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Community Action's Institutional Infrastructure

How Federal Investment Can Cultivate Collective Power

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Introduction: Community Action as a Durable Federal Experiment

Community Action Agencies (CAAs) are a durable, federally incubated network of community-based antipoverty organizations launched under the Community Action Program (CAP) of the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964 (EOA) and sustained today through the Community Services Block Grant (CSBG). Nearly 1,000 CAAs remain active nationwide; in FY 2023, 995 CAAs served 10.7 million low-income Americans (NASCSP 2023). They coordinate dozens of government programs; braid local, state, federal, and private resources; convene public and private partners; regularly assess community needs; and translate those needs into action on antipoverty priorities.

The puzzle is durability. Community Action is widely remembered as a politically defeated and historically bounded War on Poverty experiment. Yet much of the institutional network that federal policy built in the 1960s remains in place. An original reconstruction links roughly 70 percent of today's CSBG-eligible entities directly to CAAs operating in the late 1960s.

This paper argues that Community Action is best understood as a durable federal experiment in cultivating collective power—and, more broadly, in how federal policy can build democracy from below. CAP's central innovation was to change who has the organizational capacity, sustained institutional access, and political influence to shape antipoverty governance in American communities (Hertel-Fernandez et al. 2025). Maximum feasible participation repositioned poor residents from passive recipients of aid toward organized roles developing, delivering, and overseeing programs meant to improve their lives.

Community Action shifted power through three linked mechanisms: creating a direct federal channel that gave locally rooted organizations resources and standing outside traditional gatekeepers, embedding resident authority and lived experience inside governance and implementation, and underwriting the organizations and relationships through which poor communities could act collectively over time. Federal administrative machinery helped make those capacities durable by credentialing local organizations, empowering communities to take on governance and implementation, sustaining federal-local relationships, and pairing institutional continuity with review, correction, and resident recourse.

Repeated efforts to claw back Community Action's resources and authority provide revealing stress tests: During the Nixon years, CAAs and their allies defended Community Action across courts, Congress, and the administration itself. In 1981, Congress dismantled much of the direct federal-local administrative channel inherited from the Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO) and Community Services

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Administration (CSA) but carried the incumbent CAA network into CSBG as protected eligible entities and required states to pass through at least 90 percent of CSBG funding to them. Community Action survived because federal policy had built organizations with the resources, access, and influence to act strategically across levels and venues of government.

But network capacity and organizational durability should not be conflated with consistently activated people power. Community Action preserved antipoverty organizations more consistently than it organized the people those institutions served. People power must be resourced and organized too.

Recovering the history of the CAAs rewrites the lessons we draw from the War on Poverty. Community Action was neither a brief, failed experiment in participation nor a model to replicate wholesale. It was an uneven but durable experiment in using federal policy to break concentrated local control and build democratic infrastructure from below. Correcting the failure myth reveals an institutional inheritance: a living, federally supported network with deep local roots, nationwide reach, and institutional capacity accumulated over decades. The question now is how to reinvest, reimagine, and reconstruct to defend and deepen democracy.

Table 1. Community Action Legislative Milestones and Key Terms

Term	Description
Economic Opportunity Act of 1964 (EOA)	The War on Poverty statute that created the Office of Economic Opportunity and authorized the Community Action Program, including its participatory mandate.
Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO)	The original federal agency administering Community Action. OEO made grants directly to local organizations and operated through regional offices that maintained relationships with CAAs.
Community Action Program (CAP)	The federal program authorized by the EOA to support locally organized antipoverty action.
Community Action Agency (CAA)	A public or private nonprofit organization serving a defined community or service area and responsible for coordinating Community Action locally.
Maximum feasible participation	CAP's participatory mandate. OEO translated it into roles for low-income residents in planning, governance, implementation, evaluation, and employment.
Tripartite governance/ board	Community Action's three-part governing architecture representing low-income residents, public officials, and private or community interests.
Green and Quie Amendments (1967)	Green gave state and local officials a formal role in designating organizations as CAAs and altered service-area rules. Quie formalized tripartite governance. These changes constrained Community Action but did not displace the incumbent network.

Designation/federal recognition	Green authorized state and local officials to designate an organization to serve as the CAA. OEO separately recognized the organization for federal Community Action purposes, preserving the independent federal-local institutional relationship.
Community Services Administration (CSA)	The independent federal agency that succeeded OEO in the mid-1970s and continued direct federal administration of much of Community Action until 1981.
Office of Community Services (OCS)	The US Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) office that became Community Action's principal federal administrative home in 1981. It continues to administer CSBG at the federal level.
Community Services Block Grant (CSBG)	The 1981 block grant that sustains Community Action today. CSBG shifted states into the funding and oversight roles while preserving the local organizational network.
Eligible entity	The statutory status that enables incumbent CAAs to receive CSBG funding. There are set procedures for correction, funding reduction, and termination.

The Durability Puzzle: Community Action's Hidden Institutional Achievement

Living Infrastructure That the Failure Myth Cannot Explain

Six decades after the War on Poverty, nearly 1,000 Community Action Agencies (CAAs) form a nationwide network of locally rooted organizations serving 99 percent of US counties (NASCSP 2023). Much of the infrastructure built by federal policy in the 1960s endures. Today, CAAs coordinate programs and partnerships, braid public and private resources, connect residents to fragmented public systems, and translate recurring community needs into local antipoverty priorities. But the Community Action Program (CAP), authorized under the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964 (EOA), was not designed simply as a service-delivery system. Its central institutional innovation was to change who possessed the resources, access, and influence to shape local antipoverty governance (Hertel-Fernandez et al. 2025).

CAP's statutory mandate of "maximum feasible participation of the poor" treated participation as a matter of shifting power: Poor residents were to move from passive recipients into organized roles developing, delivering, overseeing, and improving the programs meant to serve them. Local organizing at scale was immediate. By the end of 1966, nearly 1,500 local organizations were participating nationwide (Masters 2014), as existing grassroots groups adapted to Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO) requirements and hundreds of new entities emerged to take advantage of federal resources, recognition, and leverage in local antipoverty governance.

Community Action took root amid the broader reconstruction of American democracy unleashed by the civil rights movement. In Black communities with deep movement roots, legacy civil rights groups repurposed themselves into localized poverty-fighting nonprofits (Andrews 2001; Orleck and Hazirjian 2011). On the West Coast, CAP helped catalyze new pan-ethnic organizing among Asian and Latino communities (Kim 2022, n.d.).

Yet Community Action is widely remembered as a political failure—politically naive, socially disruptive, and, above all, short-lived. That narrative hardened quickly from both left and right. Progressives criticized the War on Poverty as underfunded, too timid to challenge the economic order, or inclined to co-opt poor people's disruptive capacities (Kravitz and Kolodner 1969; Katznelson 1989; Piven and Cloward 1978, 1993). Critics from the right and center cast maximum feasible participation as leftist pseudoscience, politically destabilizing, and dependency producing (Moynihan 1965, 1969; *Washington Star* 1976; Murray 1984).

Five years into Lyndon B. Johnson's antipoverty campaign, Daniel Patrick Moynihan's *Maximum Feasible Misunderstanding* helped fix the collective memory of an inevitably lost war. Moynihan accused a small group of social scientists of testing flawed theories on the poor. Amid civil rights conflict and urban unrest, Moynihan linked social disruption and politically counterproductive conflicts to what he saw as CAP's core theoretical misconceptions about poor people (Moynihan 1969; Orleck and Hazirjian 2011).

Subsequent scholarship reinforced this bounded interpretation, commonly dating Community Action's death to Ronald Reagan—if not Richard Nixon—or treating it as effectively reined in by Congress on LBJ's watch (Quadagno 1994; O'Connor 2009; LaRochelle 2024). Even revisionist research recovering meaningful grassroots mobilization or long-run reductions in racialized poverty has treated CAP as historically bounded, conceding the political failure premise while emphasizing its positive impact (Orleck and Hazirjian 2011; Bailey and Danziger 2013; Bailey and Duquette 2014; LaRochelle 2019; Orleck 2023).

That conventional wisdom is difficult to reconcile with a basic institutional fact: continuity. An original reconstruction links roughly 70 percent of today's CSBG-eligible entities directly to organizations that served as CAAs in the late 1960s.[1] While Community Action's federal architecture has evolved, its original organizational network largely endures. This durability is the empirical puzzle: Explaining it requires identifying the institutional capacities that federal investment created—and that repeated political attacks and administrative changes failed to erase.

[1] Reconstruction based on OEO and CSA administrative records, state CSBG plans, nonprofit tax records, and related organizational sources.

What Federal Investment Built

How did a politically embattled federal experiment create local organizations capable of surviving repeated attempts at displacement?

The lost-war mythology has treated the visible political conflict around Community Action and repeated efforts to constrain it as evidence that the program was quickly neutralized and failed (Moynihan 1969; Quadagno 1994; O'Connor 2009; LaRochelle 2024). But a power-shifting perspective resolves the durability puzzle by distinguishing between two analytically distinct forms of backlash (Hertel-Fernandez et al. 2025). Ideological backlash critiqued the program's ambitions—what Community Action's goals should be and whether the program was designed to achieve them. By contrast, instrumental backlash makes collective power visible. Elites sought to reclaim resources and authority that Community Action had shifted from each community's traditionally powerful to the organized poor. Instrumental backlash targeted Community Action's governing architecture and funding channels—the collective resources that empowered poor communities' participation.

If CAP had truly been defanged, sustained efforts to dismantle or constrain it in subsequent decades would be hard to explain. Those clawback attempts—followed by continued organizational survival and the growing sophistication of the Community Action political coalition—reveal the resources and authority opponents repeatedly sought to reclaim.

This paper, therefore, reframes Community Action not as a cautionary tale but as a long-running federal experiment in institutionalized collective power. Community Action's survival through repeated efforts to claw back resources and authority suggests that federal policy can build—and has built—durable infrastructure for collective power. That infrastructure preserves the resources, access, and influence that allow communities to coordinate action, absorb setbacks, and fight, again and again.

But coalition strength and organizational durability should not be mistaken for uniformly strong people power. Community Action has preserved a living organizational network more consistently than it has sustained organized constituencies of poor people capable of deepening and defending those institutions. Institutional infrastructure provides a foundation, but people power must be resourced and organized. Early CAP deliberately invested in constituency-building, but different forms of service delivery offered different opportunities for organizing people, and that explicit organizing emphasis weakened as the network matured. Ordinary people need constituency-rooted organizations that build relationships and develop leaders; material support that enables sustained participation; and access to governing

responsibilities and consequential decision-making venues where collective claims can carry real influence (Jacobson 2026).

Why the Durability Puzzle Matters Now

Federal policy too often prioritizes service delivery while underinvesting in the local infrastructure that democracy demands. Public programs can meet urgent material needs without building the resources, access, and influence that communities need to exercise collective power over time. Community Action reveals a different possibility: Federal policy can build democracy from below by investing in durable local capacity through which communities can exercise power.

This paper therefore asks: How did federal investment in Community Action construct durable local infrastructure, and how did that infrastructure cultivate collective power? What endures today, and what should policymakers reconstruct now? The sections that follow define that infrastructure, trace how it cultivates collective power, describe the federal machinery that built and sustained it, and draw out what its endurance means for democratic reconstruction today.

The failure myth obscures that institutional inheritance. It teaches reformers to abandon existing infrastructure, makes reinvention appear necessary and reconstruction naive, and hides the fact that the United States already has a territorially rooted national antipoverty network built and sustained over decades of federal investment. Recovering Community Action's institutional achievement does not mean re-creating OEO wholesale or treating the original program as a model to replicate without revision. It means recognizing that democratic reconstruction need not begin from scratch. The task is to recover and adapt what worked, confront where the infrastructure fell short, and build from what still endures.

Community Action as Local Infrastructure for Collective Action

What a Community Action Agency Is

Community Action Agencies are best understood as local infrastructure for collective action. Their defining feature is neither any single service line nor their quasigovernmental role within their designated service areas. Rather, it is their capacity to offset the start-up and sustaining costs of collective action.

Durable power depends on organization: flexible resources; institutional memory; deep relationships; the connections to act across arenas and levels of government; and the

capacity to absorb setbacks and fight again. These are collective capacities that organized interests can sustain over time, but isolated individuals cannot (Hacker and Pierson 2014).

For six decades, federal funding has preserved this infrastructure nationwide through the CAAs. In practice, CAAs coordinate locally tailored programs and partnerships spanning Head Start, energy and weatherization assistance, housing and homelessness prevention, employment and education, emergency aid, and benefit navigation. Today, the CSBG network comprises roughly 1,000 CAAs serving nearly 11 million low-income Americans annually (NASCSP 2023).

What persists, then, is not one program or service model but a territorially rooted organizational base able to coordinate resources across changing local needs and federal programs.

What Community Action's Flexible Core Funding Supports

CSBG's distinctive value lies not in direct program dollars but in the rarity of what it funds: operating support and institutional overhead, which program grants generally do not cover. This includes coordination and administrative costs that cut across program grants, service lines, and missions. Federal guidance explicitly permits CAAs to spend CSBG funds for rent and salaries, community assessments, public engagement in planning processes, and maintenance of referral and benefit-navigation systems (US Office of Community Services 1999).

A 1986 General Accounting Office (GAO) report on CSBG's implementation underscores what that flexibility meant in practice. Based on visits to 16 CAAs across 8 states, GAO found that CSBG accounted for only 17 percent of the agencies' total funding on average. Yet local officials described it as "discretionary money" that enabled CAAs to identify unmet community needs, provide services unavailable through other federal or state programs, and support administrative operations (US General Accounting Office 1986). GAO documented that individual program grants did not cover those costs; CSBG filled critical gaps, allowing CAAs to coordinate and administer multiple programs as a single organization.

Catalytic Roles: Incubation and Coordination

Community Action's legacy is routinely underestimated because the program is evaluated as a discrete line item rather than as an institutional platform capable of incubating programs and coordinating resources. Its catalytic role operates in two distinct ways.

The first is at the program level. Community Action can function as an innovation and demonstration platform. Flexible funding and community control provide fertile ground where local initiatives can be piloted and refined. When successful, they can be elevated into standalone national programs with direct federal authorization, appropriations, and administrative offices of their own.

Head Start and Community Health Centers are the clearest historical examples. OEO launched Head Start with CAP demonstration funds, relying on CAAs and other local partners to establish and operate programs. CAP also financed the early neighborhood health-center demonstrations, through grants to CAAs, medical schools, and other community institutions. As these initiatives grew, they developed distinct federal authorizations and administrative homes. Administrative "spinoff" should not be mistaken for clean operational separation: Many CAAs continue to administer Head Start on the ground, and the substantial overlap between Head Start and Community Action reinforces the network's durability and coalition strength (Community Action Program Legal Services, Inc. 2018).

Community Action's second catalytic function is infrastructural. CAAs were designed as territorially anchored antipoverty intermediaries, not simply operators of discrete programs. OEO made this function explicit in a 1970 instruction issued under then-director Donald Rumsfeld, describing the CAA as having a "primarily catalytic mission"—in which operating programs was a principal activity but not the primary objective (Rumsfeld 1970). Service delivery was supposed to anchor a larger project of resource mobilization, institutional change, and sustained community response.

CAAs have repeatedly served as access points for fragmented public programs, including Medicare, Medicaid, and food stamps. As an early example, OEO's Medicare Alert project funded 463 CAPs to reach hard-to-contact older adults in coordination with Social Security offices (US Senate 1966).

That coordinating role has grown more important as federal funding streams have become more braided and conditional. The same intermediary function reappeared during early Affordable Care Act (ACA) open-enrollment cycles. Some CAAs received formal navigator grants, while others—often with limited or no ACA-specific funding—shared information, made referrals, and integrated enrollment assistance into existing human services work (Landey and Coccia 2015).

Relational Capacity as Democratic Infrastructure

CAAs' relationships with residents and community organizations, private institutions, governments at every level, and other CAAs also constitute durable capacity. Deep relationships enable local organizations to coordinate resources across sectors and act across venues and issues over time.

These local capacities also scale into network or coalition power—the capacity of CAAs, working through state and national associations and alongside allied organizations, to coordinate strategy, defend resources, and bargain across arenas and levels of government. Pages 19–25 show that capacity in action, as the network defended Community Action against repeated early attempts at retrenchment.

Read this way, Community Action is democratic infrastructure—a publicly supported institutional base through which communities can coordinate resources, sustain organization, and exercise collective power over the decisions that shape their lives. The next section traces three linked mechanisms through which that infrastructure shifted power toward poor people: breaking entrenched local control, embedding lived experience, and underwriting organized constituencies.

How Community Action Cultivates Collective Power

CAP's mandate of "maximum feasible participation of the poor" embodied a sophisticated theory of bottom-up collective power. OEO treated meaningful participation by the poor not as a procedural add-on but as a governing condition for legitimate community action. In Shriver's phrase, maximum feasible participation was a "democratic antidote to the dole"—not a slogan but an account of how federal policy could help poor communities build durable capacity to contest concentrated political, social, and economic power (Shriver 1966).

Participation was built into the governance, staffing, and neighborhood infrastructure of Community Action itself: who planned programs, who served on boards and councils, who delivered services, which community groups received material support, and whose organizations gained bargaining power in local politics.

OEO translated that democratic ambition into administrative design through three mechanisms. Community Action shifted power by resourcing grassroots organizations incorporated for and by the poor, assigning formal authority and real responsibilities to poor residents and their organizations, and funding the scaffolding that could turn representation and services into collective action. By creating a direct federal channel around traditional gatekeepers, embedding resident knowledge in governance and implementation, and underwriting organized constituencies, Community Action broke concentrated local control and built democracy from below. CAP thereby changed the terms of local politics.

Breaking Entrenched Local Control: Leverage Before Partnership

First, by recognizing and directly funding local organizations, OEO aimed to create broader bargaining power in local politics. Shriver described this as the "new element in community affairs": the people's involvement in conventionally bilateral local negotiations between public officials and private elites behind closed doors (Shriver 1966).

At its best, Community Action aspired to draw public- and private-sector elites into bargaining with poor citizens over resources and authority that CAP had placed outside traditional local gatekeepers' control. But "whole-of-community" antipoverty governance was an aspirational secondary goal, not a prerequisite: Resourcing and credentialing community-based organizations happened with or without local elite cooperation.

Ouachita Parish, Louisiana, illustrates what an independent federal channel could mean under violently racist domination in the Deep South. Black antipoverty organizers operated the Ouachita Multi-Purpose Community Action Program (OMCAP) in Monroe, Louisiana, amid aggressive and intentionally visible Ku Klux Klan activity, including cross burnings, threatening phone calls, nighttime harassment, and warnings that residents who participated in antipoverty programs would face consequences (Orleck and Hazirjian 2011). Local officials and influential white civic leaders treated the organization not as a legitimate community partner but as a dangerous intrusion backed by Washington. Despite this absence of meaningful local governmental support, OMCAP received substantial federal grants. Federal grant records show what that independent channel made possible. Beginning in 1966, OMCAP used OEO support to provide Summer Head Start; by 1967–68 it was also operating neighborhood service centers, health services, and youth programs, and by 1970–71 its federally supported work included emergency food and medical assistance, resource mobilization, and job development and placement. OEO and CSA grant records document continued federal support through 1981, while modern HHS records show the organization receiving Head Start awards in 2016—half a century after its first federally supported Head Start program.[2] Federal funding did more than finance services. By supplying OMCAP with baseline resources and credentials independent of existing power structures, OEO upended local elites' capacity to exclude.

Thus, the same design that provoked conflict also made partnership possible. Once community organizations had independent funding, staff capacity, technical assistance,

[2] Author's analysis of OEO/CSA Federal Program Activity Master (FPAM) records, NARA Record Group 381; HHS Tracking Accountability in Government Grants System (TAGGS) (*OEO/CSA Federal Program Activity Master Records*, n.d.; US Department of Health and Human Services, n.d.).

and federal recognition, they entered local governance as empowered actors instead of petitioners. Rather than bypassing local institutions indefinitely, OEO's federal channel altered the terms of local engagement. Public- and private-sector elites already bargained over community affairs. The new element was organized poor people, who could now enter those negotiations with leverage from their OEO resources. At its strongest, Community Action fostered collaboration through contestation. Collaboration required countervailing power for the poor.

Embedding Lived Experience in Community Action

Second, CAP embedded poor residents in governance and implementation through formal roles with real responsibility and paraprofessional career tracks—making community knowledge, relationships, and lived experience institutionally consequential rather than merely consultative.

In terms of governance, tripartite boards and program-level councils gave low-income residents formal standing and responsibility inside the institutions charged with planning and administering their community's antipoverty programs. Citizens in need became empowered constituents with the standing and authority to advance their own interests and remake institutions to best serve them.

Paraprofessional careers extended the same power-building from governance into implementation. Teacher aides, health workers, outreach staff, neighborhood aides, and other frontline positions within CAAs turned resident knowledge into institutional capacity and gave poor residents responsibility inside programs that would otherwise have treated them only as clients.

Shriver made this logic explicit: Paid positions were a way of "enfranchising the poor," giving the "pupil, the patient, the client" influence inside the institutions shaping their lives (Shriver 1966). These were not token jobs but career tracks through which residents could take on increasing responsibility. Expertise was not supposed to flow only from professionals down to poor residents. Knowledge from the neighborhood moved upward into program design, supervision, and institutional decision-making (US Office of Economic Opportunity 1968b).

The Watts Health Foundation shows this mechanism at its clearest. The CAA- and OEO-supported program trained and employed local Black women as health aides, sending them into homes to provide health education, connect families to care, and enroll residents in Medicaid and Medicare. Proximity bolstered their authority: They knew the neighborhood, understood local needs, and built trust where professional medicine could not. But the role was not simply relational. It was institutional. Watts health aides turned resident knowledge into program capacity, benefits access, and upwardly mobile careers. Many advanced into supervisory or professional roles, and the



program became a national model for community health outreach (Clark 2000; US Community Services Administration 1980).

Institutions work differently when lived experience is embedded in their foundations and functions rather than collected as external review. That is the difference between testimony and power: Testimony lets residents describe conditions to those who retain authority. Community Action gave residents power—assigning them responsibility within governance and implementation, allowing their local knowledge and community connections to shape decisions from within.

Underwriting Organized Constituencies

Third, CAP underwrote organization, not just representation. OEO recognized that seats and services alone do not make scattered individuals into a constituency. A board seat confers individual standing, and a service meets an individual need; neither organizes solidarity. Durable collective power requires people organized around shared stakes and organizations that develop leaders, sustain relationships, and act over time.

OEO made that obligation explicit: Community Action agencies would have to "deliberately and constantly enhance the viability of autonomous groups, or consciously seek to create these where they do not exist" (US Office of Economic Opportunity 1968a). This was not decorative participation. Community Action funded the organizational scaffolding for poor communities to act collectively.

Neighborhood centers supplied one concrete form of that scaffolding. These were community-building spaces where neighbors could come together to gain material assistance and information, surface shared problems, and develop local leadership (Andrias and Sachs 2020). Centers turned repeated service encounters into relationships, and relationships into a base for collective power.

Community Action also supported poor residents as collective economic actors. OEO promoted consumer cooperatives, buying clubs, production cooperatives, and consumer-action groups (US Office of Economic Opportunity 1968b). These were not conventional services but vehicles for pooling information and resources, aggregating economic power, challenging market exploitation, and building institutions that residents controlled.

This principle matters most where public provision is politically thin and collective power must be cultivated. Individual benefits become bases for collective power only when paired with durable organizations that turn receipt of benefits into shared claims, collective standing, and institutional pressure. The benefits may meet needs, but the scaffolding determines whether recipients remain individualized or become resourced and organized to make institutions answerable.

The Southeastern Tidewater Opportunity Project's Southeastern Virginia Nutrition Alliance illustrates the distinction (US Community Services Administration 1980). Food assistance and school meals addressed urgent material needs. But the alliance went further, organizing low-income consumers, training hundreds of potential food stamp recipients on their rights and fair hearing procedures, conducting outreach, monitoring grocery store prices, and expanding school lunch and breakfast participation. Residents were not merely assisted by a program. They learned to deepen and defend their standing within it. The alliance made low-income residents into organized actors in both public benefits and local food markets. Food aid alone could not cultivate power; scaffolded organization around it did. People power must be resourced and organized (Jacobson 2026).

The Institutional Machinery of Federal Investment

The power-building mechanisms described earlier depended on administrative machinery that gave local organizations resources, access, and influence—and protected those gains over time. Federal investment operated through four recurring phases: credentialing locally rooted organizations; empowering communities in their governance and implementation; building local capacity through regional administration; and sustaining accountable continuity through review, correction, and, when necessary, replacement of the local organization. Across planning, funding, implementation, and renewal, this machinery shows how federal policy, rather than simply financing discrete services, built democracy from below.

Credentialing Locally Rooted Organizations

The direct federal channel began with a process for establishing and credentialing locally rooted organizations. During CAP's formative years, OEO could fund community groups directly, bypassing state and local governments. The 1967 Green Amendment added a formal role for state and local officials by requiring them to designate the official CAA for a particular area. Green also imposed minimum population standards, including a 50,000-person floor for CAAs. Hundreds of smaller rural agencies merged to meet the threshold (Masters 2014). OEO field staff spent much of 1968 working with CAAs and elected officials to implement the new designation, governance, and service-area requirements.

But designation was only the first step; it remained distinct from federal recognition (US Community Action Program 1968). OEO's 1968 guidance made that sequence explicit. Governing officials chose whether and whom to designate through a process requiring participation by poor residents and private groups, public notice, a hearing, and opportunities for public comment. The designated organization then applied



separately to OEO for federal recognition, documenting its governing structure, service area, and required legal and civil rights assurances (US Community Action Program 1968).

Designation gave state and local officials meaningful influence over which organization would serve as the CAA without giving them either control over federal Community Action status or a veto over the process. OEO retained independent federal authority over recognition and, where necessary, designation. Federal recognition remained the overriding credential, preserving the direct federal-to-local organizational relationship even after Green inserted state and local governments into the process (US Community Action Program 1968).

Empowering Communities

Federal recognition gave a local organization standing within Community Action; OEO's participation rules determined who could exercise authority through it. Tripartite boards included at least one-third low-income residents selected through democratic procedures, at least one-third elected public officials or their representatives, and private community interests in the remaining seats (US Office of Economic Opportunity 1968a). In the overwhelming majority of cases, a private nonprofit served as the CAA and the tripartite board was the governing board, with authority over plans and priorities, executive leadership and major personnel, fiscal and program policy, evaluation, proposals and budgets, and federal grant compliance. Where local government itself operated the CAA rather than a separate nonprofit, federal rules gave the tripartite community action board specified authority over major planning, budget, personnel, and program decisions (US Community Action Program 1968). Tripartite governance therefore paired representation with authority over consequential decisions, rather than treating board composition as sufficient on its own. CSA retained this differentiated governing architecture through the 1970s ("Community Action Agencies" 1980). Current CSBG law still requires tripartite governance for private nonprofit eligible entities, and a tripartite board or other state-specified mechanism ensuring low-income people's participation in decision-making for public eligible entities ("Tripartite Boards" 2024).

Resident participation extended beyond formal board governance. OEO required procedures through which poor people and area residents could influence programs and participate regularly, including public forums and access to public board and policymaking meetings (US Office of Economic Opportunity 1968a, 1968c). More structured channels included low-income board representatives developing grant applications and participating in prereview meetings with federal field representatives, program advisory committees and neighborhood or target-area councils setting priorities and developing plans and proposals, and neighborhood organizations receiving delegated responsibility for planning, funding, conducting, or administering



activities. Program evaluations also had to incorporate the views of program participants and area residents (US Office of Economic Opportunity 1968a).

Participation was therefore built into recurring stages of planning, implementation, and evaluation. OEO paired those responsibilities with information, training and technical assistance, language access, transportation, childcare, reimbursement, and other supports necessary to make participation materially possible and consequential (US Office of Economic Opportunity 1968a). Paid paraprofessionals extended the same architecture into implementation. OEO required CAAs to maximize paraprofessional positions, base qualifications on people's capacity to perform the work rather than formal credentials, create opportunities for increased responsibility, and provide training and supervision for advancement (US Office of Economic Opportunity 1968a). Related guidance sketched career ladders from neighborhood aide to outreach team leader, neighborhood-center assistant director, and center director. In some settings, nonprofessionals trained professional staff (US Office of Economic Opportunity 1968b). Federal policy thus did more than open entry-level jobs to poor residents; it built career development and increasing institutional responsibility into Community Action's personnel machinery.

Building Local Capacity

Once residents and governing boards translated local priorities into plans and funding requests, those proposals entered a grant system largely administered through OEO's regional offices. By 1966, OEO had delegated substantial administrative responsibility to the regions. The grant process brought federal field staff into direct contact with CAAs. CAAs developed their grant applications through prereview meetings with OEO regional field representatives. By 1969, OEO regional directors were generally authorized to approve and fund applications within their regions (US Office of Economic Opportunity 1968a; National Advisory Council 1969). OEO's 1968 Applying for a CAP Grant formalized a "checkpoint" system requiring review and comment across local agencies, building coordination with other public programs into the process (Office of Economic Opportunity 1968b, pt. IV, p. IV-49 ff.). Regional administration therefore placed substantial working grant authority close to local organizations, linking federal resources and administrative capacity to local knowledge, community connections, and on-the-ground experience.

State Economic Opportunity Offices added a limited coordinating layer without weakening that federal-local channel. These offices reviewed CAP applications for how well they complemented and coordinated with other local, state, and federal antipoverty efforts, advised OEO regional offices on state-agency participation, provided technical assistance to CAAs, and helped identify additional public and private resources (CAP National Advisory Council 1969). State offices therefore helped coordinate Community Action with the wider antipoverty landscape, while OEO



regional offices remained local grantees' principal grantmaking and administrative interface.

Because regional offices retained the direct grantee relationship, federal personnel remained engaged beyond initial award through implementation, technical assistance, monitoring, and efforts to address operating problems. Federal investment therefore not only funded activities but supported the place-based organizational capacity needed to formulate, finance, and carry them out. The continuing regional-local relationship became part of Community Action's institutional infrastructure (Fazili 2026).

Sustaining Accountable Continuity

OEO paired recurring support with recurring review, making correction part of the process through which institutional capacity endured. Community Action grantees were required to evaluate their performance annually, with progress reports accompanying re-funding requests. OEO Instruction 6005-1 tied that review directly to participation: Representatives of poor residents assessed whether agencies involved them in planning, administration, and evaluation, developed their capacity to participate, and responded to their positions and requests. OEO would not approve a funding application that failed to identify a course of action for improving the quality of participation. By 1969, OEO formalized national standards for evaluating CAA effectiveness, an approach CSA later continued and elaborated (US Office of Economic Opportunity 1969; US Community Services Administration 1975).

Accountability also ran upward, via resident recourse. Representative groups of poor residents could petition when they were inadequately represented on a CAA board, unable to influence programs, or denied funding for proposals they had advanced. The governing body had to consider the petition publicly, notify the OEO regional or headquarters office responsible for funding and monitoring the grantee, and report its action and reasons. Residents and community groups could also complain directly to those federal offices. These procedures created formal recourse when Community Action's participatory commitments were at issue.

When an incumbent no longer met Community Action requirements, OEO could recognize a different organization. But its rules treated replacement as potentially disruptive rather than an ordinary contracting decision. Changes in designation were generally timed to the re-funding cycle, and OEO could delay their effective date until an orderly changeover could occur. The replacement CAA had to ensure that the outgoing CAA transferred its program functions, obligations, records, authority, funds, property, and other operating responsibilities (US Community Action Program 1968).

Durability meant preserving the community's collective capacity, not preserving incumbency. Community Action paired continuity of local institutional infrastructure with regular evaluation and formal channels for resident challenge, correction, and, when necessary, replacement.

What Endures—and What Its Endurance Reveals

Power is relational and therefore invisible in a static snapshot; it can be inferred only from interaction, bargaining, and contestation. Clawback attempts are therefore unusually revealing stress tests—showing what opponents sought to reclaim, what organized actors defended, and what endured.

Federal Reorganization, Local Continuity

Congress did amend the Economic Opportunity Act three years after its initial passing to give state and local officials new opportunities to assert control. The 1967 Green Amendment established a formal designation process, empowering mayors and governors to replace or reinstate incumbent organizations as the official CAA. The companion Quie Amendment formalized the tripartite-board structure most CAAs had already adopted.

Conventional wisdom assumes that state and local leaders used those new opportunities to assert control over Community Action, but this does not reflect what actually happened on the ground. When mayors and governors moved through the new designation process, more than 98 percent backed the incumbent Community Action organization already serving their communities. The CAP National Advisory Council's official annual report tallied just 19 Green-era CAA takeovers against well over 900 incumbent recertifications (CAP National Advisory Council 1969). Whether this retention reflected effective partnership, local reluctance to provoke organized resistance, or both, it does not square with the claim that Community Action was politically neutralized early on.

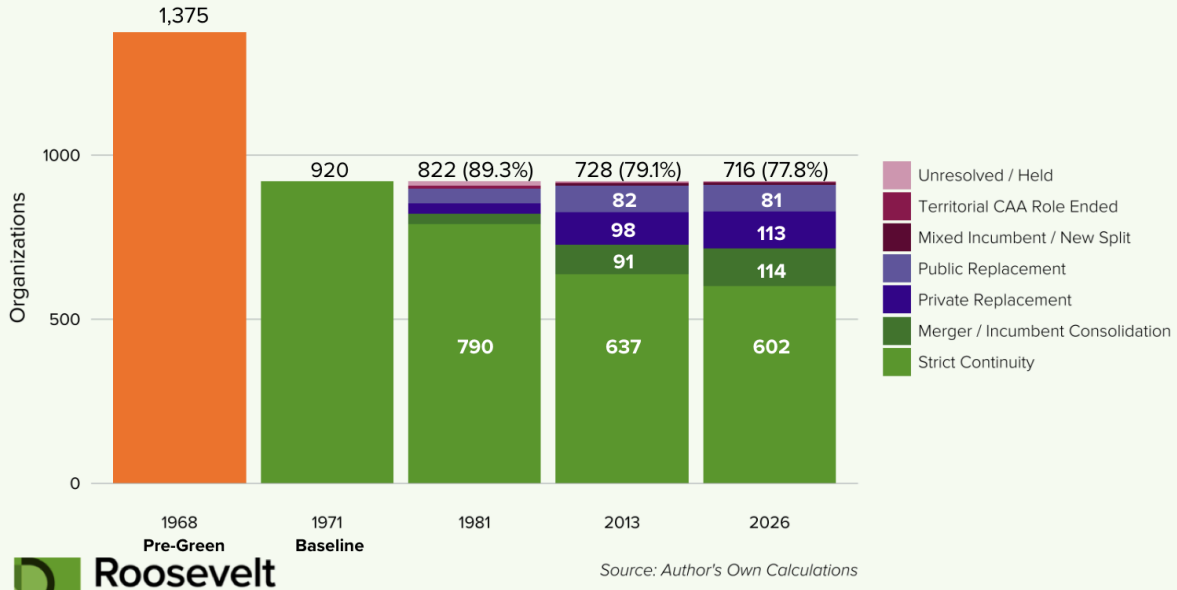
The Green Amendment is better understood as attempted retrenchment that instead entrenched. It gave local officials new tools of control without causing mass displacement and hardened the network's territorial standing: one recognized Community Action Agency per place, not an interchangeable pool of contractors, and incumbents could be replaced only through designated procedures.

Newark's United Community Corporation (UCC) captures the longer arc. UCC was among Daniel Patrick Moynihan's examples of Community Action gone wrong, and Newark's white mayor blamed Community Action organizers for fostering the conditions that culminated in Newark's 1967 riots. Yet UCC survived the backlash; three

years later, one of its founders, Kenneth Gibson, became Newark's first Black mayor. UCC remains the city's designated CAA after decades of political and administrative change, partnership, and conflict (Ceraso 1998; United Community Corporation n.d.).

This shows how federal administrative changes have been overread—sometimes dramatically so. Amendments, restructurings, devolution, block granting, and program spin-offs changed how directly federal oversight was exercised, where it occurred, and how visible Community Action remained in Washington. But those federal changes did not dissolve the underlying local network. Figure 1 traces that institutional continuity across successive periods of reorganization.

Figure 1: Community Action's Post-Green Organizational Network Remains Largely Intact



Note: The 1968 bar provides pre-Green scale context (1,375 active CAAs). The longitudinal analysis follows the fixed post-Green cohort of 920 territorial CAAs operating in 1971 through 2026. Continuity combines strict organizational continuity with mergers, consolidations, or territorial succession among incumbent CAAs: 822 of 920 (89.3%) in 1981, 728 (79.1%) in 2013, and 716 (77.8%) in 2026. Estimates are based on the author's original reconstruction from OEO and CSA administrative records, state CSBG plans, nonprofit tax records, and related organizational sources.

The Nixon Era

Table 2. Nixon-Era Clawback Attempts and Community Action's Collective Defense

Venue	Attempted Clawback	Collective Defense	What Endured
Courts	Acting OEO director restricted grant obligations and renewals, purported to rescind CAA designations, directed agencies to dissolve, and ordered OEO's 10 regional offices to close.	Four CAAs sued on behalf of roughly 930 agencies; organized OEO workers brought parallel challenges; Community Action leaders and supporters raised private resources to retain counsel.	Courts blocked abolition of OEO and termination of CAA funding; separately held that Phillips was not lawfully appointed and barred him from exercising the director's powers (Local 2677 v. Phillips 1973; Williams v. Phillips 1973).
Congress	Administration sought elimination through the federal budget, requiring Community Action to secure new funding before existing resources ran out.	CAA directors financed professional Washington advocacy and paired it with locally generated pressure from mayors, governors, and other allies (Loen 1974).	The pro-CAA campaign secured broad bipartisan support in both chambers, and Congress appropriated the funds needed to keep CAP operating (Payne 1974).
Administration	The White House turned to Senate-confirmed OEO Director Alvin Arnett to oversee closure.	CAA leaders, Black mayors, and assembled CAA executive directors confronted Arnett with what Community Action had built and what dismantling it would mean (Braithwait 2012).	OEO remained open; Arnett began defending its continuation; the White House demanded his resignation in July 1974 (*New York Times* 1974).

Courts Enforce Separation of Powers

Nixon's second term marked a decisive break from his first. As discussed on page 10, Nixon's OEO director, Donald Rumsfeld, had defended CAP's catalytic mission (Rumsfeld 1970). Fresh from reelection, Nixon instead moved to dismantle OEO and Community Action. Howard Phillips, installed as acting OEO director without Senate confirmation, pursued that objective through two principal levers: impoundment and regional-office closures (Phillips 1973a, 1973b; Williams v. Phillips 1973).

Phillips issued directives to withdraw delegated authority to obligate grant funds, restrict renewals, bar grants beyond June 30, 1973, and direct agencies to wind down. He also purported to rescind CAA designations. Congress, however, had extended CAP and required appropriated funds to remain available to CAAs. Phillips also ordered OEO's ten regional offices to close, announcing that OEO's "linkages with Community Action Agencies" would be discontinued. The executive branch was attempting to use

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administrative directives to starve a congressionally authorized program out of existence (Phillips 1973a; Phillips 1973b; Local 2677, American Federation of Government Employees v. Phillips 1973).

CAAs and organized OEO workers responded through the courts. Four CAAs sued on behalf of roughly 930 designated agencies, while the OEO employees' union brought a parallel challenge (Local 2677 v. Phillips 1973). West Central Missouri director Charlie Braithwait helped coordinate the litigation; he and longtime Community Action advocate Charles McCann later recalled that CAA leaders and supporters raised $500,000 in personal contributions to retain counsel (Braithwait 2012). Organized institutions mobilized the resources and expertise to enforce legal protections.

On April 11, 1973, Judge William B. Jones held that efforts to terminate OEO or end the funding and functioning of designated CAAs were "unauthorized by law, illegal, and in excess of statutory authority," and enjoined Phillips from carrying them out (Local 2677 v. Phillips 1973). On June 11, Williams v. Phillips separately held that Phillips had not been lawfully appointed and enjoined him from exercising the powers of OEO director (Williams v. Phillips 1973). Together, the rulings blocked the immediate dismantling and stripped the administration of the official it had installed to carry it out. The legal defense succeeded because the network had the organization, resources, and legal standing to enforce Congress's protections.

Congress Renews Community Action

Community Action survived the executive attack only to face a different challenge: securing new congressional funding before existing resources ran out.
The coalition again raised its own money, pairing professional Washington advocacy with pressure generated through local relationships. A March 28, 1974, White House memorandum captured the administration's concern: "CAP Directors have raised some money and hired some high-powered lobbyists including former Congressman Bill Cramer. Members now are starting to hear from mayors and governors in support of extending CAPs" (Loen 1974). The lobbyists did not replace bottom-up organization; they extended it into an elite policymaking arena.

The campaign secured broad bipartisan support in both chambers, and Congress appropriated the funds needed to keep CAP operating (Payne 1974). The fight had required Community Action to translate locally rooted relationships into congressional pressure, combine grassroots mobilization with professional advocacy, and coordinate across local and national venues despite continued White House opposition.



Even after Congress provided funds to keep CAP operating, the White House continued pursuing OEO's closure. OEO's then-director, Alvin Arnett, did not carry out that plan. Braithwait and McCann later recalled that CAA leaders and Black mayors in the South, along with CAA executive directors assembled in San Francisco, met face-to-face with Alvin Arnett. They showed him what Community Action had built and what its disappearance would mean. Those encounters made Community Action visible not as an abstract federal controversy but as a network of locally rooted organizations, leaders, and constituencies with political standing of their own (Braithwait 2012).

OEO did not close on June 30. Arnett instead began defending its continuation. When the White House demanded his resignation in July, Arnett said that "the President does not want O.E.O." and that he had been accused of "lobbying to continue the agency" (*New York Times* 1974).

Federated local organizations and leaders made Community Action's practical value and political standing consequential inside the executive branch. The network did not only pressure the administration from outside; its organized local presence altered administrative judgment from within.

From OEO to CSBG: What Changed and What Endures

Survival did not mean stasis. The 1981 transition to CSBG dismantled much of Community Action's direct federal-local administrative channel while carrying the incumbent local network into a state-administered regime.

Under OEO and CSA, federal recognition, direct grants, and regional field relationships linked federal officials to local CAAs. But CSBG moved states into the ordinary funding and oversight channel, ending the old recognition machinery and much of the regional, grantee-facing administration ("Community Services Block Grant Act" 1981; Masters 2014).

Reagan had proposed folding most CSA activities into the broader Social Services Block Grant. Instead, Congress created a separate Community Services Block Grant, carried incumbent CAAs forward as "eligible entities," and required states to pass through at least 90 percent of their CSBG allotments to these eligible entities ("Community Services Block Grant Act" 1981; Masters 2014; Clark 2000). Again, an attempt at retrenchment instead entrenched: CAAs entered the new regime as protected local institutions rather than an interchangeable pool of state contractors.

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Table 3. Change and Continuity Under the Community Services Block Grant

Institutional Dimension	OEO/CSA (1964–74; 1975–81)	CSBG regime (1982–)
Administrative Channel	Direct federal grants; regional administration and oversight	State administration of funding and most oversight
Organizational Status and Funding	Federal designation and recognition; direct federal grants	Incumbent CAAs carried forward as "eligible entities," with at least 90 percent of state CSBG allotments passed through to them
Governance and Accountability	Tripartite governance; federal monitoring, correction, and replacement	Tripartite governance; state monitoring and correction; federal protections against termination
Flexible Local Capacity	Flexible support for locally coordinated planning, participation, and administration	Flexible support for locally coordinated planning, participation, and administration

Governance and accountability also endured through administrative devolution. Current law retains tripartite governance, state monitoring and corrective processes, and protections against termination or funding reduction without cause and review ("Application and Plan" 2024; "Corrective Action; Termination and Reduction of Funding" 2024; "Monitoring of Eligible Entities" 2024; "Tripartite Boards" 2024).

CSBG likewise preserved flexible support for planning, coordination, resident participation, and administration across funding streams. The administrative route changed, but federal policy continued to support locally rooted organizations with unusually broad coordinating responsibilities.

But the program did evolve. Repeated retrenchment had pushed the network to professionalize, building the cross-level and multi-venue capacities required for survival. Before the CSBG transition, the National Community Action Foundation (NCAF) was already aggregating network concerns for Congress and engaging senior federal officials responsible for the transition. Community Action therefore entered the new regime with not only statutory continuity protections but also national advocacy infrastructure capable of defending them (Clark 2000).

Community Action's durability also rested on growing legitimacy across ideological lines. By the 1990s, CSBG commanded bipartisan congressional support even as cash assistance was sharply retrenched. Conservative Republican supporters defended Community Action in terms of local flexibility, community partnerships, self-sufficiency, and alternatives to centralized federal provision. Community Action endured not only because its organized network and allies defended it, but because its



institutional infrastructure became useful and legitimate to officials with very different political commitments (Ashcroft 1998; Clark 2000).

What Endurance Reveals: Three Lessons

The fights to continue Community Action show more than survival. Each defense preserved an institutional base while increasing the coalition's capacity to act: financing legal expertise, coordinating nationally, operating across political venues, and influencing administration. These conflicts did not merely reveal power. They created opportunities for communities to build more power.

Power-building policy must be designed for conflict as well as ordinary participation. Institutions that build organizational capacity and redistribute political access and authority attract clawback attempts. Democracy requires more than preserving benefits: It requires deepening the organizations, relationships, and governing roles through which ordinary people can defend what they have—and build more power through that fight.

Community Action's endurance yields three lessons for reconstructing democracy from below.

First: Durable infrastructure is collective power. Community Action repeatedly proved more entrenched than accounts of its political defeat assume. Green and Quie, then CSBG reorganized Community Action without the wholesale displacement that the failure myth requires. The Nixon-era fights and NCAF's ongoing advocacy reveal the agency behind that durability—not passive survival but the exercise of collective power. Federal control shifted, budgets fell, administrative homes changed, yet the network endures. That continuity has preserved a base from which organized actors absorb attacks, coordinate defenses, and act again as circumstances change and conflict returns.

Second: People power must be resourced and organized. Organizational and coalition power can preserve institutions and carry claims across political arenas for decades without consistently organizing the people those institutions serve. Formal representation confers individual authority without building an accountable constituency; service delivery can improve material well-being without the relationships that beneficiaries need to pursue collective claims. Community Action demonstrates both the value and the limits of durable infrastructure: It provides a foundation but does not automatically produce people power.

Head Start provides the clarifying contrast. Its center-based delivery model resources and organizes parents as a constituency around a public institution shaping families' daily lives and children's lifetime chances. Center-based delivery preorganizes for



parents a community of common interest, fostering unexpected friendships, partnerships with frontline officials, and routine practice in collective governance (Soss 2000; Small 2009). Parent committees and grantee-level policy councils institutionalize that community's power, attaching real responsibility to routine interaction and linking everyday incorporation to formal civic participation ("Parent Committees" 2025; "Policy Council and Policy Committee" 2025; "Powers and Functions of Head Start Agencies," n.d.). Parents do not only use a program; together, they govern it. These features help explain why Head Start has cultivated a constituency unusually deep, organized, and politically effective among American social programs (Jacobson 2026).

Third: The failure myth delegitimizes community power. Community Action's best-known history has been shaped not by the quiet persistence of local organizations but by the spectacle of federal conflict. The resulting failure narrative overstates defeat, understates continuity, and obscures forms of collective power that survived and grew through apparent death blows. It often reads the political consequences backward: Conflict becomes evidence of failure rather than a window into what opponents sought to reclaim, what organized defense built, and what endures.

Correcting the myth does not require romanticizing Community Action. Decades of devolution and individualized service delivery have weakened organizing functions across parts of the network and made its democratic capacities uneven. But those limitations do not erase the power Community Action built; they make the surviving network an institutional inheritance that federal policy can reinvigorate rather than re-create from scratch.

Policy Agenda: Reinvest, Reimagine, Reconstruct

Recovering Community Action's history reveals the reform agenda: Reinvest in the people, organizations, and networks through which democracy is built; reimagine governance so public participation carries real power; and reconstruct the federal architecture needed to coordinate, improve, and preserve that work.

Reinvest

Federal programs routinely fund particular benefits and services without supporting the durable capacity that connects them. Federal investment should recognize organization, coordination, and people power as vital infrastructure, not incidental overhead.

1. Reinvest in Local Coordinating Capacity

Federal funding should support not only discrete programs but also the locally rooted organizations capable of connecting, deepening, and defending them. Communities need flexible operating capacity to assess changing needs, coordinate across agencies and funding streams, help residents navigate fragmented systems, maintain institutional memory and deep relationships, and respond when problems fall between program boundaries.

Community Action provides an existing platform for that investment. Congress should strengthen CSBG core funding while preserving its flexibility to support community assessment and planning, navigation and referrals, administration, coordination, resident engagement, and work that cuts across individual program grants. Federal policy should also strengthen the state, regional, and national organizations through which CAAs share expertise, learn across communities, coordinate strategy, and act collectively across levels of government.

The principle extends beyond CSBG. Federal grants should provide sustained operating support for locally rooted organizations that coordinate fragmented programs and institutions rather than forcing every function into a program-specific award. Intermediary and meta-grantee capacity can also help smaller constituency-rooted organizations access public resources without absorbing their autonomy (Nayak 2026).

2. Reinvest in People Power

Federal policy should support nonpartisan civil-society organizing on a sustained basis: leadership development, membership building, rights education, collective problem-solving, and the durable relationships through which ordinary people identify shared stakes, develop agendas, and pursue collective claims over time (SoRelle 2026).

That means investing in the scaffolding through which people become an organized constituency (Jacobson 2026). Neighborhood centers and other community spaces—such as public schools and libraries—can bring residents together around material needs while building the relationships and leadership needed for collective action. Federal policy should treat these spaces not merely as service-delivery sites but as infrastructure for sustained community organization.

That organizing need not reside exclusively inside Community Action Agencies. Federal investment can support organizing within public programs while also strengthening autonomous constituency organizations that can bargain with CAAs, public agencies, and other institutions. The objective is not another layer of outreach or consultation around agency priorities but independent organized capacity through which people can collectively shape the institutions and decisions that govern their lives (Rahman

and Gilman 2019). Participation should be voluntary, never a condition of receiving benefits or services.

Reimagine

Investment alone does not determine who exercises authority or whose knowledge shapes implementation. Federal policy should pair organizational capacity and constituency-building scaffolding with governing authority and career structures that give affected communities consequential roles.

3. Reimagine Paraprofessional Careers

Federal programs should rebuild paraprofessional career pathways that bring resident knowledge inside implementation. Community Action's historical model treated lived experience as expertise: Frontline roles gave community members responsibility for outreach, navigation, program improvement, and supervision while they built greater skill, responsibility, and authority.

CAAs and other federally supported organizations should design these roles with fair compensation, training, advancement, and real responsibility—rather than hiring community members into low-wage positions. Federal grants can support career ladders that value community knowledge alongside formal credentials and lead from frontline work into supervisory, administrative, and professional roles.

4. Restore Representative Accountability

Community Action's tripartite boards guarantee formal representation for low-income residents. For nonprofit eligible entities, at least one-third of board members must be chosen through democratic procedures to represent low-income residents ("Tripartite Boards" 2024). But a seat carries little power if representatives lack a constituency to which they are accountable, authority over consequential decisions, or necessary resources.

Wherever feasible, low-income representatives should be selected by and remain accountable to organizations or constituencies with a real local base. They should exercise defined authority and receive compensation, information, staff support, and coverage of participation costs (Rahman and Simonson 2020). More broadly, federal advisory and governing bodies should be judged not simply by who occupies seats but by whether representatives have accountable bases, meaningful authority, and the resources to exercise that authority.

Reconstruct

Local capacity must extend, not substitute for, federal capacity. Durable democratic infrastructure depends on federal machinery capable of experimentation, coordination, technical assistance, correction, and protection over time.

5. Restore Democracy-Deepening R&D

Federal agencies should restore robust in-house demonstration, research, and evaluation capacity focused not only on service outcomes but on institutional designs that deepen democratic participation, accountability, and collective capacity. Community Action's original strength was innovation: Flexible federal support created room for locally grounded experimentation, some of which generated institutions and practices that spread beyond CAP.

Renewed demonstration capacity could test new approaches to representative governance, constituency-building, paraprofessional careers, and coordination across fragmented programs. More broadly, federal agencies should treat institutional design itself as an object of experimentation: They should pilot approaches under real operating conditions, evaluate effects on material well-being and collective power (Linden 2026), and create mechanisms to spread successful models.

6. Rebuild a Robust Federal Front Door and Regional Capacity

Federal antipoverty policy needs a visible coordinating institution with the authority to connect programs whose separate funding streams converge in communities. The shift to CSBG displaced much of the regional, grantee-facing federal relationship that had connected federal officials directly to local CAAs. Recent consolidation of HHS regional offices from ten to five makes rebuilding federal coordinating and administrative capacity especially urgent (US Department of Health and Human Services 2025).

Congress should rebuild that capacity through a robust federal front door with meaningful convening and grantmaking authority, and through adequately staffed regional offices that maintain ongoing relationships with local grantees. Regional personnel should help develop and review proposals, provide technical assistance, support monitoring and correction, and facilitate cross-state learning. These relationships would make regional administration a source of place-based federal expertise: Regional staff learn local institutions, implementation conditions, and recurring problems in ways difficult to replicate from Washington. Regional presence connects national authority to locally rooted institutions while providing an accessible and centralized federal interface (Fazili 2026).

7. Harden Democratic Infrastructure

Durable institutions need protection against both arbitrary displacement and administrative erosion. Current CSBG law preserves the 90 percent funding pass-through to eligible entities, alongside tripartite governance, state monitoring, and corrective processes ("Uses of Funds" 2024; "Tripartite Boards" 2024; "Monitoring of Eligible Entities" 2024). When states identify deficiencies, the statute requires notice, correction, and, where appropriate, training and technical assistance before termination or funding reduction ("Corrective Action; Termination and Reduction of Funding" 2024).

Congress should strengthen that continuity through multiyear funding where feasible, enforceable pass-through and eligible-entity protections, and redesignation procedures built around transparent standards, resident participation, an opportunity to correct deficiencies, and independent review. Similar protections should extend across federal programs where durable local capacity is itself a public good. These protections include reliable funding timelines; notice and review before major administrative dismantling; and safeguards against payment disruptions, office closures, staffing losses, or reorganizations that disable authorized institutions through administrative action.

Institutional continuity is not protection of incumbency for its own sake. It protects democratic capacities that take years to build and cannot simply be recreated once destroyed.

Conclusion: Lessons for Democratic Reconstruction

Community Action's endurance rewrites the lessons we draw from the War on Poverty. The program did not survive unchanged: Federal control shifted, budgets fell, administrative homes changed, and organizing functions weakened across parts of the network. Yet much of the local institutional base endures, preserving organizations, relationships, governing roles, and capacities for collective action that federal policy has helped build.

That record changes what democratic reconstruction requires. The lesson is not to re-create OEO or romanticize Community Action's original design. It is that federal policy can build democracy from below by investing in durable institutional infrastructure through which communities exercise collective power—and that much of that infrastructure remains in place.

The task is not to invent democratic infrastructure from scratch but to recognize what exists, rebuild what has been weakened, and strengthen what federal policy made possible. That means collective resources that enable people and organizations to act, institutions that make that action consequential, and federal architecture strong enough to sustain collective power despite political conflict.

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