COMMUNITY ACTION Memo

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MEMORANDUM NO. 49

EXECUTIVE OFFICE OF THE PRESIDENT
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20506

DATE : October 11, 1966

SUBJECT: Involvement of the poor in all OEO Programs

The enclosed memorandum from the OEO Director restates the vital importance of involving the poor in all community action program activities. As Mr. Shriver states, "token participation is not acceptable."

I urge every grantee and delegate agency to re-examine its programs in light of Mr. Shriver's comments to see in what ways the objective of "maximum feasible participation" can be achieved. While we have made great strides in this direction, there remains much to be achieved.

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OFFICE OF ECONOMIC
OPPORTUNITY

EXECUTIVE OFFICE OF THE PRESIDENT
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20506

September 9, 1966

MEMORANDUM FROM THE DIRECTOR:

SUBJECT: Involvement of the Poor in all OEO Programs

Several recent developments prompt me to reaffirm for all in OEO and in OEO-related programs the necessity of including the poor in all our activities, including "national emphasis programs" like Head Start, Upward Bound, Legal Services, Health Centers, Foster Grandparents, etc.

Notable among these developments is the recent speech by the President, ordering an expansion of legal programs and neighborhood multi-purpose centers. The President said his goal was "in every ghetto of America a neighborhood center to service the people who live in that area" and he asked us "to increase the number of neighborhood legal centers to make a major effort to help every tenant secure his rights to safe and sanitary housing if he lives in the United States of America."

Another important development is to be seen in the current Congressional consideration of our legislation. The Senate subcommittee handling our program has adopted an amendment authorizing OEO to expend $100 million for health centers like those already established in Denver, Boston, Chicago, Los Angeles, Mississippi and elsewhere. The subcommittee also indicated that Head Start might receive $200 million more than has been requested. A similar or larger amount may also be added for employment programs. At the same time, there is a determination by some members of Congress seriously to curtail the level of "unearmarked" community action funds for local discretion.

As these national emphasis programs grow in size and diversity, they must not lose their inherent purposes as Community Action programs. Our insistence on participation of "the residents of the areas" has not been limited to, and will not be limited to, membership on CAP governing boards. That particular "bone of contention" is for the most part now behind us. I tried to explain the need for this greater concept of participation during my recent appearance at the Ribicoff hearings. I quoted the man from Watts who told me:

> "Sargent Shriver, you listen and listen good.
> I'll tell you exactly how it is. We want to
> run the jobs. We want to run the programs.
> It is our lives. It is our future."

We have no intention, of course, of letting any one group, even the poor themselves, "run the jobs" or "run the programs." That's not Community action. But it is crucial that all of us understand the intensity of poor people's determination to participate actively in programs designed specifically to help them help themselves

Our refusal to be bound by strict formulas or uniform appli cations of the principle of "maximum feasible participation" must not be interpreted as softness on the principle itself. While we accept flexibility in the implementation of such participation, we are inflexible in our determination to achieve it as fully and as rapidly as possible.

Involvement and active participation by the poor do not, it must be understood, rule out important roles for the other parts of the community. The very concept of community action means that the whole community is involved -- public officials, private agencies, professional societies, industry, labor, church, and others. The poverty program will succeed only as all of these sectors of community life make their appropriate contributions.

The new element in community affairs -- involvement of the poor themselves -- has not always been understood, and is still being resisted. This is the reason for this memorandum. I will not consider any program a true community action program which does not have maximum feasible participation by all segments of the community -- and that must include the intended beneficiaries of that program.

The Office of Economic Opportunity funds, delegates, administers or coordinates a vast array of programs. Every one of those programs can be perverted into a form of dole -- paternalistic, unilateral, and degrading. It has become clearer than ever in the past months that the poverty program must stake its existence on that same ideal upon which our nation gambled from the outset: Democracy.

Community action is a democratic antidote to the dole -- an anti dote which offers an opportunity for a voice for each and a role for all. From the outset, the poverty program has been embroiled in countless endeavors to give life and meaning to the words "maximum feasible participation." Such was our mandate, written and enacted by Congress, signed by the President of the United States, hallowed by historical precedent, and now reconfirmed by pragmatic experience.

Now we enter into a new phase -- one which can leave the form but bleed the substance from those achievements.

First, national priority programs -- Head Start, Upward Bound, Legal Services -- tend to focus attention on the delivery of *a* certain kind of service, and the contribution it can make. Those programs are not exempt from the statutory mandate of maximum feasible participation. Those programs must not become simply vehicles for the delivery of pre-packaged, pre-designed, and unilaterally imposed services -- no matter how valuable those services may be in and of themselves.

Second, two factors -- our anticipated rate of expansion and the earmarking of funds by Congress for specific purposes -- can operate to circumscribe and reduce the opportunities for choice, for local determination and local decision. Past decisions may bind the future. And new funds may come designated for use in particular ways. This will reduce the room for democratic decision making among different program alternatives. But it must not be permitted to lessen democratic participation in determining and redetermining the content of any particular program. The diminution of one kind of choice must be at least equalled by compensatory steps to insure that the quantity and quality of meaningful participation does not diminish simply because there are different issues for decision.

The Houston Legal Services Program, the Watts medical center, New York's Institute for Developmental Studies, and our newly expanded Opportunities Industrialization Center job program provide illustrations of how democracy can operate within the context of **a** legal service program, **a** medical service program, a child development Head Start program, and a job training program.

In Houston, each neighborhood law office is subject to the control of a neighborhood council composed entirely of representatives of the poor. That control is not nominal. It extends even to the right to fire the lawyer for unsatisfactory or unresponsive performance (a right, incidentally, which every paying client has with his private attorney.) Furthermore, the overall direction of the program **will** be determined centrally by a committee composed of neighborhood council representatives and neighborhood lawyers (subject to neighborhood control) who will make the decisions on priorities, overall program direction, and allocation of resources among competing needs. Finally, there is special provision for an attorney whose sole job is to review the complaints of clients and prospective clients against the legal services program for refusing to take their case. His decision is final, and he cannot be penalized for siding with the client. That partnership between the poor and Justice is what the rule of law must come to mean in a democracy.

In the heart of Watts, a neighborhood health center will open shortly -- built in large part by the people of Watts, controlled significantly by the people of Watts, and largely staffed by the people of Watts. We are paying the additional cost of a new form of partnership -- a system of "Tandem Training" where the technicians and professionals will be paired with local residents to equip them with the skills neces-

sary to provide care and to qualify for the professional and semi-professional jobs in this clinic. The people of Watts -- and increasingly, the poor across this nation -- want no structure or service built and manned and controlled entirely by outsiders.

In New York City, the Institute of Developmental Studies at New York University has created positions -- within the public school system -- for community aides who are parents of impoverished children in Head Start and Kindergarten. They know at first hand the difficulties, the fears, and the hesitation of other parents. They act not just as intermediaries between the school and the community -- but as advocates for the child and the parent -- to insure that parents with a question or a concern or a grievance are not intimidated by a cold reception, long waits, and bureaucratic treatment. As insiders, knowing the system from within and being instantly on hand, they can see to it that the paper work concerns, the institutional concerns and the professional concerns of the principal, the administration, and the teachers do not overwhelm demands which may seem trivial or bothersome but which to a child or a parent are likely to be of all consuming and urgent importance.

OEO, along with the Department of Labor and the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, has just announced an expansion to eight other cities of the successful Philadelphia job training program. Comprehensive manpower centers will be patterned after that city's Opportunities Industrialization Center (OIC) developed by Reverend Leon Sullivan.

Operating with the motto "We Help Ourselves," the OIC program seeks to give men and women previously considered unemployable, frequently illiterate, too often dismissed as "unmotivated," an opportunity for total involvement and commitment to training and selfadvancement. "Self-help" is furthered by example and by success. Graduates of the program are given opportunities both for further personal advance and for contributions to the program itself. The enrollees are assured a significant role in the Board structure itself, in the actual operation, and in the relations with the rest of the community.

By building within all these programs paid positions for poor persons to voice the concerns of the recipient -- the pupil, the patient, the client -- we are in effect enfranchising the poor, providing a role and a voice in affairs which shape their lives directly -- but which never appear on any ballot at election time.

These illustrations are representative of a total endeavor to make democracy work more effectively than ever.

The word must go out -- and it must go out unmistakably -- that token participation is unacceptable. In the process of tightening up procedures, of improving reporting systems, or tidying up administrative details, we must not lose sight of our overriding mission.

If our program is to maintain its catalytic effect, if it is to continue to engender greater responsiveness to the needs of the poor throughout governmental and private agencies, then we must not permit our programs to suffer from hardening of the arteries.

We cannot promise the poor wealth and opportunity today, tomorrow, or even the next day. But we can continue to develop new and promising ways for involving the poor in all our programs. The four projects described above are merely illustrative of four ways developed or promoted by OEO within the last six months.

Let us continue to act in accordance with our mandate by devising new and effective ways for democracy to come alive in all our programs. Only thus can we maintain faith with our charter.

Sargent Shriver
Director

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