

58 years later, our war on poverty continues

By Steven McGarrity, executive director

Last night, Americans across the country who tuned into the State of the Union Address before Congress may have walked away with varying impressions of the President's remarks. But one theme that rang loudly for all of us to hear was that for far too long, too many Americans have lived in abject poverty.

It was 58 years ago this month that then-President Lyndon B. Johnson delivered his speech to Congress, declaring an "unconditional war" on poverty and asking our country's leaders to pass the Economic Opportunity Act -- a piece of legislation that would go on to establish programs that included legal aid and community action agencies.

We at Legal Aid have long enjoyed strong partnerships with our local community action agencies. We believe so strongly in the work they do that we've committed former and current staff and board members to serve on their agency boards in five of the eight counties we serve.

But even those of us who have spent our entire careers in the social services realm often don't have a full-scope understanding of just how integral these organizations are to the fabric of our community.

Community action agencies are the go-to place for almost anything affecting low-income people. Their very purpose is to reduce poverty by serving the needs of low-income residents and to help them get access to the services they need.

Over time, things like utility assistance and home energy assistance programs have often been administered through CAAs. Tax assistance programs like VITA sites are often run through local CAAs. Connecting people with housing providers, mental health counseling and recovery services, supporting families with children -- these

are all integral programs that our communities often take for granted.

During the pandemic, especially, they have become the hub for almost all rental and homeowner assistance across central northeast Ohio. They've been asked to do the herculean task of distributing millions of dollars to families struggling due to the pandemic (all without additional manpower to make it happen), and have been doing an incredible job of getting those dollars out into the community.

Most CAAs operate the Head Start program in their community, which provides early (Pre-K) education for low-income families. With the massive retreat of working mothers since the pandemic started, what could be more important to the economic status of working families, and to our economy overall, than making sure working parents have high-quality childcare in an educationally enriching environment?

Even before the pandemic, CAAs were looking for innovative ways to serve the needs of low-income residents. Our partnership in Wayne County, for example, allowed us to have a renewed presence in the community through a virtual office space with video conferencing that connects people directly with our staff -- no matter where they are. (This was before we all lived our lives through Zoom.)

When a community need isn't being met, we often turn to community action agencies. We do this because they have years of experience building trust in underserved communities, the capacity and infrastructure to manage large, complex programs, and a history of being well-run organizations with a high degree of transparency and accountability. And most of the time, when we ask them to take something on, they say yes.

For the last half century, legal aid and community action programs have grown up together, fighting for equity in our communities. We are grateful for their partnership.

Learn more about the community action programs serving central northeast Ohio by following the links below, or [click here to find](#) your local program.

[Community Action Akron Summit](#)

[Community Action Wayne/Medina](#)

[Community Action Agency of Columbiana County](#)

[Community Action Council of Portage County](#)

[Mahoning Youngstown Community Action Partnership](#)

[Stark County Community Action Agency](#)

[Trumbull Community Action Program](#)

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