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CRITIQUE OF THE CLEVELAND COMMUNITY ACTION PROGRAM PROPOSAL

We understand the implicit intent of the Economic Opportunities Act is to bring the forgotten fifth of America into the mainstream of our economic and social life. The program has two main objectives, and seeks to employ two major means toward attaining them.

First: The aim of the Act is to provide opportunities for the poor to "climb the ladder" out of oppressive economic and social conditions. The Act specifies that communities participating in Community Action Programs must provide "...services, assistance, and other activities of sufficient variety, scope, and size to give promise of progress toward elimination of poverty through developing economic opportunities, improving human performance, motivation, and productivity, and bettering the conditions under which people live, learn, and work..."

Second: The Economic Opportunities Act aims to involve the poor, and their community groups, in the development and conduct of the programs aimed at their own economic, social and educational problems. The Bill states that Community Action Programs should be "...developed, conducted and administered with the maximum feasible participation of residents of the areas and members of (low income) groups..." Thus the Bill seeks to overcome the powerlessness and disorganization that characterize most poverty communities and hinder sincere efforts from within and from without to ameliorate conditions.

The Act proposes to achieve these objectives through a local, non-profit corporation "...broadly representative of the community" to coordinate the attack on poverty in the area. It is on the basis of these criteria that we base our critique of the proposed Cleveland Community Action Program.

I. Organization of the Council Board of Trustees

A. The present Board of Trustees of the Council for Economic Opportunities in Greater Cleveland consists of 22 persons. Of the 22, fifteen are residents of Cleveland suburbs, and 7 reside in the city itself. In contrast to this proportion, we find that the problem of poverty is overwhelmingly a city problem. The large majority of unemployed youth, school dropouts, and unemployed adults is found within the city. In 1963 ninety-seven percent of the general relief and ADC caseload was within the city, as was 90 percent of the Aid to the Disabled. The preliminary proposal for Cleveland's participation in the Economic Opportunities Act describes programs which are largely designed for operation within the city limits for city population. However, while the proposed program is aimed at the inner city, the present Board is predominantly suburban.

B. In addition to the constituting public officials, the Board is composed of businessmen and corporation executives, three churchmen, a few attorneys, one labor representative and one representative of a west side council. Such a Board is not "...broadly representative of the community" within the intent of the Act.

C. With the possible exception of three members, the Board is not representative of the poor or those familiar with their circumstances. There are no representatives of Protestant church groups who are in viable communication with the effective leaders of Negro and white inner city churches. There is no representation of neighborhood civic or political leadership from Cleveland's east side poverty areas where the preponderance of poverty is found. Although the draft proposal recognizes that discrimination is one of the factors responsible for poverty, the Board includes no representation from Cleveland's several civil rights groups. The Board chose no representation from the indigenous poverty population itself.

In summary, the present Board is hardly representative of the community affected by poverty, and it is difficult to imagine an effective program being developed and administered by such a group. We believe the present Board fails to meet the requirements of the Economic Opportunities Act. Business, labor, governmental, social welfare and religious leadership belongs on the Cleveland Economic Opportunities Board, but the other groups mentioned above (C) must also have adequate representation if the Board is to fully represent the community. Furthermore, the Board should have a preponderance of city residents.

II. Involvement of the Poor

A. Development. - The Act stresses the involvement of the victims of poverty themselves in the development of the programs. There is no evidence that they have been involved in the development of the present Cleveland proposal, nor does the proposal provide adequate opportunity for involvement in program development at any level.

B. Conduct and Administration. - There are two major means of involving the poor in the conduct and administration of Community Action Programs. One is in the policy making process through a variety of techniques (local board participation, community forums, neighborhood surveys, etc.). The other is through actually working in the programs in a variety of jobs. With respect to the first, policy and decision making is left in the hands of professionals, city-wide boards of existing organizations and the Council Board. To carry out the intent of the Act, provision must be made at all levels for involvement of the neighborhood residents and members of low income groups. With regard to paid personnel, in the Title II proposal, there is an overemphasis upon professional staff and too limited usage of poverty victims. There is ample room for innovation and expansion here. For example, local residents could be employed as neighborhood workers in the neighborhood development service. Neighborhood people could be hired and trained as "medics" to provide front line health services in the neighborhood. The library program could be expanded by hiring neighborhood people as library aides, story hour leaders and book promoters in the neighborhood.

In summary, the present proposal over-utilizes professional staff and minimizes the usage of neighborhood people. If the aim of the Act is to be achieved in Cleveland, the role of neighborhood people as workers in the programs must be vastly expanded. Not only is this a means of providing job training and improving income, but also it provides the poor with the dignity of helping themselves.

III. Certain Other Problems

A. Innovation. - To combat poverty, innovation in methods and services is needed, not just more of what has been done in the past. In the main the Cleveland Community Action Programs Proposal fails to meet this need. For example:

1. Community Organization. Street and block clubs in poverty neighborhoods have tended to organize the moderate income homeowners, not the renting poor. The present proposal appears to regard street clubs as the sole vehicle for community organization in poverty neighborhoods, thus missing the bulk of the poor. There is a need for a variety of community organization approaches to adequately involve the poor.

2. Small Business. The proposal seems merely to contemplate an expansion of the present program of the Small Business Administration. In other cities several new approaches are planned: small business associations to promote market research and job development, to aid in mutual business problems such as purchasing, and research to seek new areas of opportunity for small business.

B. Linkage. - The Bill stresses the need for linkage of existing service systems in a coordinated attack on poverty. The Cleveland proposal appears to contain no provisions for such linkage, but instead seeks to expand existing services within existing separate structures. To provide for efficient and effective delivery of services at the neighborhood level, coordination must take place among the service systems at all levels.

In summary, there is little indication in the Cleveland proposal that the programs are sufficiently innovative or effectively linked. The proposal seems to be a series of unrelated programs, devised by separate agencies, and put together under the same cover, with insufficient interrelation.

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