



OPENING STATEMENT

House Committee on Education and Labor

Chairman Robert C. "Bobby" Scott

Opening Statement of Chair Suzanne Bonamici (OR-01)
Subcommittee on Civil Rights and Human Services Hearing
A Call to Action: Modernizing the Community Services Block Grant
Wednesday, November 3, 2021 | 10:15 a.m.

Today, we are examining the role of the Community Services Block Grant program in our national and local efforts to reduce poverty.

Poverty in America is a persistent and complex epidemic that directly or indirectly affects everyone across the country. Yet, we know poverty can look very different from one community to another. On the important issues of hunger, homelessness, and inadequate access to affordable health care, each of our communities grapple with unique circumstances when it comes to supporting our fellow Americans in need.

As policymakers, we may not always have the same views about the causes of, or exact solutions to, the many ways in which poverty manifests. But I'm confident we can agree that efforts to end poverty are best led by those *in* the community who understand the unique challenges they face.

In 1964, Congress first established its responsibility to support locally driven anti-poverty initiatives by authorizing Community Action Programs, which led to what we now know as Community Action Agencies, or C-A-As. Today, these entities—made possible by the Community Services Block Grant—form a network of more than 1,000 organizations that work in nearly every county across the country to help individuals and families find their path out of poverty.

Many C-A-As are central pillars of their communities. They administer programs like Head Start to provide quality early childhood education for low-income children and support their families, Meals on Wheels to support seniors experiencing hunger and isolation, and LIHEAP, the Low-Income Home Energy Assistance Program that helps people keep their utilities on.

In the Fiscal Year 2019, C-A-As helped more than nine million individuals, including nearly five million families, secure economic stability, meaningful employment and education, adequate housing, and much more.

In my home state of Oregon, C-A-As were able to serve more than 14,000 people who lacked healthcare, 43,000 individuals who reported having a disability, 21,000 senior citizens, 83,000 children living in poverty, and 8,200 veterans.

To be clear, eradicating the multigenerational consequences of concentrated poverty is much greater than any one program. Yet, for people across the country, C-A-As continue to be a reliable and essential source of assistance during times of economic prosperity or downturn, and particularly during national emergencies.

The COVID-19 pandemic has underscored the importance of C-A-As and the Community Services Block Grant program. Last year, at the start of the pandemic, C-A-As were among the first to provide food and emergency

support to those in need. And now, these entities are playing a key role in conducting vaccine education and outreach, helping low-income families access broadband and digital devices, distributing rental assistance, and preventing households from losing water and heating.

Despite consistent bipartisan support for the Community Services Block Grant, Congress has not reauthorized the program since *1998, that was when Google was founded and John Glenn was on the space shuttle Discovery*. It's been a long time. Over the past few decades, C-A-As have had to do far more with increasingly fewer resources—even while they face unique challenges to providing critical services.

As we recover from a historic global health pandemic, we have an opportunity and a responsibility to renew our bipartisan commitment to providing struggling Americans with direct and meaningful support that will help them through challenging times and importantly show them a path out of poverty

With the help of our witnesses, we will discuss bipartisan legislation that I have introduced with Representatives Glenn “GT” Thompson, Betty McCollum, Elise Stefanik, Mark DeSaulnier, and James Comer, and many other cosponsors, to modernize and reauthorize the Community Services Block Grant. I thank each of my colleagues for joining in this significant endeavor and appreciate that several of them are joining this hearing today to highlight the importance of updating the CSBG program. I also want to thank my staff, Jack Arriaga, and the committee staff on both sides of aisle who have worked so hard to get this point today.

Our bill, the *Community Services Block Grant Modernization Act of 2021*, will reauthorize CSBG for 10 years—the longest period in its history—and make long-overdue improvements to the program, including:

- Strengthening funding for Community Action Agencies,
- Expanding access to their services; and
- Streamlining collaboration between the federal government, states, and local entities.

Poverty is not inevitable in this country. Today, I am hopeful we can find common ground and discuss the shared policy goals we must realize to help those in need improve their lives.

I want to thank our witnesses, again, and I now yield to the Ranking Member, Mr. Fulcher, for his opening statement.