than collapsing after confrontation, Newark's antipoverty institution became an enduring part of the city's civic infrastructure, close enough to coordinate implementation yet resourced and situated to contest when community needs go unfulfilled (Ceraso 1998; United Community Corporation 2026).

Changes in federal administration have therefore been overread—sometimes dramatically so. Amendments, restructurings, devolution, block-granting, and program spin-offs changed how directly

federal oversight was exercised, where it occurred, and how visible Community Action remained in Washington. Nevertheless, those federal changes did not dissolve the underlying local network.

In the mid-1970s, the EOP-based Office of Economic Opportunity was replaced by the Community Services Administration, an independent federal agency with substantially the same responsibilities, staff, and headquarters. CSA gave way to the Office of Community Services at HHS when the Community Services Block Grant devolved a relatively larger role to the states in 1981.

Reagan sought to fold Community Action into broader state-administered social-services block granting, but Congress did not simply absorb CAP into the catchall SSBG structure. It created a distinct Community Services Block Grant, protected incumbent “eligible entities,” and required states to pass through 90 percent of CSBG funds to those organizations. CSBG eliminated the old federal process for designating, recognizing, replacing, or revoking CAAs and shifted oversight authority to the states. However, the statutory definition of eligible entities and the pass-through rule meant that the pre-CSBG CAA network entered the new regime largely intact. The one-year pass-through protection ultimately became a durable settlement, and the same basic structure still anchors CSBG today (Clark 2000; Masters 2014).

Program spin-offs produced a parallel form of federal fragmentation, moving major War on Poverty initiatives like Head Start and Community Health Centers into legacy agencies and further reducing Community Action’s visibility in Washington without dissolving the underlying local CAA network.

Retrenchment efforts also pushed the network to professionalize. Repeated attempts to claw back Community Action’s resources and authority taught CAAs to build the cross-level and multi-venue capacities required for survival. Local agencies federated to defend themselves against Nixon’s dismantling efforts. Before the CSBG transition, the National Community Action Foundation was already aggregating network concerns for Congress and engaging senior federal officials responsible for the transition. That professionalized coalition has been integral to Community Action’s perseverance (Clark 2000).

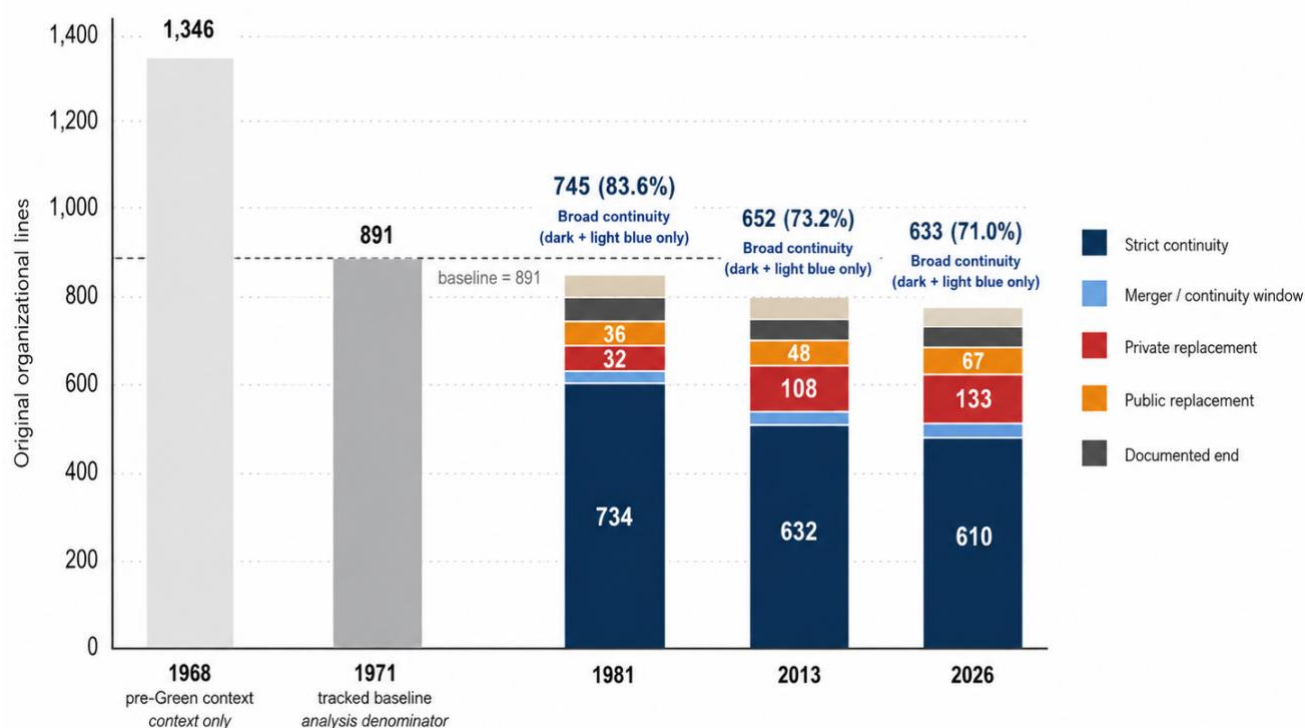
Community Action’s durability also rested on its growing legitimacy across ideological lines. Over time, bipartisan congressional majorities came to regard the network as flexible, locally rooted, and administratively efficient social provision. By the 1990s, Republicans could defend CSBG as a morally acceptable alternative to centralized welfare bureaucracy, even as cash assistance was sharply retrenched. Community Action endured not only because organized constituencies defended it, but because its governing infrastructure became useful and legitimate to officials with very different political commitments.

Community Action has not endured in its original insurgent form over the past six decades. With maturity, the program lost some of its federal visibility and youthful disruptive edge. But the basic local architecture endures: a nationwide network of territorially rooted Community Action Agencies capable of adapting through political eras.

Figure 1 establishes the institutional fact the failure narrative misses: Community Action’s original federal architecture was altered, but its local organizational network largely endured. That continuity does not itself demonstrate uniformly strong people power, but it preserves an organizational base from which collective action can be sustained and people power rebuilt.

**Figure 1. Community Action’s post-Green organizational network remained largely intact through 2026**

Counts, not percentages. The 1968 bar provides pre-Green scale context; 1971–2026 track the cleaned post-Green baseline.



**Note:** Bars display the continuity of the original CAA cohort to the present. The 1968 bar shows pre-Green scale context, before population thresholds led to rural consolidation and the drop to 891 CAAs in the stabilized post-Green cohort. Continuity includes organizational (dark blue) and rural mergers (light blue). Over 55 years, the numbers show little change: 745 (84%) in 1981, 652 (73%) and 633 (71%) in 2026.

## V. Maximum Feasible Participation as Power-Building Design

Often caricatured as a rhetorical flourish, “maximum feasible participation of the poor” was a sophisticated theory of bottom-up collective power. OEO treated meaningful participation by the poor not as a procedural add-on but as a governing condition for legitimate Community Action. In Shriver’s phrase, it was a “democratic antidote to the dole”: not a slogan but an account of how federal policy could help poor communities build durable capacity to contest concentrated political, social, and economic power (Shriver 1966).

OEO translated that democratic ambition into administrative design. Participation was built into the governance, staffing, and neighborhood infrastructure of Community Action itself: who planned programs, who served on boards and councils, who delivered services, which community groups received material support, and whose organizations gained bargaining power in local politics.

CAP was designed to convert poor people’s participation into durable collective power: organizational capacity, sustained institutional access, and political influence over policy outcomes.

The paper evaluates the depth and durability of Community Action’s collective power at three levels.

Network or coalition power captures the capacity of federated antipoverty organizations and allies to coordinate strategy, defend resources, professionalize as political actors, and bargain across arenas and levels of government.

Organizational power captures the ability of specific local organizations to administer programs, mobilize resources, maintain standing, and survive attempted clawbacks over six decades and counting.

People power captures the relational capacity of ordinary people, organized through CAAs and related institutions, to recognize shared stakes and sustain the strategies that advance their collective claims.

These levels ideally reinforce one another, but they may not. People power dissipates without institutions and renewable resources to sustain it; network and organizational power can survive without consistently organizing or activating the people those organizations serve.

Community Action’s six-decade record is most mixed in its cultivation of people power. Yet robust infrastructure, organizational capacity, deep community roots, and decades of institutional knowledge provide a rich foundation for activating people power from below.

### Breaking Control, Building Power

Section III introduced CAP’s three linked mechanisms in historical context. Here, the same policy-design architecture becomes a theory of bottom-up collective power. Community Action shifted power by

resourcing grassroots organizations incorporated for and by the poor, delegating formal authority and real responsibilities to those organizations in local governance and implementation, and funding the scaffolding designed to turn representation and services into bases for collective action.

That architecture broke concentrated power to build democracy. By creating a direct federal channel around traditional gatekeepers, making resident knowledge productive inside governance and implementation, and underwriting the institutions that converted seats and services into collective claims, CAP changed the terms of local political bargaining.

### **1. Breaking Entrenched Local Control: Leverage Before Partnership**

First, CAP broke entrenched local monopolies over political, social, and economic power by creating a direct federal credentials-and-funding pipeline to community-based organizations, routing resources and recognition around traditional gatekeepers.

By recognizing and directly funding local organizations, OEO also aimed to create broader bargaining power in local politics. Shriver described this as the “new element in community affairs”: the people’s involvement in what had conventionally been a bilateral negotiation between public officials and private elites, behind closed doors (Shriver 1966).

Community Action, at its best, aspired to draw public- and private-sector elites into bargaining with poor citizens over resources and authority that no longer flowed solely through elite-controlled channels. “Whole-of-community” antipoverty governance was an aspirational secondary goal that direct funding was designed to incentivize; resourcing and credentialing community-based organizations happened regardless.

In newly enfranchised poor Black communities, Black political officials and community-based organizations faced county and state authorities unwilling to recognize their authority or finance basic public goods. CAP grants, technical assistance, and related Great Society channels gave these communities access to federal resources, planning capacity, and administrative response that hostile local institutions had withheld. In rural Southern communities, federal access turned formal civil-rights gains into governing capacity; the Southern Conference of Black Mayors’ second annual meeting featured panels on “innovative strategies for raising municipal revenues” and “grants management under the new federalism” (Joint Center for Political Studies 1973b, 1973a, 1974).

In Ouachita Parish, Louisiana, the federal option disrupted some of the most violently racist conditions of domination in the Deep South. Black antipoverty organizers operated Monroe’s OMCAP amid aggressive and intentionally visible Ku Klux Klan activity, including cross burnings, threatening phone calls, nighttime harassment, and warnings that residents who participated in antipoverty programs would face

consequences (Orleck and Hazirjian 2011). Local officials and influential white civic leaders treated the organization not as a legitimate community partner but as a dangerous intrusion backed by Washington. Yet in the late 1960s, OMCAP received substantial federal grants despite the absence of meaningful local governmental support.

Federal funding did more than finance services. By recognizing and financing OMCAP directly, OEO upended local elites' capacity to exclude. Federal funding supplied an alternative public channel: baseline resources and credentials independent of existing local power structures.

The mechanism was not confined to the South. In California, Governor Reagan's retaliatory veto of an OEO grant to California Rural Legal Assistance showed the same fight in an opposite partisan setting.<sup>2</sup> CRLA's litigation had helped block Reagan's Medi-Cal cuts and challenge the exploitation of Mexican farmworkers; OEO responded to the veto with an independent investigation that cleared CRLA, after which Director Frank Carlucci negotiated Reagan's withdrawal of the veto (Falk Jr and Pollak 1972). Across varied political economies, CAP and related OEO grants disrupted entrenched gatekeepers by routing federal resources and recognition around them.

The same design that provoked conflict also made partnership possible. Once community organizations had independent funding, staff capacity, technical assistance, and federal recognition, they could enter local governance as actors rather than petitioners. OEO's federal channel altered the terms of local engagement rather than bypassing local institutions indefinitely. Public- and private-sector elites already bargained over community affairs. The new element was OEO-resourced and organized poor people entering those negotiations with something to wield. Whole-of-community governance was not an alternative to the federal funding channel; it depended on it. At its strongest, it was collaboration through contestation. Collaboration required countervailing power; it was not a substitute.

## 2. Embedding Lived Experience in Community Action

Second, CAP embedded poor residents in governance and implementation through formal roles with real responsibilities and paraprofessional career tracks. These roles brought community members' knowledge, relationships, and practical judgment into the institutions responsible for improving their lives.

---

<sup>2</sup> Reagan issued the formal veto 15 days after Donald Rumsfeld left OEO for a fulltime White House role. The chronology suggests Reagan deliberately waited for the transition.

Maximum feasible participation was not limited to consultation from the outside. It made lived experience institutionally consequential within the agencies and programs that planned, funded, administered, and assessed local antipoverty work.

OEO's participation guidance built formal responsibility into the local Community Action architecture. Each CAA's tripartite governing board reserved at least one-third of its seats for low-income residents, who were to be chosen democratically, trained, and properly reimbursed for their contributions. Program-level councils brought governance closer to everyday life, giving beneficiaries formal authority over the programs their families relied on.

The same guidance made Community Action Agencies responsible for hiring, personnel policy, "the number and type of nonprofessional jobs," training, and career development, with explicit career ladders running from neighborhood aide to outreach team leader to center director (Office of Economic Opportunity 1969).

Tripartite boards do this work at the agency level. They give low-income representatives formal standing inside federally recognized institutions charged with planning, funding, and administering local antipoverty work. That is a sharp break from ordinary social provision: citizens in need are not treated as passive clients of programs, but as constituents with the standing to act on their own interests and reshape the institutions meant to serve them.

But formal access is never self-executing. A board seat becomes power only when representatives have information, training, participation support, real authority, and accountability to organized constituencies. Without those conditions, representation is symbolic. With them, governance becomes a standing site of bargaining among public officials, private and community-sector actors, and representatives of poor residents.

Head Start parent committees and policy councils remain the strongest example because they attached governance to parents' ordinary experience of a materially important, center-based public service. Their importance is not that they created another advisory forum. Parents were given structured roles with real responsibility for planning, oversight, and evaluation of a program that mattered directly in their families' lives. Section VI returns to why those delivery experiences make Head Start the clarifying exception.

Paraprofessional careers extended the same power-building logic from governance into implementation, embedding lived experience in the daily work of antipoverty institutions rather than merely soliciting it from outside. Teacher aides, health workers, outreach staff, neighborhood aides, and other frontline positions turned resident knowledge into institutional capacity. Poor residents were not only invited to

speak to professionals; they were brought into the daily work of programs that might otherwise have treated them only as clients.

Shriver made the logic explicit: paid positions for poor people were a way of “enfranchising the poor,” giving the “pupil, the patient, the client” a voice inside the institutions shaping their lives (Shriver 1966).

These were not token jobs but upwardly mobile career tracks. OEO guidance contemplated neighborhood aides moving into roles such as outreach team leader, neighborhood-center assistant director, and eventually neighborhood-center director. In some places, OEO guidance even contemplated nonprofessionals training professional staff. That reversed the usual administrative hierarchy. Expertise was not supposed to flow only from professionals down to poor residents. Knowledge from the neighborhood moved upward into program design, supervision, and institutional judgment (Office of Economic Opportunity 1968b).

Watts Health shows the mechanism at its clearest. The CAA- and OEO-supported Watts Health Foundation trained and employed local Black women as health aides, sending them into homes to provide health education, connect families to care, and help residents enroll in Medicaid and Medicare. Their authority came partly from proximity: they knew the neighborhood, understood local needs, and built trust where professional medicine often did not. But the role was not simply relational (Clark 2000). It was institutional. Watts health aides turned resident knowledge into program capacity, benefit access, and a career ladder. Many advanced into supervisory or professional roles, and the program became a national model for community health outreach.

The same OEO account traced a parallel pathway in New York Head Start, where mothers became classroom aides and school-community intermediaries. Mothers’ everyday knowledge of children, local families, and their neighborhoods became paid work inside the institution itself. Like the Watts aides, they did more than help professionals reach poor families. They brought firsthand knowledge into implementation, built trust between parents and public-serving institutions, and converted parents’ lived experience into institutional responsibility and capacity (Office of Economic Opportunity 1968a).

Together, these examples show why paraprofessional careers were central to maximum feasible participation. They made participation possible for people with limited time and income, but they also changed the knowledge base of implementation itself. Resident expertise became staff capacity; lived experience and authentic community ties became sources of institutional improvement.

Community Action made resident knowledge institutionally productive—not just public input for elites to consider, or consider considering, from above, but adaptive capacity wielded from within. It converted lived experience and community roots into collective power.

Institutions work differently when lived experience is embedded in their foundations and functions rather than collected as external review. That is the difference between testimony and power. Testimony lets residents describe conditions to people who retain authority. Community Action assigned residents real responsibility inside governance and implementation and created pathways through which their knowledge shaped decisions from within the institution.

### 3. Underwriting Organized Constituencies

Third, CAP underwrote organization, not just representation. OEO recognized that seats and services alone do not make a constituency out of scattered individuals. A board seat gives an individual formal standing, and a service meets an individual need. Neither creates organized solidarity across a broad base. Durable collective power requires people organized around shared stakes and organizations that develop leaders, sustain relationships, and act over time.

OEO's guidance made the obligation explicit: the agency "will have to deliberately and constantly enhance the viability of autonomous groups, or consciously seek to create these where they do not exist" (Opportunity 1968). OEO also authorized resources for neighborhood groups and economic associations of poor people to secure professional assistance, influence local planning, change local laws, and develop economic institutions. This was not decorative participation. OEO funded the organizational scaffolding poor communities needed to act collectively.

Neighborhood centers supplied one concrete form of that scaffolding. They were not simply local service desks. They created community-building spaces where material help, relationships, information, meetings, leadership development, and problem identification could connect. Centers turned repeated service encounters into relationships, and relationships into a base for collective action.

Neighborhood and delegate subcouncils brought constituency-building still closer to the places where residents encountered antipoverty programs, government institutions, and one another. They gave residents reliable venues for collective governance, holding agency leaders and public officials accountable, developing homegrown leaders, and pressing collective claims. They also connected agency-level representatives to a broader organized base, so formal representation did not rest on isolated individuals speaking only for themselves.

Community Action also supported poor residents as collective economic actors. OEO guidance promoted consumer cooperatives, buying clubs, production cooperatives, and consumer-action groups. These were not conventional services. They were vehicles for building collective market power: residents could pool information and resources, aggregate their power as consumers and producers, reduce costs, challenge market exploitation, and build enterprises they controlled.

The same design principles matter most where benefit provision is itself politically thin. Benefits and services become power-building only when resources and organization turn individual receipt into relationships, shared claims, and institutional pressure. Section VI picks up that distinction more fully, showing why some forms of delivery build political community by design while others require thicker scaffolding around otherwise individualized benefits. Across these forms, the lesson is the same: people power must be resourced and organized.

Together, the three mechanisms shift power through political, material, and social pathways: breaking gatekeeper control, creating formal roles with real responsibilities and paraprofessional career tracks, and underwriting the relationships and constituencies through which poor residents act together. Maximum feasible participation was more than a participatory slogan. CAP built organizational capacity, granted sustained institutional access, and assigned real responsibility within governance and implementation. Through that architecture, poor communities built the collective power ordinary people need to influence policy outcomes.

## VI. Politically Incorporating Delivery

Community Action also clarifies a second contemporary confusion: the belief that competent delivery can substitute for building power in civil society. Neither speed nor ease is the problem. A functional government must reliably meet people's real material needs. Administrative burdens do more than make programs inefficient; they degrade public trust, make citizenship feel conditional, and push people away from institutions that should be answerable to them.

Fast or automated delivery is not democracy-deepening power. Material gains can be tangible, urgent, even life-changing, and still leave people isolated from one another and dependent on institutions they do not shape. A benefit can stabilize a household without creating a constituency. It can meet a need without helping recipients recognize shared stakes, develop collective agency, or expect government institutions to respond when they act together.

Democracy demands a different standard. Politically incorporating delivery is not defined by making provision faster or more automated; it resources and organizes ordinary people to shape the institutions that govern their lives. It delivers tangible material gains through routine interaction, formal civic participation, and partnership with public officials. Those experiences build personal agency and expectations of institutional responsiveness to collective claims. Above all, they turn individualized benefits into organized people power.

Some services build power by their nature. Most do not. The question is whether delivery leaves people individualized or resources and organizes them to act together.

## Head Start

Head Start remains the clearest surviving example of politically incorporating delivery within the Community Action orbit. Early childhood education and care materially improve families' lives. These supports advance children's development, parents' ability to work, and families' daily stability. Head Start's democratic significance, however, comes not from the material value to individual families but from the way its delivery resources and organizes parents as a political constituency.

Parents experience Head Start as a political community, not a transaction. Center-based delivery preorganizes parents into a community of common interest around the same public institution shaping their families' everyday lives and their children's lifetime chances. Because parents experience that institution as unmistakably public, the trust and standing they build attach to public provision itself. It fosters unexpected parent friendships, meaningful partnerships with frontline officials, and routine practice in collective governance. Parents do not only use a program; together, they govern it.

The combination matters because meaningful democratic participation requires both political agency and expectations of institutional responsiveness. A benefit that improves lives but leaves people feeling powerless, or that gathers input but never visibly responds, builds neither the agency nor the expectations that incorporation requires. Head Start gives parents confidence in their own standing and capacity to act, along with repeated evidence that public institutions can care, respond, and be changed. It gives them concrete responsibilities inside a familiar institution and lets them experience public officials, staff, and other parents as people with whom problems can be named, decisions made, and institutions moved.

Parent committees and grantee-level policy councils institutionalize that political community's power. They attach real responsibility to routine interaction and connect the daily experience of incorporation to formal civic participation and collective governance. Parents are not simply asked for unaccountable input or after-the-fact feedback. They have formal roles in planning, oversight, and evaluation; they practice collective decision-making; and they develop relationships with staff and administrators inside an institution that their families know, value, and have reason to defend.

Together, these features help explain why Head Start has cultivated one of the deepest, most organized, and politically effective constituencies in American social policy. Center-based delivery brings parents into routine interaction around shared stakes; parent committees and policy councils give that interaction formal roles and real responsibilities; and state associations and the National Head Start Association connect parent leadership across institutions and levels of government. That infrastructure carries local experience into federal policymaking and gives locally developed leadership a coordinated national vehicle. Head Start's democratic significance lies in the parent constituency that its delivery model

resources and organizes around a public institution shaping families' daily lives and children's lifetime chances.

### Co-ops and Buying Clubs

Community Action treated market organization itself as a site of power-building. Head Start builds political community through routine use and governance of a shared public institution. Co-ops and buying clubs do something different: they organize low-income consumers and producers to contest exploitation in the markets that structure daily life. Their significance lies not only in lower prices, new jobs, or better access to goods and services. It lies in building collectively controlled economic alternatives strong enough to contest exploitation and build community-controlled alternatives.

OEO guidance placed consumer co-ops, buying clubs, production cooperatives, and consumer-action groups inside Community Action's repertoire because market exploitation requires collective solutions. Low-income consumers and producers cannot remake markets as isolated actors. They need durable organization capable of gathering information, pooling demand, organizing production, absorbing losses, sustaining bargaining power, and acting on longer time horizons than any single household or worker can sustain. Community Action's role was to underwrite that staying power.

The Fresno insulation plant illustrates the producer side. A Community Action-owned enterprise, built with private-sector partnerships, used antipoverty infrastructure to create work for low-income residents and move CETA workers into permanent jobs. Its importance was not simply that it produced insulation, generated employment, or became financially viable. It converted a market problem into organized productive capacity. The Community Action Program's plant did not help residents purchase a good, or place workers one by one into an existing labor market. It helped build an institution through which residents could work, develop skills, and shift some control over production toward an antipoverty organization accountable to the community it served (Community Services Administration 1980).

A senior citizens' cooperative market in Luzerne County, Pennsylvania, shows the consumer side. In 1979 the local CAP combined community donations and county aging funds with a \$21,000 CSA grant to open a member-owned food market for older residents. Its 3,600 senior members collectively owned the enterprise and captured its gains directly—an average 15 percent discount, roughly \$140 a year each, on \$275,000 in first-year sales. The market did more than lower grocery bills: staff also counseled members on food stamps and helped them apply, making the co-op a standing institution rather than a one-time discount (Community Services Administration 1980).

The logic is not simply more workers or cheaper delivery; it is breaking exploitation and building countervailing economic power.

The cooperative model differs from Head Start but shares the same power-building logic: material support is not organized as an isolated transfer from institution to individual but resources and organizes people around shared stakes, real responsibilities, and collective capacity.

### Thin Services, Thick Scaffolding

Some provision is materially vital but politically thin. Food assistance can stabilize a household, expand access to meals, or prevent immediate hardship without organizing recipients into a constituency. The question is not whether these programs matter materially. They plainly do. The question is whether they are designed only to process individual hardship or also to help residents act together on the conditions producing it.

For thin services, collective power must be cultivated. Individualized provision becomes politically incorporating when durable organization turns that receipt into shared claims, collective standing, and institutional pressure. The benefit may meet the need; the scaffolding determines whether people remain individualized before the institutions that govern access or become resourced and organized to make those institutions answerable.

The Northern Tidewater Opportunity Project's Southeastern Virginia Nutrition Alliance illustrates this third form of politically incorporating delivery. Food assistance and school meals addressed urgent material needs. The alliance brought together low-income consumers, trained hundreds of potential Food Stamp recipients in client rights and fair-hearing procedures, monitored outreach and grocery-store pricing, and helped expand school lunch and breakfast participation. Residents were not only helped through a program. They learned to understand, claim, and defend their standing within it.

The alliance made low-income residents collective actors in both public provision and local food markets, converting food insecurity into durable collective power. Food assistance did not build that power; the durable organization around it did.

Together, Head Start, co-ops and buying clubs, and Tidewater clarify Community Action's delivery lesson. Material provision is essential, but delivery deepens democracy only when it changes people's organized relationship to the institutions and markets that structure their lives. Head Start builds parent power through routine governance of a shared public institution. Co-ops and buying clubs build countervailing economic power through collectively controlled market institutions. Tidewater shows what politically thin benefits require: durable organization around provision, because receipt itself does not create political community, countervailing economic power, or institutional leverage. Across these forms, politically incorporating delivery resources and organizes poor people for collective action.

That design choice matters most when institutions come under attack. Programs that merely deliver benefits may generate appreciation, but politically incorporating delivery generates constituencies capable of defending the institutions they use, shape, and govern. The next section turns from incorporation to defense: how the Community Action network responded when elites tried to claw back the resources and authority the program had shifted away from traditional gatekeepers.

## VII. Clawback Attempts and Collective Defense

Section VI showed how politically incorporating delivery can generate democracy-deepening constituencies. This section turns to organized defense.

Power is relational. It is not a static attribute of a program, a service output, or an attitude. Unless the imbalance is overwhelming, power dynamics are invisible in a snapshot. The historical record compounds that problem because it captures federal conflict more vividly than community-level contestation and bargaining.

That selection effect helped consolidate the failure narrative: visible conflict became evidence that Community Action had failed, while the harder-to-measure question of what endured in communities receded from view.

This section treats clawback attempts as stress tests of collective power. Because elites do not spend scarce political capital reclaiming resources and authority they consider inert, each attempt reveals what opponents considered worth reclaiming, the power organized actors exercised in defense, and what endured as a result. It begins with Nixon's attempted disabling of OEO and Community Action in three parts: a separation-of-powers fight over whether the president could nullify a program Congress had authorized and funded; a congressional funding fight that required the network to organize for renewal; and an administrative fight in which the Community Action network changed the judgment of the director sent to kill the program. It then turns to the modern Head Start lawsuit against the Trump-Vance administration, where related questions of executive authority reappear in a program whose delivery architecture has organized parents and providers for effective defense.

### Nixon I: Executive Overreach and Separation of Powers

Nixon's first term did not begin with a frontal assault on Community Action. As Section III showed, Donald Rumsfeld—one of Nixon's own OEO directors—defended CAP's catalytic mission. The opening of Nixon's second term marked a decisive break. Fresh from reelection, the administration tried to dismantle OEO and the Community Action Program without securing congressional authority to do so.

Howard Phillips was installed as Nixon's acting OEO director to carry out that mission, though the president failed to seek the Senate's advice and consent (*Williams v. Phillips* 1973).

Phillips pursued executive dismantling through two levers: impoundment and regional-office closures.

First, the administration tried to withhold money Congress had directed OEO to spend. As the district court later recounted, Congress had extended CAP and required appropriated funds to remain available to local Community Action agencies. A February 1 directive to "all employees" nevertheless declared that OEO would dissolve at the end of the fiscal year.(Phillips 1973a)

Phillips purported to withdraw previously delegated authority to obligate grant funds, brought funding decisions under his personal control, limited grant renewals, prohibited new program components, and ultimately barred grants from extending beyond June 30, 1973. A related instruction to CAAs purported to rescind their federal designations and directed the agencies to wind down operations, dispose of property, liquidate outstanding obligations, and consider formal dissolution.

Through administrative memoranda alone, the executive attempted to threaten, then starve, Community Action out of existence (*Local 2677, American Federation of Government Employees v. Phillips* 1973).

Second, Phillips moved to close OEO's ten regional offices. A March 12 order directed them to prepare for closure by April 28 and announced that OEO's "linkages with Community Action Agencies" would be discontinued. The regional offices processed grants and maintained the direct federal relationship with local CAAs. Their closure was not a peripheral administrative reduction. It was a direct attempt to dismantle the federal infrastructure through which Community Action operated (Phillips 1973b; *Local 2677, American Federation of Government Employees v. Phillips* 1973).

CAA directors and the OEO employees' union fought back. Four CAAs—West Central Missouri Rural Development Corporation, Community Action Lexington-Fayette County, Northeast Kansas Community Action Program, and Action for Boston Community Development—filed a class action on behalf of roughly 930 designated CAAs. The OEO employees' union brought a parallel action from inside the agency. A separate suit by four senators challenged Phillips's authority to exercise the powers of an office for which he had never been nominated or confirmed (*Local 2677, American Federation of Government Employees v. Phillips* 1973; *Williams v. Phillips* 1973).

The defense was itself an episode of power-building. Charlie Braithwait, executive director of West Central Missouri and one of the CAA suit's central organizers, helped coordinate the litigation across the network. In a later living-history account, Braithwait and longtime Community Action advocate Charles McCann recalled that CAA leaders and supporters raised \$500,000 in personal contributions to retain counsel (*Braithwait & McCann Living History* 2021). Legal protections did not enforce themselves.

Community Action leaders mobilized the resources and legal expertise needed to make those protections consequential.

On April 11, Judge Jones granted summary judgment to the plaintiffs. He declared the directives intended to terminate OEO or end the funding and functioning of designated CAAs “unauthorized by law, illegal, and in excess of statutory authority.” Phillips was enjoined from carrying them out and ordered to send the ruling to every regional director and designated CAA. In June, the court in *Williams v. Phillips* separately held that Phillips had not been lawfully appointed and enjoined him from taking further action as acting director.

The legal defense that organized CAA leaders and unionized federal workers mounted blocked the immediate dismantling of Community Action and strengthened the coalition’s capacity to finance and coordinate collective action. It did not merely survive the fight; it became more powerful through it.

## Nixon II: Congressional Renewal

The courts blocked the administration’s immediate dismantling effort, but they could not appropriate money. Community Action had survived an executive attack only to face a different challenge: securing a new congressional appropriation before existing funds ran out.

The coalition responded. Again, it raised its own money, pairing a coalition-financed lobbying campaign with homegrown pressure on members of Congress. In the same living-history account, Braithwait and McCann recalled that one regional effort generated 25,000 letters to a senator already allied with Community Action (*Braithwait & McCann Living History* 2021). A March 28, 1974, White House memorandum reveals the administration’s recognition of Community Action’s countervailing power:

*“CAP Directors have raised some money and hired some high-powered lobbyists including former Congressman Bill Cramer. Members now are starting to hear from mayors and governors in support of extending CAPs” (Loen 1974).*

The White House understood that it was no longer confronting isolated local organizations. The lobbyists marked the coalition’s growing sophistication: professional advocacy it financed and directed, not a substitute for its own power.

The campaign secured bipartisan support in both chambers, and Congress appropriated the funds needed to keep CAP operating. The congressional funding fight compelled the Community Action coalition to continue learning to play across venues: translating bottom-up organization into congressional pressure, entering elite policymaking arenas, and building the coalition necessary to win new federal funding despite an opponent in the White House.

The White House's objective nevertheless remained unchanged. The same March 28 memorandum closed with a blunt question: "May we assume that we are still hanging tough for OEO shutdown on June 30?" (Loen 1974).

After the courts held that Howard Phillips lacked lawful authority to act as OEO director, Al Arnett took office as the agency's presidentially appointed and Senate-confirmed director. Under Arnett's directorship, the White House still expected OEO to shut down by June 30.

### Nixon III: Changing Administrative Judgment

Arnett broke with that objective after encountering the institutions the administration expected him to close. In their living-history account, Braithwait and McCann recalled that meetings in the South brought him into direct contact with local CAA leaders and Black mayors who showed him what Community Action had built and what its disappearance would mean. They also recalled a later meeting with assembled CAA executive directors at San Francisco's Mark Hopkins Hotel. Those encounters made Community Action visible not as an abstract federal controversy, but as a network of locally rooted organizations, leaders, employees, and constituencies with political standing of their own (*Braithwait & McCann Living History* 2021).

The change appeared in Arnett's conduct. Rather than preside over OEO's shutdown, he began defending its continuation. When the White House demanded his resignation in July, Arnett said he had been told that "the President does not want O.E.O." and that he had been accused of "lobbying to continue the agency." The White House confirmed that the conflict arose from Arnett's lobbying against its plans to scale down OEO and described the policy differences as irreconcilable. The administration removed him. Contemporary reporting also placed pressure from Senator Strom Thurmond in the background of the ouster: Arnett said Thurmond had pressed for his dismissal, while Thurmond acknowledged sending the White House information critical of Arnett's political activity in South Carolina (*New York Times*, July 16–17 and July 23, 1974).

OEO did not close on June 30. The defense had also widened Community Action's political reach: the official expected to oversee its shutdown had become a public advocate for its continuation.

Organized local institutions and political leaders forced a federal administrator to reckon with realities the administration's failure narrative had obscured, converting Community Action's local legitimacy and organized presence into influence inside the executive branch. Arnett's change of course reveals a broader source of Community Action's durability: officials charged with controlling, restructuring, or funding the program repeatedly encountered institutions whose practical usefulness and political standing made

dismantling harder to sustain. The network did not merely pressure the administration from outside. It changed administrative judgment itself.

### Head Start: People Power in Collective Defense

Fifty years later, related questions of executive authority reappeared in Head Start. Congress had authorized and funded the program. The Trump-Vance administration nevertheless moved to deactivate it administratively without first persuading Congress to end it.

The attempted disabling again proceeded through money and administrative machinery. First, HHS withheld congressionally appropriated Head Start funds. Between January 20 and April 15, 2025, the agency disbursed roughly 65 percent of what it had released during the comparable period a year earlier. Local programs reported delayed access to grants, threats to payroll and rent, and interruptions in services. In July, the Government Accountability Office concluded that HHS had impermissibly impounded Head Start funds in violation of the Impoundment Control Act. Because the Head Start Act creates a mandatory formula-grant structure, GAO further concluded that the funds could not lawfully be deferred under the Act. The legal architecture Congress built in response to Nixon-era impoundment had become part of Head Start's modern defense. (*GAO 2025.*)

Second, the administration moved against the federal infrastructure through which Head Start operated. HHS closed half of the Office of Head Start's regional offices and eliminated roughly 60 percent of its staff, leaving agencies in twenty-three states without regional program staff. Those offices did more than process paperwork. Program specialists maintained the federal relationship with local providers, supported grant administration and statutory compliance, and approved access to funds needed for rent, payroll, and other immediate obligations. Their removal threatened the machinery through which Congress's commitment became daily program operation.

Third, the administration tried to make Head Start's statutory responsibilities potential grounds for financial punishment. HHS prohibited federal spending on activities associated with diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility and required grantees to certify compliance on pain of losing or repaying federal funds. Agencies received instructions to remove terms associated with race, disability, mental health, tribal communities, underserved populations, and women from grant materials—even where those terms described populations and services the Head Start Act required them to address. Providers faced a manufactured contradiction: complying with the new restrictions could place them in violation of the law governing the program itself.

In July, HHS opened a fourth front by reclassifying Head Start as a federal public benefit from which some immigrant children could be excluded. The directive reversed a nearly three-decade interpretation,

imposed new verification duties without notice and comment, and altered eligibility requirements Congress had repeatedly left untouched.

Politically organized parents and providers were ready for rapid response. Parent Voices Oakland and Family Forward Oregon joined the Head Start associations of Washington, Illinois, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin in challenging the administration's actions. The parent organizations brought together parents and caregivers around accessible, high-quality child care. The state associations linked agencies, staff, and program leaders across jurisdictions and levels of government. Like the OEO employees' union in Nixon I, these organizations gave people living and working inside the institution vehicles through which to act together.

Head Start's ordinary governing structure already required parent leadership through elected policy councils and governing bodies. Its center-based operation had already created shared stakes among parents, staff, and providers around a common public institution. Parent organizations and provider associations converted that embedded knowledge into declarations documenting funding disruptions, interrupted services, contradictory directives, and the consequences of removing the federal support Congress had required.

The courts supplied legal protection, but organized parents and providers made those protections actionable. In September 2025, the district court preliminarily blocked HHS from excluding children through its new immigration directive. In January 2026, the court enjoined the anti-DEIA letter, grant certification, and related funding conditions. It also postponed the effective dates of the Office of Head Start layoffs and regional-office closures while the litigation proceeded. The January order expressly prohibited the administration from delaying, withholding, conditioning, or terminating Head Start grants for reasons not authorized by the Head Start Act or its regulations.

The program endured. Head Start disbursements returned to rates broadly consistent with the prior year, and Congress funded Head Start at \$12.357 billion for fiscal 2026—an \$85 million increase. The litigation remains ongoing, but the administration has so far failed to eliminate the program, impose the challenged grant restrictions, exclude immigrant children, or complete the contested dismantling of its federal infrastructure.

The defense also exercised and deepened the coalition's political capacity. Parent organizations and provider associations coordinated across states, connected program knowledge to legal expertise, and made the consequences of administrative dismantling legible to courts and Congress. Unlike the Nixon-era litigation, which rested primarily on CAAs and the OEO employees' union, this defense also mobilized an organized beneficiary constituency—the parents themselves.

That is the people-power payoff. Head Start's material value made the stakes urgent. Its delivery architecture gave parents and staff relationships, governing experience, shared standing, and organizations through which to act. Under attack, those capacities became collective defense.

### What the Stress Tests Show

The four fights expose different but mutually reinforcing dimensions of collective power. Nixon I revealed the capacity of organizations and workers to finance litigation and enforce statutory limits. Nixon II revealed a network capable of converting local relationships into congressional pressure and professional advocacy. Nixon III showed locally rooted institutions changing the judgment of the administrator expected to close them. Head Start adds the force of a constituency organized through the institution's ordinary operation.

None of the defenses succeeded through a single venue. Courts could block unlawful dismantling but could not appropriate money. Congress could supply resources but could not manufacture locally rooted organizations on demand. Administrative relationships mattered because organized institutions could make their legitimacy and usefulness consequential. Legal protections, political allies, professional expertise, and governing rules became power when organizations and constituencies could connect them.

The cases therefore show more than survival. Each defense preserved an institutional base while increasing the coalition's capacity to act: financing legal expertise, coordinating nationally, operating across political venues, influencing administration, and organizing the people who used and sustained a public institution. Conflict did not merely reveal power that already existed. It also created opportunities to build more of it.

The stress tests reveal Community Action's central achievement and its central limit. Federal policy built durable organizational and network power, but that durability did not consistently organize the people Community Action served. Head Start demonstrates the stronger possibility. Politically incorporating delivery connects durable infrastructure to a constituency capable of defending the institution that helped organize it.

Power-building policy must therefore be designed for conflict as well as participation. Institutions that redistribute resources, authority, and governing capacity will attract attempts at clawback. The democratic answer is not merely to preserve their service outputs. It is to preserve and deepen the organizations, relationships, and governing roles through which ordinary people can defend what they have built—and build more power through the fight.

## VIII. Cross-Case Lessons

### A. Durable Infrastructure Is Collective Power

Community Action's first major lesson is infrastructural. Across episodes commonly remembered as death blows, the network repeatedly proved more entrenched than its critics—and later scholars—assumed. Federal policy resourced and organized poor communities, underwriting a local network through which they could exercise collective influence. Washington repeatedly changed the program's administrative form without dissolving that network.

Opponents repeatedly tried to reclaim resources and authority that Community Action had redistributed away from traditional gatekeepers. Yet even when they won important concessions, they overwhelmingly failed to displace the original, predominantly nonprofit network. In several cases, redesigns later remembered as proof of defeat instead hardened continuity and magnified the network's collective power.

Green and Quie constrained Community Action but stabilized local recognition and formalized tripartite governance. Reagan abolished the Community Services Administration and reduced funding, but Congress carried the original CAA network into CSBG as protected eligible entities. Neither redesign produced anything like the wholesale displacement the failure myth requires.

The three Nixon-era cases reveal the substantial agency behind that durability. The defenses were not passive survival but episodes of power-building: CAAs and the OEO employees' union exercised the influence federal policy had helped them acquire, and the work of fighting back taught the network to coordinate nationally and act as a political actor. Community Action did not merely survive the attacks; it became more powerful by fighting them.

Federal control shifted. Budgets fell. Administrative homes changed. Workforces were reduced. Figure 1 establishes the breadth of what nevertheless endured; the clawback cases reveal its political meaning. Durable infrastructure is collective power because it gives organized actors a persistent base from which they can absorb an attack and answer it.

### B. People Power Must Be Resourced and Organized

Community Action's durability also reveals its central limit: durable infrastructure does not automatically cultivate people power. Organizational and network power can preserve institutions, coordinate collective defense, and carry claims across political arenas. But the survival of a CAA—or even an entire national network—does not mean that the people it serves are organized to shape and defend those institutions.

Formal representation can delegate authority to individuals without resourcing an organized base. Service delivery can materially improve people's lives without creating organizations through which beneficiaries pursue collective claims. Community Action's history therefore distinguishes durable institutions that serve poor communities from institutions that sustainably resource and organize people power for the poor.

The Nixon defenses sharpen that distinction. CAAs and the OEO employees' union converted legal protections and expertise into leverage, preserving and strengthening the institutional base—but that was organizational and network power, not activated people power among the communities it served.

Head Start parents provide the clearest contemporary example of this stronger possibility. Their organized role—and their defense of the program under attack—shows that beneficiary power can be real, durable, and politically consequential when federal programs create structures through which recipients pursue collective claims rather than receive services as individuals.

The broader lesson is how much people power remains untapped. Community Action never generalized Head Start's level of organized leverage across the full range of CAA beneficiaries. The modern shift toward more individualized benefits and services compounds the problem. Programs such as weatherization require purposefully designed supplemental scaffolding if recipients are to become a constituency rather than remain isolated.

A parallel missed opportunity concerns worker organization among Head Start and CAA staff. Organized OEO employees were pivotal to Community Action's defense under Nixon, but worker organization never became a general feature of the larger network. That missed opportunity matters because frontline workers and beneficiaries can each organize around how services are governed and delivered. Their interests will not always coincide, which makes independent organization more—not less—important.

Together, organized OEO employees and Head Start parents show what organized constituencies can accomplish—and how much power-building potential remains unrealized across the larger Community Action network. People power must be resourced and organized.

### **C. The Failure Myth Delegitimizes Community Power**

Community Action's final lesson concerns narrative power. Its history has been shaped less by the quiet persistence of local institutions than by the spectacle of federal conflict. Those conflicts were real, but they created a misleading interpretive shortcut: what happened in Washington came to stand in for the program's entire history.

The resulting failure narrative overstates federal defeat, understates local persistence, and obscures forms of collective power that survived—and sometimes grew—through apparent death blows.

Section VII showed why visible conflict is an unreliable proxy for failure. Conflict does not in itself establish Community Action's failure; the relevant questions are what opponents sought to reclaim, what organized defense emerged, what that defense built, and what endured.

Several core episodes reveal nearly the opposite of what the failure narrative implies: the redesigns remembered as defeats—Green and Quie, Reagan's block grant, Nixon's assault on OEO—entrenched the network or strengthened its coalition. The conventional interpretation does not merely omit what endured; it often reads the political consequences backward.

The failure myth delegitimizes community power in the present. It teaches reformers to abandon existing infrastructure and tells poor communities that one of the few federally supported institutional networks designed to give them sustained political standing failed. It makes reinvention appear necessary and reconstruction naïve. It hides the fact that the United States already has a territorially rooted national antipoverty network with statutory standing and decades of demonstrated capacity for collective defense.

Correcting the myth does not require romanticizing Community Action. Decades of devolution and service-delivery pressure have weakened organizing functions across parts of the network and made its democratic capacities uneven. But those limits do not erase the power Community Action built. They make the surviving network the starting point for the agenda that follows: where to reinvest, what to reimagine, and what federal capacity must be reconstructed.

What looked most dramatic in Washington was often the least reliable guide to what endured in communities. The task is not to invent new democratic infrastructure from scratch, but to reinvest in, reimagine, and reconstruct the infrastructure Community Action built—and that still endures.

## IX. Policy Agenda: Reinvest, Reimagine, Reconstruct

Recovering Community Action's history changes the reform agenda. The task is not to recreate OEO wholesale, ask CAAs to abandon service delivery, or replicate the original Community Action Program without revision. It is to build from infrastructure that already exists while correcting its central democratic weakness: Community Action preserved durable organizations more consistently than it sustained organized people power.

The agenda has three parts. **Reinvest** in the people, organizations, and networks through which collective power is built. **Reimagine** governance and delivery so participation carries real responsibility and material provision helps people act together. **Reconstruct** the federal architecture needed to coordinate, improve, and protect that work.

## REINVEST

Community Action's most important resource is the durable infrastructure that empowers ordinary people to act collectively over time. Reinvestment begins there.

### 1. Reinvest in People Power

Community Action's greatest promise—federal policy's capacity to resource and organize ordinary people for meaningful collective action—was only partially realized.

Federal policy should fund nonpartisan civil-society organizing on a sustained basis and refocus support on autonomous constituencies: organizations through which ordinary people define their own agendas, cultivate homegrown leaders, and act collectively across political venues over time. Those organizations must be able, where necessary, to bargain with, monitor, and challenge the agencies on which their members rely.

CAA staff deserve fair and intelligible ground rules and the same political freedoms enjoyed by comparable nonprofit employees. Federal administrators should proactively clarify which political activities CAAs may lawfully undertake while drawing much clearer lines around prohibited electioneering and partisan activity. CSBG reauthorization should repeal the statute's extraordinary extension of the Hatch Act to employees of private nonprofit CAAs, which restricts frontline staff whose duties are connected to CSBG while leaving coworkers performing comparable work solely through co-administered programs such as LIHEAP outside its reach (United States Office of Special Counsel 2014).

### 2. Scaffold Individualized Services

Many materially important social benefits are inherently politically thin. Individualized provision leaves people politically isolated unless deliberate scaffolding turns scattered recipients into an organized constituency with the resources and standing to influence the institutions that control access.

Federal policy must invest in that scaffolding. Neighborhood centers and comparable community institutions can provide durable places where recipients meet across programs, identify recurring barriers, understand and defend their rights, and formulate collective claims. Governing councils attached to those institutions should possess real responsibility and authority over defined aspects of service design, implementation, and accountability.

The Tidewater Nutrition Alliance is the working model: organizing around food assistance—training recipients in their rights and turning individual aid into collective claims—accomplished what the benefit alone never could. The scaffolding, not the food, built collective power.

### 3. Reinvest in Local Coordinating Capacity

Collective power requires flexible operating support, institutional memory, coordination, and enough capacity to absorb setbacks and fight again. Categorical grants often treat those capacities as overhead even though they are the foundation of durable collective action.

CSBG subsidizes this infrastructure on a shoestring—just \$775 million nationwide for nearly 1,000 eligible entities (Dalaker 2025). Congress should increase funding by an order of magnitude while protecting the unique flexibility that allows CAAs to regularly assess community needs, provide multifaceted navigation and referrals, coordinate across programs, and act on problems no single grant can address. Federal policy should also strengthen the state, regional, and national organizations through which CAAs share training and technical expertise, coordinate legal strategy, and act collectively across communities and levels of government. Reinvestment should treat the Community Action coalition as democratic infrastructure.

CAAs are unusually valuable as experienced federal meta-grantees. They can lower administrative barriers for smaller, newer, and more constituency-rooted organizations that have local legitimacy but limited compliance infrastructure. Federal agencies should work with state, local, and philanthropic partners to support models in which CAAs hold grants, manage reporting, provide fiscal sponsorship or back-office support, and subgrant to grassroots groups without absorbing or displacing them.

## REIMAGINE

More funding will not, by itself, revive Community Action’s democratic promise. Reimagining Community Action requires changing who governs public programs.

### 4. Enshrine Beneficiary Power

Where delivery does not itself create durable interest-based organization, federal policy should support independent beneficiary unions or comparable membership organizations. Congress should provide stable funding, access to eligible beneficiaries as potential members, program information, and formal rights to bargain collectively over administration and program change. These organizations should be governed by beneficiaries and remain independent of the agencies with which they bargain.

The temporary expansion of the Child Tax Credit under the Biden administration clarifies the missed opportunity. It meaningfully reduced child poverty and gave families greater financial autonomy, but recipients were not organized into a constituency capable of mobilizing to deepen or defend the benefit before it lapsed. With sufficient federal funding, access to eligible families, and organizing support, a parents’ union could have helped parents understand the credit as a right worth fighting to keep and

bargain with the federal government over its administration and future. A more generous CTC could then have done more than improve economic well-being: it could have fostered a collective identity and built lasting political power among American families.

## 5. Reimagine Paraprofessional Careers

Federal administrators should support CAAs and related grantees in creating paraprofessional career pathways that bring resident knowledge inside implementation. These roles should carry real responsibility for improving program design and delivery, not confine community members to outreach or advisory work.

Community hiring is not enough if residents are brought in only as low-wage labor. Positions should include fair compensation, training, supervision, advancement pathways, and real authority to improve the program—treating lived experience as a source of institutional judgment.

## 6. Restore Representative Accountability

Tripartite boards remain one of Community Action's most distinctive institutional features, but representation is not self-executing. Federal guidance should clarify that, wherever feasible, low-income representatives should be selected by and accountable to organized local constituencies rather than serving only as unaffiliated individuals.

Demographic presence is not the same as democratic representation. Some CAAs use random sampling to constitute the electorate for low-income board seats (Community Action Program Legal Services 2021). But a randomly assembled electorate is no substitute for interest-based organization: it treats representation as the aggregation of interchangeable individuals rather than an accountable relationship between representatives and an organized constituency.

Some CAAs go even further, filling the low-income seats themselves by lottery—extending the same logic of interchangeable individuals from the electorate to the representatives. The remedy is not a better lottery but a real election—the regular, democratically meaningful selection of representatives by an organized constituency, not an assembled electorate. Federal guidance and the network's technical-assistance providers should promote that standard rather than showcasing random selection as a democratic model.

Those representatives should exercise defined authority over consequential decisions, including upstream choices made before major policy options are foreclosed. The bodies on which they serve must also have the independent staff and resources needed to exercise that authority (Rahman and Simonson 2020). CAAs should separately compensate low-income representatives and cover the practical costs of sustained participation.

## RECONSTRUCT

Reinvestment in people power and reimagination of who governs will not pay off without a federal architecture capable of supporting, coordinating, improving, and protecting that work. Reconstructing Community Action requires rebuilding that federal capacity.

### 7. Restore Democracy-Deepening R&D

Community Action's original strength was not uniformity. It was flexible experimentation grounded in local need and democratic participation.

Congress should restore dedicated demonstration authority and rebuild strong in-house federal research and evaluation capacity for CSBG and related antipoverty programs. A major increase in the overall appropriation should include protected funding for three distinct functions: piloting new institutional designs, evaluating their effects, and helping successful models spread. These funds should supplement, not compete with, the already inadequate support sustaining existing CAAs.

Federal administrators should test how different service forms, governance structures, neighborhood institutions, organizing supports, and worker roles affect both material outcomes and collective capacity. Performance systems should reward access, uptake, retention, and successful material outcomes—not only formal compliance, processing speed, or error reduction (Barnes et al. 2023). They should also assess whether programs develop leaders, connect representatives to organized constituencies, assign residents meaningful responsibility, and change institutional practices in response to collective claims.

The purpose is network-wide learning, not another compliance checklist—and a path from local experiment to replication and permanent authorization for the designs that prove out.

### 8. Rebuild a Robust Federal Front Door

Congress should establish a federal coordinating office with enough authority and visibility to serve as a robust front door for antipoverty policy and democratic institution-building. Whether housed in a strengthened Office of Community Services or a new successor institution, it should have meaningful grantmaking authority and the power to convene agencies whose separate funding streams converge inside the same communities. It should use that authority to resolve conflicts among those streams, fund community-based intermediaries, and protect the flexible coordinating role that makes CAAs valuable.

Regional capacity is essential. Federal personnel closest to implementation should have sufficient resources and delegated authority to maintain ongoing relationships with CAAs and other local institutions, resolve operational problems, and identify conditions national reporting systems cannot see.

They should serve as accessible federal partners—not merely compliance outposts or conduits for national directives.

The Trump administration closed HHS regional offices in Boston, New York, Chicago, San Francisco, and Seattle—five major Democratic-led metropolitan areas—reducing the department’s regional footprint by half, eliminating West Coast presence altogether, and disrupting Head Start grant administration (Kennedy 2025). Congress should therefore establish and fund a durable regional field-office system with minimum staffing and delegated authority rather than leave federal-local capacity wholly vulnerable to executive reorganization.

## 9. Organize Frontline Workers

Public-sector unions should prioritize organizing Head Start and Community Action workers. These workers are frontline translators between public policy and daily life. They see recurring barriers, build trust with families, and shape whether institutions feel responsive or punitive.

The fragmented grantee structure makes workplace-by-workplace organizing unusually difficult. Public-sector unions should develop coordinated strategies capable of building worker power across the Head Start and Community Action workforces. Congress must appropriate enough funding to support fair compensation and collectively bargained wages and benefits. Federal agencies should structure grants and program requirements so that those funds reach the workforce.

Worker organization complements beneficiary power but does not substitute for it—workers and beneficiaries have distinct interests, and each needs its own independent organization.

## 10. Harden Democratic Infrastructure

Institutions that shift resources and authority will attract efforts to weaken or displace them. Congress should protect the continuity of power-building infrastructure through multiyear grant cycles, enforceable pass-through requirements, and eligible-entity protections. Redesignation must remain possible when an eligible entity genuinely fails, but it should require transparent standards, resident participation, an opportunity to correct deficiencies, and independent review—not an ordinary contracting decision.

Protection must anticipate extra-constitutional executive clawbacks. Congress should establish enforceable funding timelines, emergency procedures for payment disruptions, and safeguards against office closures, staffing reductions, or reorganizations that disable authorized programs before affected institutions can obtain relief.

## X. Conclusion

Community Action was neither a brief, failed experiment in participation nor a model to replicate wholesale. It was an uneven but durable experiment in using federal policy to break concentrated local control and build democratic infrastructure from below.

The failure narrative obscured what mattered most. Community Action did not disappear. It survived because federal policy built organizations with resources, standing, and the capacity to act across courts, Congress, administration, and local politics. It fell short because institutional durability did not automatically translate into organized people power. That is not a reason to dismiss the experiment. It is the central design lesson.

Head Start shows the stronger possibility. Delivery can organize the people who use and sustain a public institution into a constituency capable of shaping and defending it. Parents and staff did not have to be assembled after the program came under attack. Its ordinary routines, governing roles, relationships, and organizations had already given them shared stakes and a basis for acting together.

This history clarifies two contemporary confusions about democratic reform. The first is the temptation to equate deeper engagement with empowered participation. Better engagement improves the information available to policymakers—but engagement that does not redistribute resources, change processes, or create accountability becomes another procedural layer: officials convene meetings, residents talk, decisions remain unchanged, and people leave more alienated because their participation carried no weight.

Power-building participation is different, and Community Action shows what it takes. CAP's strongest mechanisms were not consultations layered onto decisions already made. They were institutional supports—direct funding, formal representation, paid responsibilities, paraprofessional roles, neighborhood centers, program councils, and autonomous organizations—that changed who possessed the capacity, access, and influence to shape consequential decisions.

Participation becomes obstructionist when it gives already powerful actors more opportunities to block. It becomes democratic infrastructure when it equips communities normally excluded from governing to make public institutions work.

The second confusion is the idea that democratic repair can be achieved through fast, automatic, and seamless delivery without also asking whether public provision builds power. Community Action rejected the false choice between meeting material needs and cultivating collective capacity. It treated delivery as one possible site of power-building, not its opposite.

Invisible material benefits can improve lives without producing organization or defense. Public provision becomes democracy-deepening when it also builds relationships, governing responsibilities, shared claims, institutions, and organized constituencies. Head Start illustrates the point most clearly because materially significant benefits are delivered through routines, parent governance, staff partnerships, center relationships, and sustained engagement with an institution that families have reason and standing to shape. Other services can improve lives without building collective power. When politically thin provision is paired with durable organizational scaffolding, however, individualized receipt can become shared claims, collective standing, and institutional pressure.

The lesson is neither “more process” nor “deliver fast.” It is power-building public provision: policy designed to meet urgent needs while resourcing and organizing the people most affected to shape, improve, and defend the institutions that serve them.

This capacity matters because democratic institutions do not operate outside politics. Programs that shift resources, authority, and governing capacity will generate opposition. Legal protections matter when organized actors can enforce them. Funding commitments matter when constituencies can defend them. Formal participation matters when representatives remain connected to organized bases. Institutional survival matters because it preserves the staff, relationships, legitimacy, memory, and standing through which communities can absorb setbacks and act again.

Community Action still offers much of that infrastructure. Its organizational durability exceeded its success in sustaining people power, but the network remains a living base from which that unrealized promise can be rebuilt. The task now is to reinvest in its durable organizational foundation, reimagine CAAs as democratic intermediaries, and reconstruct the governing roles, delivery practices, and organized constituencies through which poor communities can build power.

The democratic test is not whether government listens deeper or delivers faster. It is whether public policy helps the governed build the power to govern.

## References

- Andrews, Kenneth T. 2023. "Social Movements and Policy Implementation: The Mississippi Civil Rights Movement and the War on Poverty, 1965 to 1971." Sec. 71. *American Sociological Review* 66 (1): 71–95. <https://doi.org/10.1177/000312240106600105>.
- Arnstein, Sherry R. 1969. "A Ladder of Citizen Participation." *Journal of the American Institute of Planners* 35 (4): 216–24. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01944366908977225>.
- Bailey, Martha J., and Sheldon Danziger. 2013. *Legacies of the War on Poverty*. Russell Sage Foundation.
- Bailey, Martha J., and Nicolas J. Duquette. 2014. "How Johnson Fought the War on Poverty: The Economics and Politics of Funding at the Office of Economic Opportunity." *The Journal of Economic History* 74 (2): 351–88. Cambridge Core. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022050714000291>.
- Braithwait & McCann Living History. 2021. May 13.
- Cascio, Elizabeth U., and Ebonya Washington. 2014. "Valuing the Vote: The Redistribution of Voting Rights and State Funds Following the Voting Rights Act of 1965 \*." Sec. 379. *The Quarterly Journal of Economics* 129 (1): 379–433. <https://doi.org/10.1093/qje/qjt028>.
- Ceraso, Karen. 1998. "Community Action Agencies." *Shelterforce*, July 1.
- Clark, Robert Francis. 2000. *Maximum Feasible Success: A History of the Community Action Program*. National Association of Community Action Agencies Washington, DC.
- Community Action Program Legal Services, Inc. 2021. *Raising the Low-Income Voice: Case Studies in Democratic Selection Procedures*. Community Action Program Legal Services, Inc. (CAPLAW). [https://caplaw.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/CAPLAW\\_RaisingtheLowIncomeVoice\\_April2021.pdf](https://caplaw.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/CAPLAW_RaisingtheLowIncomeVoice_April2021.pdf).
- Community Services Administration. 1980. *CSA Opportunity II Past Present Future Summer 1980*.
- CSBG IM #37 Definition and Allowability of Direct and Administrative Cost Block Appropriation and Allocations (2000).
- Dalaker, Joseph. 2025. *Community Services Block Grants (CSBG): Background and Funding*. No. RL32872. Congressional Research Service. <https://www.congress.gov/crs-product/RL32872>(<https://www.congress.gov/crs-product/RL32872>).
- Falk Jr, Jerome B., and Stuart R. Pollak. 1972. "Political Interference with Publicly Funded Lawyers: The CRLA Controversy and the Future of Legal Services." *Hastings LJ* 24: 599.
- Garden-Monheit, Hannah, and Tresa Joseph. 2025. *Building a More Effective, Responsive Government: Lessons Learned from the Biden-Harris Administration*.
- Hacker, Jacob S., and Paul Pierson. 2014. "After the 'Master Theory': Downs, Schattschneider, and the Rebirth of Policy-Focused Analysis." *Perspectives on Politics* 12 (03): 643–62. <https://doi.org/10.1017/s1537592714001637>.
- Hertel-Fernandez, Alexander. 2025. "Beyond Deliverism." *Democracy Journal*.

- Joint Center for Political Studies. 1973a. "FOCUS Magazine (Annual Review of Black Elected Officials & Municipal Strategies)." *Focus* (Washington, D.C.) 2 (2): 1–8.
- Joint Center for Political Studies. 1973b. "FOCUS Magazine (Special Feature on Black Mayoral and Municipal Leadership)." *Focus* (Washington, D.C.) 1 (12): 1–8.
- Joint Center for Political Studies. 1974. "FOCUS Magazine (Special Feature on Black Elected Officials and Local Power Expansion)." *Focus* (Washington, D.C.) 2 (6): 1–8.
- Katznelson, Ira. 1989. *Was the Great Society a Lost Opportunity? The Rise and Fall of the New Deal Order, 1930–1980*, edited by Steve Fraser and Gary Gerstle. Princeton University Press.
- Kennedy, Robert F., Jr. 2025. "RFK Jr.: I'm Fighting Chronic Disease, Slashing Unhealthy Fat at HHS." HHS Press Room, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, April 10. <https://www.hhs.gov/press-room/ny-post-kennedy-op-ed-slashing-unhealthy-fat-hhs.html>.
- Kim, Jae Yeon. 2020. "How Other Minorities Gained Access: The War on Poverty and Asian American and Latino Community Organizing." Sec. 89. *Political Research Quarterly* 75 (1): 89–102. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1065912920983456>.
- Kim, Jae Yeon. forthcoming. *Unseen and Uncounted: How Bureaucracy and Community Organizing Made New Racial Groups in America*.
- Kravitz, Sanford, and Ferne Kolodner. 1969. "Community Action: Where Has It Been? Where Will It Go?" *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 385 (July): 30–40. <https://doi.org/10.1177/000271626938500104>.
- LaRochelle, Ryan. 2018. "Reassessing the History of the Community Action Program, 1963–1967." *Journal of Policy History* 31 (November): 126–64. <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0898030618000362>.
- Larochelle, Ryan. 2023. "'A Mission Without Precedent': The Rise and Fall of the Office of Economic Opportunity, 1964–1981." Sec. 1. *Journal of Policy History* 36 (1): 1–33. <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0898030623000313>.
- Local 2677, American Federation of Government Employees v. Phillips (1973). <https://justia.com>.
- Loen, Vern. 1974. "OEO Extension." In *Loen and Leppert Files*, Box 7. Gerald R. Ford Presidential Library, March 28. <https://s3.amazonaws.com/NARApodstorage/lz/presidential-libraries/ford/grf-0014/570828/1075761.pdf>.
- Masters, Jim. 2014. *A History of Community Action*.
- Maxwell, Mary Beth. 2025. "Time for People-Centered Policy." Sec. 76. *Democracy Journal*, March 12. <https://democracyjournal.org/magazine/76/time-for-people-centered-policy/>.
- Moynihan, Daniel Patrick. 1965. *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action*. Department of Labor.
- Moynihan, Daniel Patrick. 1969. *Maximum Feasible Misunderstanding; Community Action in the War on Poverty*.
- Murray, Charles. 1984. *Losing Ground: American Social Policy, 1950–1980*. Basic books.
- NASCSP. 2023. *FFY 2023 STATE CSBG FACTSHEET*.

- National Advisory Council. 1969. *OEO 1969 March. The Second Annual Report of the National Advisory Council.Pdf*>.
- New York Times*. 1976. "'Welfare Queen' Becomes Issue in Reagan Campaign." February 15.
- O'Connor, Alice. 2001. *Poverty Knowledge*.
- Office of Economic Opportunity. 1968a. *OEO Instruction 6005-1 Participation of the Poor*.
- Office of Economic Opportunity. 1968b. *OEO Instruction 6710-1 Applying for a CAP Grant*. Nos. 6710-1.
- Office of Economic Opportunity. 1969. *CAP Mission Guide Participation of the Poor*.
- Orleck, Annelise. 2023. *Storming Caesars Palace: How Black Mothers Fought Their Own War on Poverty*. Beacon Press.
- Orleck, Annelise, and Lisa Gayle Hazirjian. 2011. *The War on Poverty: A New Grassroots History, 1964-1980*. University of Georgia Press.
- Phillips, Howard. 1973a. "Howard Phillips Memo Ordering OEO to Shut Down." Office of Economic Opportunity, February 1. <IA3-2 OEO Feb 1 1973.
- Phillips, Howard. 1973b. *OEO 1973 Mar 12 Teletype Director Howard Philips to All OEO Employees about Shutting down OEO April 28.Pdf*>.
- Piven, F. F., and R. Cloward. 1978. *Poor People's Movements: Why They Succeed, How They Fail*. Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group.
- Piven, Frances Fox, and Richard Cloward. 1993. *Regulating the Poor: The Functions of Public Welfare*. Vol. 3. Vintage.
- Quadagno, Jill. 1994. *The Color of Welfare: How Racism Undermined the War on Poverty*. Oxford University Press. <https://oup.com>.
- Rahman, K. Sabeel, and Jocelyn Simonson. 2020. "The Institutional Design of Community Control." *California Law Review* 108 (3): 679-742. <https://doi.org/10.15779/Z38WD3Q23Q>.
- Rumsfeld, Donald. 1970. *OEO Instruction 6320-1 Mission of a Community Action Agency*. Office of Economic Opportunity.
- Shriver, Sargent. 1966. *Community Action Memo: Involvement of the Poor in All OEO Programs*.
- United Community Corporation. 2026. "Our Histor." May 20.
- United States Office of Special Counsel. 2014. *Hatch Act's Application to Employees of Private, Nonprofit Organizations*. U.S. Office of Special Counsel. <https://www.osc.gov/~assets/docs/hatch-acts-application-to-employees-of-private-nonprofit-organizations.pdf>.
- Wilkins, Elizabeth. 2025. "Winning a People-Powered Future." *Democracy Journal*.
- Williams v. Phillips, 360 Federal Supplement 1363 (1973). <https://law.justia.com/cases/federal/district-courts/FSupp/360/1363/1887560/>.