

50th Anniversary of the War on Poverty

Fifty years ago, in January of 1964, in his first State of the Union address, President Lyndon Johnson boldly declared “unconditional war on poverty in America.” His arsenal included new programs: Community Action Agencies, Medicaid, Medicare, Head Start, food stamps, more spending on education, and tax cuts to help create jobs.

In August of 1964, the Economic Opportunity Act (EOA) was passed by Congress and signed into law. In September of 1964, Sargent Shriver, director designate of the Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO), was confirmed by the U.S. Senate. In the subsequent years, Democrats and Republicans worked together to pass a series of ambitious programs designed to provide basic dignity and economic security to more people.



Unfortunately, many Americans live on the outskirts of hope ... our task is to help replace their despair with opportunity.
-President Lyndon B. Johnson, Jan. 8, 1964

The War on Poverty has made a Difference in our Nation

Poverty has declined by more than one-third since 1967. This significant decline in poverty is largely due to programs that have historically enjoyed bipartisan support and increased economic security and opportunity. Programs designed to increase economic security and opportunity lifted over 45 million people from poverty in 2012, and led to an average of 27 million people lifted out of poverty per year for 45 years between 1968 and 2012. Cumulatively these efforts prevented 1.2 billion “person years” of poverty over this period.



President Lyndon B. Johnson signs the Poverty Bill (also known as the Economic Opportunity Act) while press and supporters of the bill look on, Aug. 20, 1964. US Senator and former Wisconsin Governor Gaylord Nelson was present at this ceremony.

Antipoverty programs, such as Community Action Agencies, have been increasingly oriented around rewarding and encouraging work and are an important source of opportunity for low-income working families. The vast majority of Americans receiving nutrition assistance have a job or are either too young to work, are over age 65, or are disabled.

Social Security has played a crucial role in lowering poverty among the elderly. Poverty among those aged 65 and older was 35% in 1960. Following rapid expansions in Social Security in the 1960s and 1970s, poverty among the elderly fell to 14.8% in 2012.

The economic and social benefits from these programs go beyond just helping reduce poverty in the current generation. Increased access to SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program) – formerly known as the Food Stamp Program – for children has been found to lead to better health and greater economic self-sufficiency in adulthood. Increased family income in childhood from the EITC (Earned Income Tax Credit) and CTC (Child Tax Credit) leads to higher student achievement. The long-term effects of Head Start and other high-quality preschool programs include higher educational attainment, employment, and earnings, and lower rate of teen pregnancy and crime, as beneficiary children become teenagers and young adults.

WISCAP has made a Difference in Our State

The Wisconsin Community Action Program Association (WISCAP), created in 1974, was founded on the principal that bringing about economic self-sufficiency for the state's low-income households should be a coordinated endeavor – including strengthening policy, resources mobilization, training and development, and advocacy efforts. WISCAP is the statewide trade association for Wisconsin's 16 Community Action Agencies and three single-purpose agencies with statewide focus: the Coalition of Wisconsin Aging Groups, the Foundation for Rural Housing, and United Migrant Opportunities Services.



Community Action Agencies were created to provide services, assistance, and other activities of sufficient scope to give the promise of progress toward the elimination of poverty. In 2013, more than 298,000 low-income and working poor residents of Wisconsin turned to Community Action for help.

Couleecap has made a Difference in Our Area

Couleecap, Inc., a community action agency created in 1966 as part of the War on Poverty, fights poverty and promotes self-sufficiency, economic development, and social justice in Crawford, La Crosse, Monroe, and Vernon counties, in western Wisconsin. Our vision is to make a difference in the lives of people by empowering them to achieve their full potential, serving as a catalyst for change, and strengthening families and communities.

Over the last 48 years, Couleecap has made a difference in our area. Here are a few highlights:

- 1970s: Couleecap starts its weatherization program, and starts and spins off RSVP, Family Planning, Head Start, and Senior Nutrition Services.
- 1980s: Couleecap is a regional leader in employment and training services for adults and youth including innovative welfare reform initiatives.
- 1990s: Couleecap establishes a Lender's Consortium of area bankers to support home ownership opportunities for low and moderate income families.
- 2000s: Couleecap creates the innovative Coulee Community Land Trust and the Coulee Community Realty to increase permanently affordable housing.
- 2010s: Couleecap is the regional leader in homelessness services, helping people transition from homelessness to safe, stable, and secure housing and lives.



Couleecap currently operates more than 50 contracts in the areas of housing, emergency assistance, employment, business development, transportation, health, and child and family development. In 2013, almost 35,000 people benefitted from the valuable services of Couleecap.

The War on Poverty Succeeded

Just as President Johnson had envisioned, the War on Poverty succeeded in lifting up Americans who “live on the outskirts of hope,” helping them “replace despair with opportunity.” The fundamental lesson of the past 50 years is that we have made progress in the War on Poverty largely through bipartisan efforts to strengthen economic security and increase opportunity. As our economy moves forward, rather than cut these programs and risk leaving hardworking Americans behind, we need to build on the progress we have made to strengthen and reform them. Going forward, we can't lose sight of the positive part government can continue to play in reducing economic hardship and ensuring access to economic opportunity for all citizens. At the same time, sustainable improvements are only possible if we create jobs and speed the economic recovery in the short run, raise economic growth in the long run, and work to ensure that the benefits of a growing economy reach all Americans.

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References: Executive Office of the President of the United States, Council of Economic Advisers; The War on Poverty 50 Years Later: A Progress Report, 2014; www.whitehouse.gov
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