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Case study and recommendations

Muskegon-Oceana Community Action Partnership, Inc.

PA663 – Erin Skene-Pratt

Introduction

As David Bradley, executive director of the National Community Action Foundation, took time out of his busy schedule for a 20-minute phone interview with a Midwestern graduate student, he had one ear on the TV and unfolding developments with the Congressional “super committee” and how it could impact funding for Community Action Agencies nationwide. During the conversation, he also mentioned he had one day off this year.

With such a contentious political and economic environment in Washington, such is life for the leader of NCAF, which Bradley helped found in 1981 to represent the nation’s 1,100 Community Action Agencies (CAAs) as well as their state and regional associations. The private, non-profit foundation serves as an advocate and lobbyist for CAAs, organizations that provide direct-client services to low-income families and individuals, and helps amplify and enhance their work in local communities throughout the country, promoting self-sufficiency and sustainable poverty reduction, according to ncaf.org. For nearly three decades, David Bradley has been recognized as one of Washington’s leading advocates for low-income programs. He has helped to innovate under different administrations, helping to write and renew the Community Services Block Grant since 1981. He has worked with federal government representatives, members of Congress, congressional staff and key White House personnel to develop national policies dealing with low-income needs and related regulations and guidelines, states ncaf.org.

Due to the CAA funding structure, local CAAs cannot actively lobby, which is why member organizations leave that work to Bradley. The NCAF is an example of a private foundation devoted to policy work, acting as a convener and bringing together members of Congress and the executive branch, federal and state agencies, and a variety of public interest groups to leverage funding for CAA programs and to shape future policy directions. As Arons’ “Power in Policy”

states, “In addition to grantmaking, serving as a concerned, evenhanded broker and convener of politically disparate groups can be one of the most valuable roles foundations play in the public policymaking process” (p. 139). NCAF advocates for broad range of issues, including: the Community Services Block Grant (which provides core funding to CAAs), welfare reform, Head Start, child care, the Low-Income Home Energy Assistance Program, workforce development, housing and shelter for the homeless, health, nutrition, tax and income policy, and energy conservation programs. NCAF provides research, data and training, as well as policy, legal and legislative support, and works on behalf of CAAs, so they can devote resources to providing services to more than a quarter of all Americans living in poverty and to several million more families with incomes only slightly higher than the poverty threshold every year, according to ncaf.org.

At the state level, the Michigan Community Action Agency Association (MCAAA) represents the 29 CAAs that provide programs and services to help low income individuals and families achieve greater economic self-sufficiency and stability. Since 1975, MCAAA has supported the important work of its member agencies through advocacy with state and federal legislators and policymakers, professional development conferences, grant administration, and communications efforts.

This case study examines the policy work and readiness of a local CAA, Muskegon-Oceana Community Action Partnership, Inc., and offers recommendations for how the organization can be more vocal and active at a grassroots level, with the media and state and federal legislators.

Overview of organization

Muskegon-Oceana Community Action Partnership, Inc. (MOCAP), 1170 W. Southern, is a nonprofit 501(c)3 human service agency that provides assistance and services to low- and

moderate-income individuals and families in need throughout Muskegon and Oceana counties. It has three action centers where clients can go for initial intake, apply for services or seek referrals. The locations include: Eastview, 5129 E. Apple; Oceana, 569 S. State St., Shelby; and Townsend, 313 Jackson Ave. Over the years, the organization has provided varied services to qualifying clients including: Rental and mortgage assistance, utility bill assistance, deliverable fuel assistance, tax preparation, Senior Project FRESH, commodities, clothing, vehicle repairs, home weatherization, migrant services, infant safety cribs, Senior Chore services, Youth Connection, medical referrals, and case management and other referrals.

MOCAP is a member of the Muskegon Area Chamber of Commerce, National Community Action Foundation, Michigan Community Action Agency Association and many others. According to its Web site, in recent years, “MOCAP has positioned itself to become a substantial stakeholder in the communities that we serve by assisting those in need throughout Muskegon and Oceana Counties. We have increased the number of families and individuals served by more than 60 percent in just a few short years. MOCAP is fully committed to understanding the causes of poverty and eliminating them.”

One of the most pressing state-level legislative issues for agencies such as MOCAP is Gov. Rick Snyder’s 48-month cap on families receiving cash assistance through the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families and Family Independence Program and similar policies that reduce or cut off services to families living in poverty. This has or will cut off cash assistance to an estimated 600 Muskegon County families, and the number will increase into the future. The new policy on limitations with DHS will significantly affect their work, and Executive Director the Rev. Kenneth Shelton and Operations Manager Jeanette Riley serve on a variety of initiatives in the community that are struggling to decide what to do.

The \$15 trillion deficit and ongoing debate in Washington over how to reduce it includes examining domestic discretionary spending for programs such as Community Action Agencies, Bradley said.

“It keeps me up at night, it really does,” he said. “We are facing huge cuts across the board. A lot of good members are going to retire. The real pressure is going to come post-2012 elections.”

While CSBG funds only comprise a small percentage of MOCAP’s total budget, it could have a damaging impact on the agency’s operations if political leaders change the law and structure for that grant money by opening it up for competitive bid, Riley said.

“For 40 years, we haven’t really worried about that because core funding was legislated,” she said. “We just had to submit a community action plan to say how we were going to use the money allocated to us.”

Simply, federal and state policies impact the organization’s ability to deliver services.

How MOCAP interacts with government

MOCAP’s history and interaction with government is unique, as it is a local service agency of a large network of Community Action Agencies nationwide. The promise of Community Action “changes people’s lives, embodies the spirit of hope, improves communities, and makes America a better place to live. We care about the entire community, and we are dedicated to helping people help themselves and each other.” In 1964, the federal government established CAAs to combat poverty and address local needs in poverty-plagued communities. A response to President Lyndon Johnson’s “War on Poverty,” CAAs are legislated through the Economic Opportunity Act and receive core funding from Community Services Block Grants. Part of their mission is to determine services and deliver them to those who have historically been “unable to

participate in American life.” One stipulation of the act that also makes CAAs unique is their governance structure. They have a tripartite board designed to promote the participation of the entire community to help in the reduction or elimination of poverty. Board members include public sector officials, private sector officials, and low-income residents or advocates. MOCAP’s 12-member board includes four consumers, four public officials and four people from the private sector. They are clergy, school administrators and board members, and community and business professionals.

Since 1981, CAAs have been guaranteed core funding through a grant system created under President Ronald Reagan and authored by Bradley. Although Reagan cut federal funding for CAAs, this established Community Services Block Grants and funnels funding directly to the state. Reflective of Reagan’s devolution of government, this policy change allowed states to decide what their biggest priorities were and administer the funds without having a number of federal departments involved. From the outset, Community Action Agencies were designed to be locally focused organizations, determining and offering programs based on local community assessment of needs, thereby reducing duplication of services offered by other organizations and maximizing efficiencies of delivery of service, according to both Bradley and Riley.

According to “Nonprofits for Hire: The Political Economy of Nonprofit Revenues,” federal expenditures for social welfare services almost tripled between 1965 and 1970, from \$812 million to \$2.2 billion. By 1980, federal funds comprised 65 percent of total government spending at all levels on social welfare services, compared to 37 percent in 1960, and “a big percentage of the increase in public funding of social services was expended through nonprofit agencies” (Lipsky, Smith, p. 54-55). The article goes on to say these figures understate the increase in government contracting with nonprofits in several key respects such as federal block

grants and community action agencies. Federal spending for special OEO and ACTION programs, which included funding for community action, rose from \$51.7 million in 1965 to \$2.3 billion in 1980 (Lipsky, Smith, p. 56). “Community action agencies were to be an alternative to the state social service bureaucracies,” (Lipsky, Smith, p. 60). However, this trend reversed during the Reagan Era. Although he established the Community Services Block Grant to provide core funding to CAAs, he also reduced the amount of federal money awarded to them. In his first year of his presidency, Reagan passed the Omnibus Reconciliation Act, a major budget cutting legislation which included provisions that affected social services and government funding of nonprofit agencies. “Federal funding for social service programs such as community action agencies and neighborhood health clinics was reduced significantly” (Lipsky, Smith, p. 62).

In Dennis Young’s article “Complementary, Supplementary, or Adversarial? A Theoretical and Historical Examination of Nonprofit-Government Relations in the United States,” Young offers several strands of theory on how nonprofits interact with government. MOCAP obviously falls into the complementary category, as Young writes:

In the complementary view, nonprofits are seen as partners to government, helping to deliver public goods largely financed by government. In this perspective, nonprofit and government expenditures have a direct relationship with one another. As governmental expenditures increase, they help finance rising levels of nonprofit activity (Young, p. 33).

Young presents information about the economic theory of organizations, as well as the public goods and transactions-cost theory, to explain why government delegates the delivery of services to private and nonprofit organizations.

Although MOCAP’s budget has a variety of funding streams, most of them lead back to the state and federal government. The agency’s budget was under \$1 million when Riley started at

MOCAP roughly a decade ago. Now it averages about \$3 million, with money coming from various sources such as the Department of Education for food programs, the U.S. Department of Energy for home weatherization, Federal Emergency Management Agency for emergency food and shelter assistance, and Community Services Block Grant funding for other programs.

MOCAP got a big boost since 2009 thanks to American Recovery and Reinvestment Act dollars. In the past couple of years, the budget ballooned to nearly \$10 million thanks to two different grants from the U.S. Department of Energy for weatherization programs – one for traditional weatherization for low-income families and another for renewable energy initiatives.

The agency went from employing 13 people to 30 people, Riley said. Ed Elsey, director of energy programs for MOCAP, said the \$5.3 million in stimulus money increased the number of homes being upgraded tenfold over prior years. It used to do about 60 homes a year. Since the ARRA funds in 2009, MOCAP has completed about 700 and on target to do a total of 883. The staff for energy programs increased from two staff positions to 12 and from four weatherization contractors up to 16, according to www.mlive.com/news/grand-rapids/index.ssf/2011/11/community_action_agency_progra.html

The stimulus funding is slated to end March 12. In Kent, Muskegon, Oceana and Ottawa counties, more than 1,450 homes have had weatherization improvements with approximately 450 scheduled for work through CAAs. Total money granted to the three areas for weatherization programs was \$11.1 million.

Another MOCAP weatherization program making a difference was made possible by a \$3.2 million grant from the U.S. Department of Energy through a Sustainable Energy Resources for Consumers (SERC) grant. It allows several Michigan contractors to install one or more systems at residential and income-eligible group care facilities. Installations include hybrid domestic hot

water, solar domestic hot water, solar hot air and solar photovoltaic systems in single and multi-family units. Grand Valley's Michigan Alternative and Renewable Energy Center provides technical assistance and serves as a resource for the project. There are four, large multi-family projects underway that will benefit 150 people, and about one third of approximately 50 residential projects have begun, said Kim Walton, program coordinator at MAREC and technical advisor for the project.

Still, some programs have been scaled back due to a reduction in funding, such as money available for emergency services and rent/mortgage assistance. For example, for the last five or six years, the organization has only had \$25,000 for rent and mortgage assistance and it dropped to \$12,000 for this year, Riley said.

“We haven't been able to help people with rent and mortgages this year at a time when no one had any money for it,” Riley said. “There are a huge number of people from our economy that are being pushed into the poverty level. We're constantly chasing money and dealing with people saying ‘you're helping people sitting on their butts.’”

At MOCAP, people can only come there once in a year for an emergency service or receive rent or mortgage assistance for one month. Those who qualify for the weatherization program can only do it once every 15 years.

While MOCAP is a good example of a nonprofit delivering services that are technically funded by the government, the readings offer conflicting perspectives on the pros and cons of the blurry nature of government-nonprofit relationships and the pitfalls of this resource dependency. Young continues on to say the three perspectives of supplementary, complementary and adversarial are “by no means mutually exclusive.” Nonprofits can finance and provide services where government does not, deliver services that are financed or otherwise supported by

government, advocate for changes in policies and oversight, and be affected by government pressure and regulations (Young, p. 33). “For example, Kramer (1981) observed that nonprofits’ reliance on public funds to deliver services did not necessarily constrain their advocacy efforts” (Young, p. 33).

But Lipsky and Smith note that such reliance on public funding can create tension between government and nonprofits providing human services and thwart their advocacy efforts. Nonprofit executives they spoke with for their research expressed concern that the advocacy role of nonprofits would be constrained by government funding (Lipsky, Smith, p. 58). This has turned out to be the case with the nation’s network of Community Action Agencies, which is why Bradley’s National Community Action Foundation does the large-scale lobbying. As a licensed lobbyist, Bradley works with Congress to further the mission of CAAs and make sure the funding model, as well as the amount of federal funding, is guaranteed from year to year. While local CAA employees can advocate, they cannot directly lobby due to the structure of the CAA system, Bradley said.

Lester Salamon and Stephanie Geller also mention this issue in the Center for Civil Society Studies at the John Hopkins Institute for Policy Studies Listening Post Project survey results titled “Communique No. 9 Nonprofit America: A Force for Democracy?” While government funding does deter some nonprofits from advocacy and lobbying, respondents cited a lack of staff time as the most common reason for non-involvement. Only about one-fifth (20 percent) mentioned concerns about losing public funds, about the same proportion as cited board opposition or reluctance to be involved (Geller, Salamon, p. 8). The public funds issue comes up again, however, on page 13, in the “Putting it All Together Section.” The authors write:

The second explanation points to the revenue base of organizations as the key determinant shaping advocacy involvement. One line of argument within this ‘resource dependency’ framework suggests that receipt of government funding inhibits nonprofit policy advocacy, and that this inhibition is further reinforced by worrisome legal restrictions (Geller, Salamon, p. 13).

In the Arons’ book on page 121, there is a graph showing that 52 percent of 1,700 nonprofits throughout the country that took part in a Strengthening Nonprofit Advocacy Project cited receiving government funds as a barrier to public policy participation. For many NPOs, there is definitely a stigma associated with advocacy and lobbying, especially when their funding is strongly tied to state and federal dollars. Arons’ writes:

Some nonprofits downplay their role in public policy because they want to be known for providing effective services, not for pleading with the government. Unfortunately, too many nonprofits do not see their public policy role as a positive and equal activity with charitable service – one that helps to hold government accountable as a partner with the nonprofit sector and that works with government to use taxpayer dollars wisely in providing services to the public (Arons, p. 121)

As mentioned in my reading reflection, there does seem to be problems with some nonprofits having too much reliance on one funding source and the need for them to diversify their revenue streams to avoid some of the regulations and headaches associated with chasing government money. When money is guaranteed, it can lead to stagnation, waste and lackadaisical behavior on the part of employees. When money is guaranteed and arrives late, it can create internal stress, frustration and reflect negatively on the organization in a variety of ways, including bad customer service, program cuts and staffing issues.

Using my case study organization as an example, while the CAA structure has proven to be beneficial for determining and addressing poverty-related issues at a local level, the nationwide CAA network also survives based in large part on government money. If that funding would disappear or, for example, the CSBG granting process is opened to competitive bid, these community action agencies could be forced to close their doors and would definitely be left scrambling for money. Additionally, MOCAP does not focus on fundraising or invest much staff resources in seeking out other grant money, Riley said.

How do public policy issues affect MOCAP and vice versa?

On a broader and more critical level, and something that has been touched upon already, Muskegon-Oceana Community Action Partnership Inc.'s public policy issues relate to federal budget appropriations for Community Services Block Grants. As previously discussed, CAAs serve as complementary partners with government in public service provision, and the federal government issues grant funding to state-level departments, which then disperse the money to local agencies. States can only keep 5 percent of Community Services Block Grant money for administration costs, Riley said. The rest must be distributed to CAAs for programs, and the individual allocation is based on the percentage of poverty in a local community, Riley said. Each year, MOCAP has to provide an updated community action plan to Michigan's CSBG office, which is a division within the Department of Human Services.

“One way they impact us is they have us hanging out on a wire,” Riley said. “We’re worried on this side about monies coming in. We’re increasing the load, but decreasing the funds to deal with the load.”

MOCAP is opposed to any change in legislation regarding federal funding for Community Action Agencies, Riley said. She is concerned what will happen if and when the NCAF loses Bradley to retirement or burnout.

“What would happen if David Bradley would fall out of the picture?” she said. “We’re lucky there are enough people in Congress who still have hearts and still understand and are not denying we have poor people in the United States.”

The CSBG system has survived in large part thanks to the National Community Action Foundation and Bradley’s work with both Congress and the executive branch for the last 30 years. Located in the heart of Washington on Massachusetts Avenue, the National Community Action Foundation takes on the adversarial role on behalf of local agencies when necessary, such as when funding is in jeopardy of being cut. It also promotes the interests and activities of action agencies nationwide and acts as an advocate in the process of public policy formation, according to ncaf.org.

In particular, Community Services Block Grant (CSBG) is the only federal program focused on comprehensive services to people in need. Bradley has been the principle author of the granting program since its inception. This three quarter of a billion dollar program provides the core funding to the nation’s community action agency (CAA) network. It is the essential funding which enables CAAs to leverage almost 9 billion in other federal, state, local and private resources, according to ncaf.org.

If eliminated, the 1,100 Community Action Agencies across the country will be forced to slash programs, or even close their doors. In February, the Obama Administration made true on comments in his State of the Union with the release of its fiscal year 2012 budget proposal. The

President is requesting that CSBG be funded at \$350 million, or half the FY 2010 level of regular funding.

The House has recommended maintaining the current funding levels despite Obama's recommendation. Bradley believes CSBG funding is safe until 2012, but after that, he is worried.

He said the 2010 elections changed the whole nature of Congress and members have their focus set on deficits and debt reduction. Domestic, discretionary programs are going to be competing with military spending and some will have the ax fall on them, Bradley said. It is even more important for those who work on behalf of the poor to make their voices heard by writing and calling their legislators and building grassroots support in local communities.

Bradley said the Obama administration has proposed turning CSBG money and grants earmarked for weatherization into competitive dollars, due to issues of performance, accountability and transparency.

"We may think we are good, but how can we be better?" he said. "Going forward, we have to set the bar higher."

Specifically in Michigan, Gov. Rick Snyder in early September signed a welfare reform bill into law capping cash assistance at 48-months through the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families and Family Independence Program. Initially, an estimated 41,000 Michigan welfare recipients are expected to lose cash benefits in the amount of approximately \$515 a month. More will fall off the welfare rolls as they reach their lifetime limit. That figure includes 29,700 children, according to the Michigan Department of Human Services. The new law will reduce the number of children and adults receiving cash assistance by nearly a fifth, from more than 221,000 to around 180,000. Enforcing a four-year limit will save the state more than \$60 million

annually, according to a House Fiscal Agency analysis. The state estimates \$65 million in savings in fiscal year 2012.

Muskegon County's number of affected families is the third highest in the state behind Wayne and Genesee counties, according to an article on www.mlive.com/news/muskegon/index.ssf/2011/09/muskegon_county_charities_brac.html. The average family receiving assistance in Muskegon County has one parent and two children, and receives about \$495 per month, said Jane Johnson, DHS director for Muskegon, Oceana and Mason counties, according to the article. The money is meant to help cover rent, utilities and personal items the family may need. The 2010 American Community Survey estimated about 17.7 percent of all Muskegon County households live in poverty. That includes 44 percent of families headed by a single female.

These sorts of policy changes impact organizations such as MOCAP because it offers one-time assistance with mortgage/rent, deliverable fuel and utility bills for low- to moderate-income families, as well as home weatherization and foreclosure prevention services. Although it is too early to tell, with more families in need losing cash benefits, MOCAP and other agencies anticipate an increase in clients seeking help to pay their rent/mortgage and utilities, Riley said.

Like at the federal level, MOCAP also supports maintaining funding levels for state welfare programs, and examining ways to help needy families transition to self-sufficiency rather than cutting their assistance. This current legislation is a double whammy for the needy and nonprofits who serve them. MOCAP simultaneously faces the threat of reduced government support and increased client need. For example, Riley said she recently received a call from a woman who was being cut off from TANF who had nearly completed training to become a CNA but did not have the \$176 to pay to take the test for the state license.

MOCAP, along with other member agencies of National Community Action Foundation and Michigan Community Action Agency Association, relies on those organizations to do policy work and advocacy and lobbying and keep the agency abreast of important or pending legislative changes. Riley said MOCAP employees and board members do talk to state and federal legislators to give them updates on what the organization is doing and its good work and impact in the local community. MOCAP representatives attend an annual legislative conference every year, and the organization tries to send a few representatives to Capitol Hill to meet with federal legislators every year. This past March, Shelton, Riley and the board chair and vice chair all went to Washington to advocate and speak with Michigan's representatives in Congress.

MOCAP employees are so busy and focused on direct-client services that they do not have adequate time to work on long-term policy changes and legislative initiatives at the local, state or federal level. They do their best by pitching articles in area newspapers about services provided; speaking with community organizations about programs and client demographics; networking with neighborhood associations, other nonprofits and human services agencies; and attending meetings of the local Emergency Needs Committee.

Nationally, the NCAF and Bradley do a lot to impact public policy and issues affecting the poor. Besides authoring and advocating for the renewal of the Community Services Block Grant system, Bradley also wrote a major portion of the McKinney Act, which provides homelessness assistance to a wide variety of social service agencies. He helped found and fund CAP LAW which provides a legal support system to this anti-poverty network and is widely credited with increasing the effectiveness of all partners, federal, state and local in the Community Services Block Grant network. Bradley established CAP-PAC, the Community Action Program Political Action Committee. This allows community action programs to participate in a sophisticated

manner in the political process. Recently Bradley helped create CAP Fund which is the first venture capital fund to be established to assist CAAs in their economic development activities.

Bradley feels the pressure will be on in the short-term future for CAAs to step up local advocacy efforts and raise awareness about the good work they do in their communities. He is feeling the heat and fielding the questions about why CAAs have their own funding stream in the form of Community Services Block Grants.

“They are starting to ask ‘why do CAAs get their own money?’” he said. “Even our former allies are looking at it. It’s going to get very, very competitive. I’ve always had 2013 in the back of my head. We have two very, busy, stressful years ahead.”

Recommendations for future advocacy efforts

Although CAAs cannot do hard lobbying, Bradley sees areas where local agencies can work harder to educate new legislators, especially from the up-and-coming Tea Party, about the CAA legacy and mission.

“They can certainly advocate and let people know what we do,” he said. “I’ve been dealing with a lot of new Tea Party members and I keep telling them ‘We’re not Washington. We’re the community. We’re not welfare. We’re about opportunities and getting people back on their feet.’”

He cited the CAA tripartite board structure of elected officials, private sector and at-large community members. “There isn’t another organization like that,” he said. Bradley also noted that the nationwide CAA network helped 20 million struggling Americans last year.

Bradley encourages local CAAs such as MOCAP to collaborate and build new allies in local communities with banks, universities and city hall.

“We’re not all Lefties and Democrats,” he said. “They need to continue to reach out, continue to invite members (legislators) in to see what they are about and do it in a nonpartisan

way. They need to emphasize partnerships. We are not a stand-alone organization but part of the community. Emphasizing our strengths really works with a vast majority of members in Congress.”

Based on my interview with Riley, MOCAP employees and board members seem unclear about how much advocacy and lobbying they can do. The organization needs to invest in training, especially for board members, regarding the organization’s lobbying and advocacy roles in the local community and what is allowed under the law. One easy and free way to educate and engage board members: Form a public policy subcommittee of the board, charged with educating itself on federal and state policy issues affecting MOCAP and CAAs in general. This committee could report back to the board at regular meetings to keep other members abreast of current and upcoming bills, as well as network locally and build state and federal legislative champions and grassroots support.

MOCAP relies on the NCAF and MCAAA for much of its advocacy and lobbying and to keep it abreast of policy issues through e-mail blasts and legislative updates issued by Bradley. While this is the role of the national and state organizations and why MOCAP is a member of both, it seems MOCAP employees and board members could do more to raise awareness of the agency in the local community – via newspaper articles, letters to the editor and speaking to churches, local political officials, human and community-based agencies and volunteer service groups.

Although Riley said they do this, I worked at the local newspaper for nearly five years and never recalled reading much about their programs or services. There have been recent stories about the weatherization program and its expansion thanks to stimulus money. The current funding issues at the federal level seem like a prime opportunity to make a call to the local

newspaper and pitch another story.

This is part of the three-legged stool we discussed in class regarding direct support, grassroots campaigns and using the media to get your organization's message out. As I have written in my class notes, "Messages carry different meaning" and MOCAP needs to identify various groups who can deliver a message of support or opposition for policies affecting the poor. The organization needs to maintain solid working and referral relationships with other nonprofits and human service organizations, as well as tap clergy, clients who are experience success and willing to tell their stories, and local politicians and public officials to write and call state and federal legislators.

Since MOCAP serves clients who live in poverty and may not be well-educated or registered to vote or turned off by the political process, they could offer voter registration as part of their services. At intake or follow-up visits, case managers could ask if they are registered to vote and find ways to educate clients on policies and budget-related decisions that could impact the services they receive. If clients understand the direct impact on them and that MOCAP programs could be reduced or eliminated due to federal and state budget constraints or changes in the granting process, they may be more apt to get involved and vote or contact a legislator.

As we know from various classroom readings, numbers count in politics and votes count at the polls. Numbers of calls, letters, visits, and letters to the editor have a profound influence on elected officials (Avner, p. 111). This is not only why it would benefit MOCAP to get more of its clients to become registered voters, but it would behoove a public policy subcommittee of the board to devote efforts to educating the local community about policy issues and budget cuts that could jeopardize MOCAP's services or negatively impact the poor.

The Avner book offers a variety of suggestions for organizations to build and mobilize

grassroots support on pages 111-115. The Arons' book outlines similar "Public Policy and Civic Strengthening Strategies" on pages 72-73. Some of these recommendations include:

- Conduct a stakeholder analysis. Create a chart that allows MOCAP's board to see who cares about what issue, why they care, what they can do and how to persuade them to join the cause and act.
- Prioritize stakeholders and set up a system for identifying and reaching specific individuals. This will require building lists of people who need to be kept informed and can be called to action.
- Build supporters' interest and understanding of your policy issues over time. Include materials and ongoing updates (via e-mail blasts or social media sites) about the organization's policy positions, what is happening at the state and federal level, and how they can help.
- Teach supporters how to communicate effectively with elected officials, providing them with tips on how to write letters, leave phone messages and build ongoing contact with legislative representatives you want to reach. Provide phone numbers, addresses, some biographical information and past voting record on bills as well as key points to include in a personalized letter or phone call.
- Bring people together to see the process at work and get comfortable talking with their elected representatives. Hold town hall meetings and forums and invite both elected officials as well as local supporters, organize rallies and "Days at the Capitol" that engage people in the public dialogue.
- Sign up individuals to be eligible to vote. Must be nonpartisan and can target historically low voter turnout areas or clients who seek services through MOCAP.

- Conduct nonpartisan efforts to educate voters about policy issues facing causes and communities. Tactics may include flyers, ads, radio messages, public meetings and paid media or traditional newspaper articles and editorials. Human-interest and feature stories in area newspapers, especially with clients who are willing to tell their story, are free and effective.
- Research on civic activity. Organize an inquiry about citizen participation in the democratic process, volunteerism, participation in public decision making and advocacy by other nonprofits in the community.
- Civic education. Develop school and community-based programs to teach the importance of understanding how democracy works; also why and how people participate through advocacy, voluntarism, and service learning.

After talking with Bradley, there does seem to be cause for concern over the next few years with regards to the future of Community Action Agencies. I do not believe clients, local religious and political leaders or the greater community is aware that Obama and Congress is currently debating whether to continue funding CAAs, or at least what level, and the potentially dire consequences if this network of action agencies is dissolved or the process for funding and program delivery is restructured or opened to competitive bid. I am by no means an expert on Community Action Agencies, but they have been around for 45 years and won the continued support of Congress and past Presidents – and we know that can be a hard sell.

Basically, MOCAP needs to step up its awareness efforts in the Muskegon and Oceana communities and get its own clients, local religious leaders and others who advocate for and work with poor, unemployed, single mothers and homeless educated about the funding cuts facing the organization if nothing else. Shelton is a local pastor so he should have connections in

the religious community. Board members include elected officials, school board members and those with connections to the business and philanthropic sectors. An easy place to start that would not take too much time or money would be to mobilize them to write letters to the editor of area papers and call state and federal legislators.