

**Testimony before the House Committee on Education and Labor
Subcommittee on Civil Rights and Human Services**

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Madam Chair and members of the Subcommittee on Civil Rights and Human Services.

My name is Clarence H. Carter. I serve as Commissioner of the Tennessee Department of Human Services. I am honored to speak to you today about my work with the Community Services Block Grant program and the over 1,000 Community Action Agencies funded through the block grant.

My work with CSBG spans over nearly three decades while serving 2 presidents, 4 governors and a mayor. I have had the blessing and good fortune to partner with community organizations dedicated to addressing the challenges of those in our society experiencing economic, social, and developmental vulnerabilities.

My working relationship with CSBG has been a rewarding and spirited one. I have met and consider among my friends and partners, leaders of several Community Action Agencies. They are fierce poverty warriors, doing some of the most innovative programming in this space.

I want to clearly and unequivocally state for the record that it has been my lived professional experience that CSBG and the Community Action Network is a vital tool in the public effort to serve those Americans experiencing basic challenges to making their everyday lives work.

Over these many years, what has made our relationship ebb and flow is that I am a change agent. Since very early in my work in this space I have believed the public safety net is flawed - in design and operation. I have dedicated my career to highlighting and addressing these flaws by proposing a new vision and construction for serving our vulnerable citizens. I have encouraged my partner, the Community Action Network, to join me in this endeavor. I have openly shared this desire and that has created some turbulence in our relationship.

Allow me first to speak generally about what I believe are the flaws of our public safety net before turning to my hopes for CSBG and the transformation of the American safety net.

Between federal and state government alone America spends more than one trillion dollars annually in 80+ programs that address every aspect of the human condition. Each program, while important in its individual objective, is not tied to any overarching vision for our nation. Our current safety net actually is not a “system” or “net” at all. Instead, we have a disparate set of individual benefits, goods and services that operate as band aids to certain human conditions.

As a result, we measure success in the current system by focusing on output; how many units of services we provide; how quickly we process applications; whether we provide every benefit, good or service to every eligible individual or family. We take these measurements without considering the perspective of those served. In doing so we fail to measure what I believe is the most important objective: growing those in need beyond their dependence on the benefits, goods and services we provided.

We instead should measure success by focusing on freeing the Americans we serve from a life of basic survival to a life that allows them to create their own unique version of the American dream.

I use the phrase “growing capability to reduce dependency”. I would argue this should be the overarching vision, true north and rallying cry for the American safety net. This would result in supporting our vulnerable citizens in ways that foster their growth of knowledge, skill and independence from government support.

I would further argue that we don’t leverage other sectors of American society in this vital work. The 1T dollar figure I referenced previously is public funding only. It does not account for one dollar or one hour of the time, talent and treasure any number of sectors add to the equation. We don’t combine our efforts and assets to ensure the “whole” American safety net is greater than the sum of its parts.

Now back to CSBG and Community Action.

The Economic Opportunity Act of 1964 created this Network of national and locally-focused organizations to lead the nation’s conversation on the issues

attendant to social, economic, and developmental vulnerability. During my 27-year relationship with Community Action my hope has always been that they would partner with me to say “this emperor has no clothes”; that our safety net, while absolutely essential to the vitality of our nation, is woefully flawed in its design and operation. My hope has been and remains that Community Action will speak out about the problem and work towards solving it.

To be clear, the problem is not that we don’t have enough funding, or programs, or people, or heart to solve these vexing challenges. The problem is that we have no system at all, and we don’t leverage *all* of our American assets in pursuit of a shared vision to grow capability to reduce dependency. Addressing poverty in America cannot be a problem left to the government to solve alone.

I truly don’t believe CSBG or any other safety net program needs more money. This belief is not based on any philosophical opposition to our safety net. I fully recognize the safety net is vital and essential. I don’t believe more money is needed because our “system” fails to adequately manage the resources currently available. Providing more money will merely increase the already mismanaged resources, without correcting the delivery method used for those resources.

I believe we should stop constricting other sectors from active involvement in this important work. Instead, we should be a catalyst for bringing those other sectors to the table. The community of faith, the private sector, philanthropy, academia, not-for-profits and the service sector should be welcomed into this effort; not as competitors for public funding, but as our valued partners in helping to make the whole greater than the sum of its parts.

Finally, I would ask for CSBG to partner in redefining the success of our collective endeavor. It is not that the Community Action network lacks accountability measures. I have been alongside the Network through the evolution of their measures. But as I said earlier in this testimony, those measurements focus on process and outputs. Our measurements should be about *outcomes*. We need to pivot our measurement focus to: “How many of those served were helped in ways that moved them beyond the crisis in their lives that required our intervention in the first place?”

It has been my experience that the CSBG and Community Action agencies are an important tool in the toolbox of America’s effort to serve those in our society

experiencing economic, social and developmental vulnerability. However, every tool in our toolbox, in fact the toolbox itself, demands a refresh. My critique here today is a call to all of us to rethink, reimagine and renew the collective American effort to serve our neighbors and build a true opportunity for all to thrive, not just survive.

Madam Chair, thank you for this opportunity to speak with you today. I would be pleased to respond to any questions.