

Cuts to WCAC unacceptable AS I SEE IT

By Deborah Penta and Jill Dagilis

President Barack Obama, during his State of the Union address, stated that federal cuts to the Community Services Block Grant funding are part of a unique opportunity to "right our fiscal ship and begin to reduce our massive deficits and debt." Cutting this program support for community action agencies is an attack on over 20.7 million income-limited children, seniors, veterans and families across the country. This is unreasonable and unacceptable.

CSBG funds the Community Action network — 1,100 nonprofit service providers nationwide, 24 of which are in Massachusetts. It's one of the most significant and comprehensive approaches by the federal government to provide a safety net and build economic security for struggling Americans. Worcester Community Action Council receives this funding and currently services over 72,000 people in 49 Central Massachusetts communities.

As a direct result of the economic downturn, more people are at our doors seeking services today than in the agency's 45-year history. This is a 50 percent swell from 47,000 people served just five years ago. Cutting CSBG funds would dismantle a responsive, holistic program that began as the War on Poverty and has helped millions of Americans live decent lives at a time when the difference between the rich and the poor has grown exponentially.

Last year, WCAC's CSBG funding — \$644,000, representing less than 3 percent of the total agency budget — leveraged \$24 million in program funding from federal, state, local and private funding sources to deliver 21 programs in education, employment, energy and asset development. These programs will not exist or have anywhere near the impact they do without the core funding that is CSBG. In addition to these funds, more cuts are proposed to other important community action programs — the Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program and Head Start, which provides early education and care to thousands of families nationally and to 348 WCAC children alone. WCAC's fuel assistance program has grown over the last five years from 10,000 households applying to over 16,000 applying annually now. This trend is an indicator of the crushing need for help.

Since 1965, WCAC has provided economic self-sufficiency programs and emergency services including fuel assistance; adult and early childhood education; job skills training; summer jobs for youth; weatherization; housing and food assistance; financial education and tax assistance programs; and other interventions that give people the tools to build careers, own homes, pay taxes, give back to their communities and stabilize their lives. CSBG supports all of these programs. Further, we do our work with a strong network of over 100 partners in this region crossing every sector, who refer to and rely on WCAC for services from state and local government to business, health, education, faith and neighborhood groups.

We hear from some administrative and elected officials that they don't think community action agencies are accountable or effective. We invite doubters to visit WCAC to witness the demand for and scope of our services, to understand our commitment to business-centric approaches and best practice programs, and to see the throngs of people working to stabilize their lives.

Our customers are seniors, young families and veterans, folks with disabilities and people in foreclosure, lifelong workers who are now unemployed, and youth who are homeless or living in shelters. Many are in crisis and struggling to make decisions about paying for rent, heat, medications or food. If you were in this situation, what would you do? Where would you turn?

WCAC funding must be supported. Difficult budget deliberations are under way at the federal level. We understand the need to tighten financial belts, but let's be fair and equitable with the programs to be cut. CSBG is a drop in the bucket within the entire federal budget; however, the programs it supports, and additional resources that it brings to bear for services, are far-reaching, impactful, and support the country's most vulnerable people. Is cutting an effective safety net during this economic firestorm truly the unique opportunity to right our fiscal ship? CSBG, Head Start and LIHEAP funding must be maintained at reasonable levels; otherwise, who will provide services and programs to our customers?

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