

CAYUGA COUNTY'S ROLE IN WAR ON POVERTY

## Cayuga/Seneca Community Action Agency: The war on poverty continues in Auburn



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In 1964, when Sargent Shriver, President Kennedy's brother-in-law and founding director of the Peace Corps, was asked by President Johnson to lead the national war on poverty, his first step was to conduct research. Shriver assembled everyone who knew anything about the issue. A medley of impassioned stakeholders met tirelessly for weeks and months to hash out the nation's poverty platform. The Office of Economic Opportunity was created to oversee and coordinate the effort. New programs like Head Start, Vista, Job Corps and Community Action were formed.

Community Action agencies were charged with providing "services, assistance and other activities of sufficient scope and size to give promise of progress toward elimination of poverty or a cause or causes of poverty." By June 1965, 415 Community Action agencies were in existence; a year later, more than 1,000; and by 1968, over 1,600 covering two-

thirds of the nation's counties. Today, there are about 1,000 Community Action agencies covering 96 percent of the nation's counties.

Cayuga/Seneca Community Action Agency was incorporated in 1965 (as the Cayuga County Action Program); the agency first operated from a house on Thornton Avenue in Auburn. Funding was available through the OEO to operate anti-poverty programs, but to access them, Community Action agencies needed to present an assessment of need. CSCAA hired interviewers at \$1.75 an hour to go door-to-door, asking residents within Cayuga County's poorest Census tracts about their needs and to gather household and employment information.

The agency's earliest programs included Head Start in Moravia, the Migrant Workers Program in King Ferry, Emergency Food and Medical Care, Neighborhood Youth Corps, and on-the-job training in partnership with local industry. The agency also operated neighborhood centers in Auburn, Genoa, Moravia, Conquest and Port Byron. James

Schmidt, CSCAA's second executive director, stated the purpose of the centers was to "involve low-income people in community projects so they can play some role in the decision making processes that affect their lives." Outreach workers were hired to support the centers, to canvass neighborhoods looking for people in need of help, and to connect people to resources offered through the agency and other community organizations.

The early days of Community Action were filled with hope and promise. Staff believed they would work themselves out of their jobs within a few short years through the eradication of poverty. At the time the War on Poverty launched, half the nation's poor were children. Fifty years later, poverty remains a pervasive problem here at home. A recent fiscal stress report from the State Comptroller's Office cites a 31-percent poverty rate among children in the city of Auburn.

There is no silver bullet available to end the complex problem of poverty. Situations change, jobs are lost, health deteriorates, life happens. People lack the education and training needed to access jobs in local growth industries. Many good people are struggling with mental health and substance abuse issues. There is a staggering shortage of quality, affordable rental housing in our community. Single mothers cannot afford day care. Families with one or no vehicle cannot reliably access employment.

Development of a Low-Income Community Needs Assessment remains a requirement for our funding. For years, the agency worked with a consultant to develop our assessment. Our 2016 assessment will be coordinated in-house. Over the course of the next year, like Shriver in 1964, we will be conducting research and assembling a team of impassioned stakeholders to help identify the community and individual barriers to self-sufficiency that prevent people in poverty from achieving and sustaining self-sufficiency. The process will include public forums, focus groups, interviews, surveys and more. The final product will help inform programming through our agency and our partners within Cayuga and Seneca counties. If you would like to weigh in, please contact me.

To commemorate our golden anniversary, please join us for our 50th Anniversary Celebration May 7 at the Cayuga Museum of History and Art located at the corners of Washington and Genesee Street in Auburn. This event will include a brief program, reception and viewing of the Museum's main exhibit "People Helping People: Celebrating 50 Years of Community Action." The exhibit, sponsored by Welch Allyn and Mack Studios, provides an in-depth look at the War on Poverty and history of our agency, causes and symptoms of poverty, the spirit of our customers and the incredibly generous heart of our community.

## **If you go**

**WHAT:** Cayuga/Seneca Community Action Agency 50th Anniversary Celebration

**WHEN:** 5:30 to 7 p.m. Thursday, May 7

**WHERE:** Cayuga Museum of History & Art, 203 Genesee St., Auburn

**COST:** Free and open to the public

**INFO: Call (315) 253-8051 or (315) 255-1703**