

## **The history of Ozark Action Inc.**

*Submitted by OAI*

Throughout history, the U.S. government has been involved in the creation of “Poor Laws” which restrict local and government assistance to the poor.

As early as 1887, Community Chests and United Ways were created and in 1933 the “New Deal” established government-run programs to assist people out of work. Other important legislative events happened such as the Employment Act of 1946 and the West Virginia focus on poverty programs started during the Civil Rights Movement. However, it wasn’t until 1962 that America’s “War On Poverty” began on a large scale.

President John F. Kennedy was moved to action by Michael Harrington’s classical book “The Other America” which focused on the issues of the invisible population of poor in America. President Kennedy (JFK) was so moved that in 1963, he directed his economic advisors to prepare an anti-poverty program for inclusion in his 1964 legislative package. After JFK’s assassination in November 1963, President Lyndon B. Johnson carried on this program design and even called his 1964 State of the Union Address “The War on Poverty.”

In August 1964, President Lyndon Johnson signed the Economic Opportunity Act, creating economic opportunity corporations (community action

agencies). This policy set up local decision-making structures composed equally of representatives of the low-income, business and civic leaders, and local public officials as the governing structure for the newly created local poverty agencies. At the federal level, the Office of Economic Opportunity was established. In 1965, Johnson appointed Sergeant Shriver director of the Office of Economic Opportunity.

By late 1965, every county in Missouri was served by its own Community Action Agency and/or an Economic Opportunity Corporation. Due to lack of funds to sustain single-county operations and administrations, mergers occurred. The counties of Howell, Oregon, and Texas merged in November 1965 and Douglas, Ozark, and Wright counties merged in 1968. Once again, mergers occurred and in July 1975, Ozark Action, Inc. (OAI) was created to serve all six counties under one governing agency.

The first OAI programs focused on basic needs of getting persons basic food and clothing and teaching people in each community how to set up direct assistance such as food commodities. From 1965 to 1968, Head Start, Neighborhood Youth Corps and Adult Basic Education were funded as part of this “War on Poverty” in our service area. Ozark Action Head Start programs were in full swing by this time and were operating in local churches, houses and old business buildings throughout the area.

In 1973-74, under President Richard Nixon's "New Federalism" Community Action Agencies were almost closed down. National leadership including Missouri's Charles Braithwait of West Central Missouri Community Action Agency in Appleton City and the late E.C. Walker provided a combination of legal and legislative victories defeating those efforts. Daryl Andrews, director of a Joplin-based agency played a key role, serving as the first president of the Missouri Association for Community Action (MACA).

In 1970, OAI programs expanded to include Weatherization help and then in 1978 Housing Rental Assistance were begun. Throughout the 1970,s, the core funding for operation of OAI outreach continued under the Community Service Act of 1974. OAI services then expanded to include the operation of various Comprehensive Employment and Training Programs funded by the Comprehensive Employment and Training Act (CETA), and the Job Training Partnership Act (JTPA) of 1983. In 1998, JTPA was changed to what is now the Workforce Investment Act (WIA).

Starting in 1981, the Community Services Act was terminated by President Ronald Reagan. In its place the Community Services Block Grant (CSBG) was established under the assistance of David Bradley with Community Action Agencies being the presumed recipients. In and after 1994, many of the Community Action programs were under Federal attack and various levels of reconstruction occurred.

Beginning in the 1990's and continuing through the new Millennium, most all federally funded programs have moved towards those of integration, collaboration and greater conservation of financial and human resources, in tax-payer dollars. OAI plays an integral role in collaboration with partner agencies and will continually increase these roles to contribute towards its primary role in serving the poor and working-poor and helping them move towards maximum self-sufficiency.

Additional programs were added in 2005, Ozark Action, Inc started the CLAIM program to provide educational information to individuals eligible for Medicare. This education provides Medicare eligible individuals with the information about Medicare Part D and how to determine the best supplemental service for each individual's situation. During this year we also began to run all aspects of the Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program as the state reduced its staffing and turn full operation of the program over to community action agencies throughout the state.