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ABSTRACT

A Grassroots War on Poverty:
Community Action and Urban Politics in Houston, 1964-1976

by

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Grassroots studies of the implementation of the federal antipoverty initiatives of the 1960s and 1970s are showing that the War on Poverty did not operate in a vacuum; rather, it was profoundly shaped by a multifarious group of local actors that included public officials, local elites, grassroots antipoverty activists, program administrators, federal volunteers, civil rights activists, and poor people themselves. In Houston, grassroots activists created a local context in which to implement the War on Poverty that was much more diverse in its intellectual and political influences than the rather narrow confines of New Deal-Great Society liberalism. The moderate liberalism that motivated the architects of the federal War on Poverty certainly helped galvanize local antipoverty activists in Houston, but even more prominent in their antipoverty philosophy were Prophetic Christianity, radical civil rights activism, and the vision of participatory democracy and community organizing espoused by members of the New Left and iconoclastic figures like Saul Alinsky. This local context created a favorable environment for these activists to use the War on Poverty to advance an agenda of social change by empowering the poor and helping them engage in confrontations with the city’s elite. By the same token, the diversity of ideas that fueled the implementation of the War on
Poverty in Houston – and especially the small victories that grassroots activists were able to achieve in their quest to empower the city’s poor – provoked a swift and powerful backlash from local public officials and conservative defenders of the status quo. In Houston, therefore, local political conditions and contests, even more than federal politics, determined how the War on Poverty was fought, and the interaction between the federal antipoverty program and a broad range of local ideas gave the War on Poverty a distinctive flavor in Houston that both created opportunities for grassroots activists to bring about social change and set limits on what those activists could accomplish.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

It is perhaps cliché by now to say that a scholarly work is never simply the product of an individual working alone, but I failed to understand the full meaning of this sentiment until I began writing my own dissertation. As much as we toil alone in the archives or in the confines of our solitary library carrels, historians rely on a vast network of support in order to complete our work. It therefore gives me great pleasure to acknowledge those who have provided the encouragement, resources, and academic stimulation I needed to finish this dissertation.

Each member of my committee made unique contributions to my dissertation. Allen Matusow initially sparked my interest in the 1960s even before I arrived at Rice in 2005 and continually challenged me to think more critically about my subject. John Boles provided much needed encouragement when times got rough, and he is as good as it gets when it comes to academic professionalism and compassion. Caleb McDaniel brought a fresh perspective to my project, and our many conversations have helped me immensely in thinking about my dissertation more broadly. Chandler Davidson offered an interesting sociological perspective that will continue to benefit my work as a historian, and as a scholar-activist his work has helped me see the link between rigorous academic inquiry and progressive social change.

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I would also like to express my gratitude to the students who took my course titled, “American Biography: The 1960s,” at Rice University during the fall 2009 semester. It was a sincere pleasure to teach such bright, inquisitive, and ambitious students, and they helped me see how my project fits more broadly into the history of the 1960s in America.

When I was a student at the University of North Texas, Mike Campbell took me under his wing and shaped the kind of historian I would eventually become. Dr. Campbell encouraged me to explore more deeply the periods of history that had always fascinated me, even when they did not match up neatly with his own academic interests. Although I am certain to fall short, I strive to emulate him in so many ways ranging from his engaging teaching style to his genuine concern for the well being of his students. Thinking about Dr. Campbell, I am reminded of the day I received the phone call from Rice University telling me that I had been accepted into their graduate program in American history. I rushed to Dr. Campbell’s office to tell him the good news, and with a smile on his face he replied, “Well, there you go, Wes. Your future is wide open.” The success I have experienced in the graduate program at Rice is a testament to all of the hard work Mike Campbell contributed to making me a good historian.

Members of my family have been a constant source of support during my time as a graduate student. My parents, Lee and Carol Phelps, instilled in me at an early age the value of an education and were patient with me when I lost sight of that for a few teenage years. My in-laws, Kip and Dana Inman, and my brother-in-law, Dustin Dodson, were there for me when I needed them most and often expressed genuine interest in my work as a historian and a teacher. I only wish Dustin were still with us, with all of his goofiness
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shared with me their memories of the 1960s and played a significant role in kindling my
interest in the history of that turbulent decade. In a similar way, Claude Doane sparked
my fascination with urban history and the plight of America's cities through our many
tours of downtown Dallas in the mid-1990s.

There are two people in my life who have lived with this dissertation on a daily
basis for just as long as I have. My partner, Devon, and our daughter, Jordan, have been
my rock, my source of inspiration, my unconditional cheering section, and they have
experienced with me the full range of emotions - from insecurity and exhaustion to joy
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time writing, Devon has dedicated the last three years of her life to making the ideals of
educational democracy and equality a reality in the lives of low-income Houston
elementary school students. She is a powerful source of inspiration in my life and is a
constant reminder that we all can make a unique contribution to the quest for social
justice. I count myself lucky to share my life with someone I admire and love so deeply.

On the day of my dissertation defense, Jordan, who is five years old and
beginning to learn how to write, penned me a note in her preschool class: "To my Dad,
Dr. Phelps," the note began, "I love you! Congratulashons on feneshing skool. Love,
Jordan." This letter will occupy a permanent place on my office wall to remind me that
life tastes so much sweeter surrounded by the ones I love.
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Introduction

Bringing the Local Back In:
The War on Poverty from a Grassroots Perspective

Perhaps the story of Community Action must be told by a poet or mystic rather than a politician or historian.

—Donald Rumsfeld
Director, Office of Economic Opportunity

On May 22, 1964, President Lyndon Johnson delivered the keynote address to the graduating class of the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor. In a speech that would forever mark the launching of his Great Society, Johnson pledged “an end to poverty and racial injustice, to which we are totally committed in our time.” In response to the African American civil rights movement, Johnson had made remarkable progress using the power of the federal government to help movement activists tear down the walls of racial segregation in the American South, and indeed the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 was less than a month away. What the federal government could accomplish in a pursuit to end poverty, however, was a much more complicated and unprecedented matter. The president had made statements about fighting poverty before, most notably in his State of the Union address to Congress the previous January in which he declared an “unconditional war on poverty in America.” In the University of Michigan speech, however, Johnson’s liberal optimism and his faith that Americans could solve any problem with enough will and determination bubbled to the surface in an almost utopian.

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1 Donald Rumsfeld, “Remarks at NACD Conference, Silver Spring Maryland,” 11 October 1969, Box 2, Folder CAP (General), Office of Economic Opportunity, Southwest Region, VISTA, Central Files, Budget-Mexican American Affairs, Record Group 381, National Archives and Records Administration, Southwest Region, Fort Worth, Texas (hereafter cited as NARASW).
vision of a perfect America free from the problems plaguing it since the founding of the nation.\textsuperscript{2}

One result of these proclamations was the federal War on Poverty, launched in August 1964 with the passage of the Economic Opportunity Act as part of Johnson’s quest to make the Great Society a reality. Like the president’s statements during the previous few months, the act called for a bold and ambitious series of initiatives fueled by the spirit of 1960s American liberalism. It created the Job Corps to provide unemployed and underemployed young men and women with marketable skills, Volunteers in Service to America (VISTA) to tap the great resource of idealistic youth eager to take an active role in fighting poverty, and the Community Action Program (CAP) to coordinate the delivery of new and existing local social services and initiate reform of the institutions that affected the lives of the poor. Soon the War on Poverty would also include a number of additional programs, such as Legal Services and Head Start, designed to provide services for the poor to which they otherwise would not have access. The massive federal antipoverty program would be administered by the newly created Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO).\textsuperscript{3}

Several policy analysts began writing about the War on Poverty while it was still being fought in the 1960s and early 1970s, but it was not until the 1980s – a decade that saw the systematic dismantling of much of the Great Society – that a significant number of historians and social scientists became interested in Johnson’s federal poverty war.


The first generation of scholars writing about the federal antipoverty initiative were particularly concerned with the impact of its programs on the fate of American liberalism in the 1960s, and they tended to focus on a broad national narrative and to make assessments based on the president’s ambitious pledge to eradicate poverty from American society. The most prominent scholars in this group – historian Allen J. Matusow and political scientist Charles Murray – approached the study of the War on Poverty from very different perspectives yet reached strikingly similar conclusions. The War on Poverty, argued Matusow and Murray, was a failure because it fell short of eradicating poverty in America. As Matusow stated, “the War on Poverty was destined to be one of the great failures of twentieth-century liberalism.” Arguing that antipoverty programs of the 1960s never attempted to redistribute the nation’s wealth in a more equitable way, Matusow suggested that the epitaph for the War on Poverty should have read, “Declared but Never Fought.”

Murray argued that the government’s social policy during the 1960s, particularly the War on Poverty, actually resulted in more poverty because it made more American citizens dependent on the welfare system for survival. “We tried to provide more for the poor,” proclaimed Murray, “and produced more poor instead. We tried to remove the barriers to escape from poverty, and inadvertently built a trap.” Like Matusow and Murray, recent accounts also approach the War on Poverty from a macro level, with many historians seemingly fixated on judging the success of this

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4 Matusow, *Unraveling*, 220, 270.
series of massive and complex federal programs with the use of statistical national aggregates.\(^6\)

Although national studies are necessary for understanding the ideas and politics that shaped federal policy, they tend to obscure the multitude of ways that poverty warriors actually implemented these policies in local communities. This is particularly true with regard to the Community Action Program (CAP), which was by far the most ambitious and least understood component of the poverty program and the part most contingent on local factors and dependent on grassroots activists to make it successful. As Matusow admitted twenty-five years ago, the real story of community action in the War on Poverty rests with organizations “in one thousand communities across the country” working to implement their vision of effective antipoverty programs. Since historians know very little about how War on Poverty programs operated at the local level, continued Matusow, no final judgment of them is possible “until an army of local historians recovers the program’s lost fragments.”\(^7\)

Fortunately, over the last ten years historians have begun to do just that. By investigating the implementation of the War on Poverty at the grassroots level, these

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\(^7\) Matusow, *Unraveling*, 254-255.
historians are forcing a reevaluation of the federal antipoverty programs of the 1960s and are broadening our understanding of twentieth-century American politics. For example, in her study of the War on Poverty in the state of Alabama, Susan Youngblood Ashmore has shown that the implementation of the federal poverty program helped African Americans become political actors by providing avenues to local power. In this way, according to Ashmore, the War on Poverty at the grassroots level was a significant extension of the civil rights movement. In his investigation of New Orleans, Kent B. Germany argued that the War on Poverty rejuvenated liberalism in the Crescent City by helping keep southern liberals relevant in the midst of the conservative counterrevolution. Political organizations resulting from the War on Poverty and other Great Society programs provided Louisiana’s Democratic Party with a firm base of support for the next several decades. As Germany stated, “In the late 1960s and early 1970s, the South developed its first long-term, clearly legitimate political liberalism in which cultural tolerance, intellectual openness, and racial inclusiveness were guiding themes.”

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Bauman has discovered that the War on Poverty intersected with a wide variety of social movements in Los Angeles and helped grassroots activists redefine their own racial, ethnic, and gender identities. The implementation of the federal poverty program, according to Bauman, also provided a structure for activists to create Black Power, Chicano, and feminist political organizations. As these few examples illustrate, the vast majority of recent scholarship on the War on Poverty attempts to explain the concrete effects of the federal poverty program on the ground and to move beyond questions of success or failure. By reevaluating the War on Poverty from the grassroots level, historians have been able to pose new questions about the wide array of complex consequences – both intended and unintended – that resulted from the federal poverty war of the 1960s and 1970s.

For the present grassroots study of the War on Poverty in Houston, a return to Johnson’s Great Society speech at the University of Michigan is an excellent place to begin this reevaluation. In addition to launching his domestic program and giving it a name to connote the massive scale the president had in mind for it, Johnson made several important points in his speech that are instructive for how historians can continue rethinking the War on Poverty.

The first place where Johnson planned to attack poverty and racial injustice was in the nation’s cities. “Our society will never be great,” Johnson proclaimed, “until our cities are great. Today the frontier of imagination and innovation is inside those cities and not beyond their borders.” Quoting Aristotle, Johnson told the graduating class, “Men come together in cities in order to live, but they remain together in order to live the good

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life.” Yet the president expressed concern that it was becoming increasingly difficult for citizens to live the good life in the cities of the nation because of urban decay, inadequate housing and transportation, and the erosion of “the precious and time honored values of community.” To combat the ills of the modern American city, Johnson argued that “in the next 40 years we must rebuild the entire urban United States.” How the War on Poverty affected America’s major cities, which was a priority for Johnson and other program planners, remains an understudied part of the historical record.10

An equally significant part of Johnson’s speech outlined how the federal government would carry out this plan to rebuild the nation’s cities. In order to solve the twin problems of poverty and racial injustice, particularly in urban centers, Johnson told University of Michigan graduates that he would rely on a new “creative federalism” to attack the problems of the nation. “The solution to these problems does not rest on a massive program in Washington,” Johnson stated, “nor can it rely solely on the strained resources of local authority. They require us to create new concepts of cooperation . . . between the National Capital and the leaders of local communities.” This conception of federal-local relations had significant implications for the War on Poverty and had important effects on the course of American politics in the twentieth century.11

These two components of Johnson’s University of Michigan speech – the clear focus on the nation’s cities and a new “creative federalism” – can guide current historical work on the War on Poverty. Historians Robert O. Self and Thomas J. Sugrue have argued that “the signal contribution of post-1945 urban historiography has been to rework

postwar political narratives by seeing local places as the central sites, not peripheral phenomena, of post-Depression battles over the extension and legacy of the New Deal.\textsuperscript{12}

By viewing the implementation of the War on Poverty at the grassroots level, historians can reframe the questions they ask about the federal antipoverty initiative of the 1960s in order to gain a more nuanced understanding of American politics during the decade. Whereas scholars once asked why the War on Poverty failed to eradicate poverty in America and how liberalism failed to complete its reform agenda in the 1960s, new scholarship accepts the unsurprising conclusion that the poverty program failed in its utopian plan to eradicate poverty in American society and attempts to move beyond this success versus failure paradigm in order to investigate the on-the-ground impact of the War on Poverty at the grassroots level.

Grassroots studies of the implementation of the federal antipoverty initiatives of the 1960s and 1970s are showing that the War on Poverty did not operate in a vacuum; rather, it was profoundly shaped by a multifarious group of local actors that included public officials, local elites, grassroots antipoverty activists, program administrators, federal volunteers, civil rights activists, and poor people themselves. In Houston, the federal War on Poverty briefly opened a window of opportunity for grassroots activists to use federal programs to empower the poor by organizing them to confront certain pillars of the local power structure. An important part of why and how these activists sought to empower Houston's poor using the War on Poverty lies in the antipoverty philosophy

that fueled their grassroots actions. The Houston case thus shows that one of the most significant ways that local circumstances determined the course of the federal antipoverty program was the way in which the local context shaped the intellectual ground upon which the War on Poverty operated.

In Houston, grassroots activists created a local context in which to implement the War on Poverty that was much more diverse in its intellectual and political influences than the rather narrow confines of New Deal-Great Society liberalism. The moderate liberalism that motivated the architects of the federal War on Poverty certainly helped galvanize local antipoverty activists in Houston, but even more prominent in their antipoverty philosophy were Prophetic Christianity, radical civil rights activism, and the vision of participatory democracy and community organizing espoused by members of the New Left and iconoclastic figures like Saul Alinsky. This local context created a favorable environment for these activists to use the War on Poverty to advance an agenda of social change by empowering the poor and helping them engage in confrontations with the city’s elite. By the same token, the diversity of ideas that fueled the implementation of the War on Poverty in Houston – and especially the small victories that grassroots activists were able to achieve in their quest to empower the city’s poor – provoked a swift and powerful backlash from local public officials and conservative defenders of the status quo. In Houston, therefore, local political conditions and contests, even more than federal politics, determined how the War on Poverty was fought, and the interaction between the federal antipoverty program and a broad range of local ideas gave the War on Poverty a distinctive flavor in Houston that both created opportunities for grassroots activists to bring about social change and set limits on what those activists could accomplish.
The city of Houston offers a valuable location for a case study of the implementation of the federal War on Poverty and a comprehensive analysis of the Community Action Program. Houston was and continues to be the largest city in the American South, yet is also by far one of the most understudied cities in the nation. The lack of scholarly attention paid to Houston is really a shame since the city has a strikingly rich multicultural history and has been near the center of so much of the country’s development in the twentieth century, particularly in the post-World War II period. Similarly, the decade of the 1960s was a period of transition for the city of Houston as its boundaries were rapidly expanding, its economy was growing, its population was diversifying, and its city government was becoming more powerful. In essence, the city of Houston was becoming a modern urban metropolis, and the implementation of the War on Poverty was an important part of that story.

Ultimately, historians must look to cities like Houston to find both the opportunities that made new antipoverty efforts possible and the constraints that limited how much activists were able to achieve. It takes neither a poet nor a mystic to recognize that local circumstances shaped the implementation of this massive federal program in profoundly important ways. Yet Donald Rumsfeld’s remark about community action in the 1960s and 1970s holds some truth. The ideas behind the War on Poverty’s Community Action Program were complicated, often confused, and occasionally contradictory, but in the process of implementing these ideas, grassroots activists assigned new meanings and established new objectives for the program. By focusing on the implementation of these ideas in the city of Houston, it becomes apparent that the
War on Poverty was even more complicated and had even more significant consequences than historians previously believed.
Chapter 1

Declaring a War on Poverty in Houston: 
The Tumultuous Road to Establishing a Community Action Agency, 1964-1965

"Through Houston’s modern civic and social history seeps a pervasive conservatism," stated Houston historian David G. McComb in his landmark study of the city,

reflected in varying degrees in politics, public schools, and reactions to urban problems. It is the conservatism of a nineteenth-century robber baron – exploitative, laissez-faire, and at times generous in philanthropy. Its roots lie in the Southern heritage of the town, the expansive, opportunistic nature of the area, and the strong business orientation of the economy. It gives to the people a certain bold, reckless, stubborn, independent, and sometimes lawless attitude, which means that the conservatism both helps and hinders the development of the city.¹

The conservatism that McComb described certainly defined the city’s politics in the mid 1960s and had a profound effect on the implementation of the War on Poverty in Houston.

The War on Poverty was not simply a top-down phenomenon imposed on local communities from Washington; rather, a multitude of local complications defined the program in significant ways. From the moment of its declaration local circumstances profoundly shaped the implementation of the War on Poverty in Houston. Between August 1964 and December 1965, local public officials, politicians, grassroots antipoverty activists, members of the city’s traditional welfare bureaucracy, and federal

program administrators wrangled over how the War on Poverty would be fought in the city. Much of the disagreement stemmed from divergent interpretations of the meaning of community action, a concept developed by federal War on Poverty architects with roots in the federal juvenile delinquency programs of the early 1960s. According to federal program developers, community action would offer a novel and aggressive method for attacking the root causes of poverty in American society. Despite pressure from federal War on Poverty administrators and a handful of local advocates of this new antipoverty philosophy, Houston’s public officials and members of the city’s traditional welfare establishment interpreted the concept of community action in a very conservative manner. The city’s public officials, particularly Houston Mayor Louie Welch, interpreted the federal mandate in a way that would increase their own political power. During the first year of the War on Poverty, Welch attempted to use federal antipoverty funds to pay for services the city government had yet to provide, such as infrastructure improvements and increases in sanitation and other municipal services, for which the mayor could take credit and reap the political rewards. Members of the city’s traditional welfare bureaucracy similarly tried to use the community action concept to strengthen their control over the purse strings of private charitable giving in the city. Meanwhile, several federal program administrators and a few grassroots antipoverty activists in Houston began calling for nothing short of a revolution in the way the city addressed the needs of the poor. The contentious process of creating a community action agency to administer the War on Poverty in Houston was therefore shaped by local power struggles and the contours of city politics more than by debates in Washington about how to fight poverty.
The concept of community action was ill defined, open to a multitude of interpretations, and remains the most poorly understood element of the War on Poverty. At its core, community action presented a new way of thinking about both the causes of and solutions for poverty. According to historian Allen J. Matusow, the Community Action Program (CAP) called for local communities to create community action agencies that would be capable of “mobilizing local resources for a comprehensive attack on poverty.” The goals of this direct attack on poverty would be threefold: 1) to create and provide new social services for the poor; 2) to provide centralized coordination of all social services available to the poor; and 3) to bring about institutional change that would benefit those living in poverty. This final CAP objective of reforming local institutions proved to be political dynamite in many communities because it implied a direct challenge to the balance of power, especially in the larger cities. A good portion of the architects of the federal War on Poverty had learned “to despise local schools, police, welfare departments, and private charity institutions,” Matusow argued, “for dispensing demeaning, fragmented services to the poor.” While more and better services were certainly needed, many federal planners believed that real social change was required in order to attack poverty in any meaningful way.²

As Matusow pointed out, the reformers among the War on Poverty planners recognized that local institutions would be openly defiant of efforts to change them. The reformers’ solution to this problem was to declare that all community action agencies must be administered with the “maximum feasible participation” of a community’s poor residents. “Community action,” concluded Matusow, “would seek to reform institutions

by empowering the poor.” The edict of maximum feasible participation could operate in three ways: 1) poor residents could serve on the governing boards of the local community action agencies; 2) the poor could be hired to work in the various programs; or 3) local community action agencies could employ community organizers to help empower the poor to make demands on local institutions and elected officials. Predictably, this final application of maximum feasible participation, which called for nothing short of the politicization and empowerment of the poor to demand a greater share of a community’s resources, provoked the strongest response from local public officials and institutions.3

The amorphousness of the community action concept left it wide open to interpretation. As Matusow argued, big city mayors in particular tended to be “guided by their own convenient conceptions of what community action should be.” This was certainly the case in Houston, where Mayor Louie Welch and members of the traditional welfare establishment interpreted community action in a way that did not challenge the city’s “pervasive conservatism” that McComb described so poignantly.4

Like other Sunbelt politicians, Louie Welch was a moderate conservative who had an overtly favorable attitude toward business enterprise in Houston. Welch actually gained political clout and ultimately won the mayor’s seat in 1963 by appearing as an outsider to the established political culture in the city. Most importantly, many people saw Welch as a common-sense moderate on racial issues. Although there was a sizable number of Houstonians who resisted calls to desegregate the city in the late 1950s and early 1960s, the most powerful business interests recognized that ugly racial conflicts like


4 Matusow, *Unraveling*, 246.
those occurring in places like Birmingham would only serve to hurt Houston’s reputation as a business friendly city. In response to an increasing number of calls from the city’s civil rights leaders to desegregate businesses in Houston, the city’s business and political elites gathered behind closed doors and decided to desegregate much of the city quietly and without fanfare.\(^5\)

During his tenure on Houston’s city council between 1950 and 1962, Louie Welch built a reputation as a racial moderate who was sympathetic to the business community’s efforts to avoid showdowns over desegregation in the city and at the same time as a friend of and advocate for the city’s African American community. In 1959, as an increasing number of black Houstonians lodged complaints of police brutality and harassment against the Houston Police Department, Welch demanded that the city attorney’s office perform a complete investigation and take disciplinary action against any guilty officer. Coming on the heels of this political victory, one particular event in 1960 solidified Welch’s reputation as a moderate conservative whose commonsense approach would save the city from the bad publicity of tense racial confrontations. In March 1960, about thirty-five black and white students from nearby universities staged a sit-in at the segregated cafeteria located in the basement of City Hall, whose owner was one of the few holdouts resisting desegregation. As the students sat in the cafeteria waiting to be served, a crowd of angry whites began to gather inside the building and on the sidewalk outside the main window. Welch was upstairs in the council chambers, and when he got news of what was happening in the cafeteria he rushed to the scene. The

cafeteria manager sought out Welch and asked him what she should do. "Serve them," Welch responded, "because if you don't you are going to get into trouble. They are citizens of the city and this is a city building, so serve them." Welch then fought his way through the crowd and walked over to the table where the students were sitting. Someone from the crowd of onlookers yelled, "Get those niggers out of here!" Welch looked at the students, looked back at the crowd, and said, "Well, we don't all have to be damn fools, do we?" Welch then sat down beside the students and started up a conversation. In just a few minutes the cafeteria manager had served all of the students, and Welch became an important part of this civil rights triumph in the city.6

Just three years later, after two failed attempts, Welch finally won the mayor's race with the help of a substantial majority of black Houstonians supporting him. His opponent, the incumbent Lewis Cutrer, once had the overwhelming support of the city's black voters. As the sit-ins began in the early 1960s, however, Cutrer found himself recast as a stubborn opponent of civil rights because he was not willing to support desegregation efforts publicly or help create more job opportunities for African Americans in city agencies. Most concerning to Houston's black citizens was Cutrer's hiring of the overtly racist and brutal Carl Shuptrine as police chief. Welch promised that as mayor he would fire Chief Shuptrine and clean up the police department to make it more professional and more just in its treatment of all citizens. He also promised to address the problems of poverty in Houston.7

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6 Cole, No Color, 42-43.
7 Chandler Davidson, "Negro Politics and the Rise of the Civil Rights Movement in Houston, Texas," Ph.D. diss., Princeton University, 1968, 61. For additional information on the civil rights movement in Houston, see also Chandler Davidson, Biracial Politics: Conflict and Coalition in the Metropolitan South (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1972). Once elected, Welch delivered on his promise and promptly fired Chief Shuptrine and replaced him with the more humane and racially tolerant H. Buddy McGill. Within a year, however, Welch had fired McGill, allegedly because he was too soft on the city's
Welch's antipoverty philosophy was essentially traditional and conservative in nature, and his interpretation of the community action concept reflected his moderate approach. With the passage of the Economic Opportunity Act in August 1964, Welch declared that his office and the City Council would work together to develop a plan to apply for some of the $5 million to which the city was entitled under the new antipoverty act. Welch envisioned using these funds to make infrastructural improvements to the city, such as extending water and sewage services to the outskirts of town and perhaps paving roads in some neighborhoods. What the mayor did not have in mind, however, was a community action program in Houston like national planners had advocated. As for the maximum feasible participation edict, Welch stressed that he and the City Council alone were responsible for deciding when and how the city of Houston would participate in the federal War on Poverty. If the city did indeed apply for and receive federal antipoverty funds, Welch promised to appoint an antipoverty committee himself to oversee the use of these funds. So while Welch was part of the new breed of southern politician who was moderate on racial issues and at least open to the idea of accepting federal funds to improve the city, the message was clear: Welch would be in control of the War on Poverty in the city of Houston.\(^8\)

The 1964 national elections indicated to Welch that even his moderately conservative positions would meet some resistance in Houston's more dogmatically conservative political environment. Houston's mayoral politics were ostensibly

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\(^8\) Mel Young, "City Can Get $5 Million Yearly in Poverty Funds," *Houston Chronicle*, August 19, 1964; Office of Economic Opportunity, "Allotment Among States of Funds Authorized by the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964," 25 September 1964, Box 1, Folder 4, Records of the General Counsel, President's Task Force in the War Against Poverty, Record Group 381, National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, Maryland (hereafter cited as NARA).
nonpartisan, and many of the city's past mayors had steered clear of national politics and instead focused solely on local issues. The War on Poverty, however, presented Welch with a new challenge because it intertwined national and local politics so closely. When the Democrats met in Atlantic City in late August 1964 for their national convention, they overwhelmingly endorsed the idea of making the War on Poverty a major campaign issue. Party leaders noted that Barry Goldwater, Johnson's challenger for the presidency, had voted against the Economic Opportunity Act. New York Mayor Robert F. Wagner implored the convention delegates to highlight this important difference between the two candidates in the general election. Wagner stated, "The issue between the parties is clear. The platform must reflect this clearcut issue and give it the dramatic prominence it deserves." Platform writers agreed and made the War on Poverty a major theme of the party's campaign document. The final draft pledged the Democratic Party to carrying "the War on Poverty forward as a total war against the causes of human want" and relished in the accomplishment of getting the Economic Opportunity Act passed through Congress. In fact, the Democratic Party platform mentioned the War on Poverty seven separate times throughout the document, making it clear that the poverty program, along with civil rights for minorities, would be the centerpieces of the campaign that year.9

A few weeks after the Democratic national convention, Mayor Welch, who was not a member of the liberal wing of the Democratic Party in Texas, announced his approval of the party platform and his endorsement of the Johnson-Humphrey ticket. This proclamation prompted a flood of angry letters from Goldwater supporters and other

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conservatives in Houston, and many of these letters attacked Welch's implied support for Johnson's War on Poverty. Exemplifying the reaction of many conservatives in Houston, Virginia Eastham wrote to berate Welch for his support of Johnson and the Democratic Party's alleged left-wing agenda. "In my opinion, you favor socialism, destruction of free enterprise, [and] federal control (this is borne out by your request for federal anti-poverty funds)," she said. A letter from Mrs. John T. Carter accused Welch of playing politics with the federal antipoverty program. Carter stated, "I also note that you have been quick to seek Washington aid for local affairs, and these efforts, if fruitful, may enhance you in the eyes of some of the recipients of this government dole, but certainly I do not believe it will prove politically advantageous to you." Although Welch was open to the idea of obtaining federal funds through the War on Poverty, these kinds of letters reminded him that strong conservative forces would oppose him and undoubtedly served to temper the mayor's interpretation of the federal antipoverty mandate.10

The War on Poverty and the prospect of its implementation in Houston also opened up serious political rifts that had been brewing for some time among the city's elected officials. Harris County Judge Bill Elliott, whose position was akin to a chief financial officer for the county, was known as a staunch liberal and vocal critic of many of Welch's moderate pro-business policies. Elliott attacked the mayor's plan to control all of the city's War on Poverty funding and said it "smelled to high heaven of being an election year gimmick." Elliott objected to the fact that Welch would have the power to

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10 Virginia F. Eastham to Mayor Louie Welch, 16 October 1964, Box 14, Louie Welch Papers, Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library, Houston, Texas (hereafter cited as Welch Papers) (first quotation); Mrs. John T. Carter to Mayor Louie Welch, 2 November 1964, Box 14, Welch Papers (second quotation). For an interesting account of the history of anticommunism and right-wing politics in Houston, see Don E. Carleton, Red Scare!: Right-Wing Hysteria, Fifties Fanaticism, and their Legacy in Texas (Austin: Texas Monthly Press, 1985).
appoint a board and a director for any central antipoverty committee in the city of Houston. Attacking the War on Poverty from the right, in September George H. W. Bush, a millionaire oilman in Houston, launched his campaign as a Republican against liberal Democrat Ralph Yarborough for the United States Senate. During the first month of campaigning, Bush made the War on Poverty a central issue by accusing Yarborough and his liberal colleagues of being paternalistic in their antipoverty efforts. War on Poverty proponents, argued Bush, “assign the needy a number and tell them to get into a federal handout line.” Bush said he would offer his own brand of “compassionate conservatism” as an alternative to Yarborough’s “cold liberalism.”

The results of the 1964 election seemed quite favorable to the liberal War on Poverty both nationally and locally in Houston. In Harris County, the Johnson-Humphrey ticket won 63.1 percent of the popular vote and outpolled Goldwater by about 75,000 votes. Considering the Democratic Party made the War on Poverty one of the campaign’s major issues, it is reasonable to assume that there were many War on Poverty supporters in Houston. A further indication of this support was Senator Yarborough’s defeat of Bush, who lost Harris County even though he lived there. Harris County voted overwhelmingly Democratic for the first time since 1948, and voters made Lyndon Johnson the first Democratic president to win Harris County since Harry Truman.

President Johnson interpreted the 1964 election as a mandate to continue building the Great Society, and Houston civic leaders drew similar conclusions about Harris County.

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returns. Mayor Welch and County Judge Elliott, in particular, began moving closer to
direct participation in the War on Poverty.\textsuperscript{12}

Welch and Elliott were not alone in calling for some sort of War on Poverty for the city of Houston. The Houston Community Council, the established bureaucratic agency responsible for coordinating the activities of all the major public welfare agencies in the city, also began positioning itself to be a part of the implementation of the federal antipoverty initiative. The Community Council was responsible for studying the needs of the poor in Houston, publishing its findings in an annual report, and ensuring the cooperation of the city’s various welfare agencies to address these needs. Like similar welfare coordinating boards in other major cities across the United States, Houston Community Council members came mostly from the ranks of the city’s white upper middle class and worked closely with the city’s public officials. In May 1964, as President Lyndon B. Johnson’s Economic Opportunity bill made its way through Congress, the executive committee of the Community Council launched a study of how the new federal antipoverty initiative might be implemented in Houston once it became law. Members of the Community Council’s executive committee immediately recognized the potential for the Economic Opportunity bill to have profound implications for poverty work in Houston. Like Welch, members of the Community Council had a conservative view of the concept of community action, but they also recognized the need for an increased level of social services that would benefit the poor. Although Welch had tried to make it clear that he would control any War on Poverty funds that might come to the city, Houston Community Council members remained confident that their organization

\textsuperscript{12} Mildred to President Lyndon Johnson, memorandum, 4 November 1964, Box 69, Folder 8, White House Central Files, Lyndon Baines Johnson Library, Austin, Texas (hereafter cited at LBJL); Oscar Griffin, “Harris County Vote is Solid for Democrats,” \textit{Houston Chronicle}, November 4, 1964.
would become the community action agency for Houston and the primary recipient of federal funds to fight poverty in the city.\textsuperscript{13}

This confidence was reinforced in August 1964 when Joseph Zarefsky, Executive Secretary of the Community Council, traveled to Austin to attend a meeting of the State Mental Health Planning Committee and had a lengthy conversation with Fred Baldwin, who was a member of President Johnson’s Task Force on Poverty. Baldwin stressed to Zarefsky that the federal government would approve only one official community action agency per city and that it would be very wise for that agency to work closely with public authorities and local politicians in order to ensure any proposed antipoverty programs would not meet any resistance from those in power. The Houston Community Council, Baldwin argued, was in a great position to assume this leadership role for the War on Poverty in Houston and seemed to be on good terms with the mayor and the city council.\textsuperscript{14}

As Welch began making statements asserting his authority over the implementation of the War on Poverty in Houston, Zarefsky responded by inviting the mayor and his staff to a Community Council Board of Directors meeting in late August to discuss the possibility of forming a coordinating committee to administer the War on Poverty in Houston. As Zarefsky stated during the meeting, the Community Council already possessed the tools and staff to administer the War on Poverty based on its previous welfare work in the community. Despite his need to retain control, Welch seemed receptive to the idea of the Community Council being involved in the War on

\textsuperscript{13} “Poverty Funds Bid By City is Rejected,” \textit{Houston Chronicle}, September 26, 1965.

\textsuperscript{14} Minutes of Houston-Harris County Community Council Board of Directors, 7 October 1964, Box 2, Records of the Community Welfare Planning Association of Greater Houston, Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library, Houston, Texas (hereafter cited as CWPA Collection).
Poverty in the city, most likely because their interpretations of the concept of community action were so similar. Zarefsky and other board members made it clear that a traditional service-delivery philosophy would continue to guide the Community Council and that there would only be minimal participation of the poor in planning and implementing these antipoverty services. Community Council Chairman J. Robert Reynaud noted that the War on Poverty, once implemented in Houston, would require the involvement of “lay people and professionals, official agencies and voluntary agencies, [and] school districts,” and would need the same kind of participation from the “city, county, the Employment Commission, the Community Council, and many other agencies.” The concept of “maximum feasible participation” of the poor seemed to have been lost on Community Council members in Houston.15

With Welch’s informal approval, by late September 1964 the Houston Community Council was actively positioning itself as the logical board to administer the War on Poverty in the city. The executive committee met that month and decided to begin forming a community committee made up of the Community Council and several of its delegate agencies. The board of directors of the Community Council then issued a public statement asking Mayor Welch to approve this committee as the central antipoverty agency for the city of Houston. In an effort to obtain that approval from Houston’s public officials, Community Council leaders also requested that both Mayor Welch and County Judge Elliott each appoint some of the members of the committee.

15 Minutes of Houston-Harris County Community Council, 24 August 1964, Box 2, CWPA Collection (quotation); Minutes of Houston-Harris County Community Council Board of Directors, 7 October 1964, Box 2, CWPA Collection.
Welch and Elliott both responded favorably, and it seemed the War on Poverty might actually begin to be implemented in Houston during its first year.\footnote{Minutes of Houston-Harris County Community Council Board of Directors, 22 September 1964, CWPA Collection; Minutes of Houston-Harris County Community Council Executive Committee, 30 September 1964, CWPA Collection; Minutes of Houston-Harris County Community Council Board of Directors, 27 October 1964, CWPA Collection; “Community Council Presses for Ammunition in Poverty War,” \textit{Houston Chronicle}, October 8, 1964; “Poverty Funds Bid by City is Rejected,” \textit{Houston Chronicle}, September 26, 1965.}

Despite giving tacit approval for the Community Council to become the central coordinating board for the War on Poverty in Houston, Welch still wanted to retain control of its implementation and continued to favor obtaining federal grants to fund improvements to the city’s infrastructure rather than expand and improve social welfare services for the poor. Welch continued developing his own personal plan for using federal antipoverty funds in the city, and part of his plan included asking the Office of Economic Opportunity to award a grant to the city of Houston to improve water and sanitation services in a poor, mostly African American neighborhood in the northwest part of Harris County called Acres Homes. Welch announced that he would request $8 million from the federal government to install sanitary sewers, drainage, and water lines, and to provide training in construction industry skills for poor residents of the area.

Meanwhile, Houston Community Council members continued their efforts to persuade Welch and Elliott to appoint a central committee to oversee the War on Poverty in the city. To make their case stronger, the Community Council’s board of directors began developing ideas for antipoverty service programs that could be funded through the War on Poverty, particularly through the city’s traditional welfare agencies such as the Harris
County Welfare Department, the Opportunity Center for Retarded Children, the Texas Employment Commission, and the Houston Neighborhood Centers Association.\(^{17}\)

While adequate sanitation services and the delivery of traditional welfare services are important in any city, it is clear that Houston's city leaders and welfare bureaucracy refused to accept fully the implications of the Economic Opportunity Act. Architects of the federal War on Poverty, especially when they developed the community action component of the act, envisioned a different kind of poverty program than what traditional welfare agencies offered. New and expanded social services and the centralized coordination of those services was certainly part of the Community Action Program, but an equally significant component was the idea of reforming local institutions by promoting the participation of poor residents in the planning, development, and implementation of poverty programs designed not simply to alleviate the symptoms of poverty but to attack the root causes of poverty. The War on Poverty certainly was neither supposed to subsidize the building of infrastructure, which was the responsibility of cities and municipalities, nor designed simply to increase funding to traditional welfare agencies.

It is certainly possible that Mayor Welch and members of the Houston Community Council simply failed to understand the new antipoverty philosophy that motivated the designers of the War on Poverty. A more likely explanation for their actions, however, is that both the mayor and the Community Council board wanted to

\(^{17}\) Mel Young, "$8 Million Poverty War in Harris!," *Houston Chronicle*, October 13, 1964; Howard Spergel, "Youth Unwanted," *Houston Post*, December 13, 1964; Minutes of Houston-Harris County Community Council Membership Committee, 19 November 1964, Box 2, CWPA Collection; Minutes of Houston-Harris County Community Council Committee on Appraisal of Needs, 10 December 1964, Box 2, CWPA Collection; Minutes of Houston-Harris County Community Council Board of Directors, 7 October 1964, Box 2, CWPA Collection.
retain control over the traditional welfare bureaucracy in Houston, and in order to accomplish this, they intentionally worked to keep the poverty program conservative in philosophy and to prevent poor residents from participating. In fact, there were a few voices in the wilderness in Houston who recognized this play for power and advocated for a more aggressive interpretation of the concept of community action. One of these critics was Reverend John F. Stevens, director of Christian Social Relations for the Episcopal Diocese of Texas and the head of the Episcopal Society for Cultural and Racial Unity in Houston. Stevens offered a powerful critique of the entire welfare philosophy of the service-oriented welfare agencies in Houston. He stated that Houston’s traditional welfare agencies had become “just another outside service to a poverty-ridden area” and had “lost touch with local leadership.” Stevens said this happened because members of these organizations had a faulty understanding of the remedy for poverty, “which sees the dominant (affluent Anglo-Saxon) community providing a solution for the depressed area on its own terms, while being distrustful of any exercise of power on the part of residents in the depressed area.” As a result, “no real solution is possible until the status quo in society is changed to give residents of depressed areas equal educational and job opportunities, competitive pay and equal access to good housing.” As Welch, Elliott, and the Community Council moved forward with their plans for a piecemeal antipoverty effort in Houston that they controlled, critical voices like that of Reverend Stevens would grow louder and more forceful and begin to gain an increasing amount of legitimacy in the poor neighborhoods of the city.18

In addition to a few vocal critics of the way Houston’s public officials and traditional welfare bureaucracy were handling the declaration of the War on Poverty in

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the city, several additional antipoverty agencies actually began to compete for a piece of this new pool of federal money to fight poverty. The Neighborhood Centers Association, an organization created in the early twentieth century as part of the Progressive Era settlement house movement, teamed up with the Houston Independent School District in January and submitted a proposal for using War on Poverty funds to create a program to keep at-risk high school students in school by providing them with remedial education and job training. In April the federal government also approved a Neighborhood Centers Association application to administer a Neighborhood Youth Corps program in Houston.\(^{19}\)

The antipoverty organization that eventually forced public officials and members of the Houston Community Council into action was Houston Action for Youth (HAY). Professional social workers in Houston created HAY in the summer of 1964 as part of the Kennedy-Johnson effort to curb juvenile delinquency in the nation's cities, and the organization was already funded by the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare through May 1965. HAY administered traditional programs such as homeless shelters and job training centers for impoverished young people in Houston and in April 1965 partnered with the HISD school board to draw up a proposal to administer a summer

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Head Start preschool program in Houston funded by OEO to reach approximately 2,500 children living in poverty.\textsuperscript{20}

Members of the Community Council board, wanting to avoid losing any control or influence over the development of the War on Poverty in Houston and threatened by an organization like HAY that was conceivably large enough to administer the federal antipoverty program in the city and already receiving federal funds, began to put additional pressure on Mayor Welch to give formal approval for the appointment of a central antipoverty committee for the city made up of Community Council members. Board Chairman Reynaud met with Welch in January and reiterated the need for a committee in Houston, yet Welch continued to be coy about his intentions. At a board meeting near the end of February, Community Council board member William Ballew expressed alarm about the fact that some antipoverty agencies in Houston were already submitting funding applications to the Office of Economic Opportunity. Ballew argued that despite the difficulties the Community Council had been experiencing with Mayor Welch, it was time to move forward with creating a committee to oversee War on Poverty funding in Houston regardless of whether or not the mayor gave his approval. There were simply too many organizations calling for the Community Council to take an active leadership role in the War on Poverty, according to Ballew, and those voices could no longer be ignored.

Ballew, who would later become the head of Houston’s community action agency and move the organization in a more radical and confrontational direction, was a very

politically astute individual. As a successful attorney with one of the city’s oldest and largest law firms, Ballew understood the intricacies of Houston’s local politics. In an effort to push Welch more forcefully, Ballew began making overtures toward County Judge Bill Elliott, Welch’s political rival, and asked him to help convene an antipoverty committee. He then persuaded the Community Council board to appoint a task force, to be chaired by Ballew, whose sole responsibility was to perform a study of how War on Poverty programs could be implemented in Houston and to convince the mayor to name a committee.21

Federal War on Poverty administrators also ramped up their efforts to persuade Welch to help establish a community action agency for Houston. Sargent Shriver, director of OEO, sought to help smooth the process of getting an antipoverty committee appointed by sending a letter to Mayor Welch expressing his desire to work closely with local leaders in the implementation of the War on Poverty across the country. Shriver stated, “I have always felt and OEO policy has always supported the position that local public officials have a major role to play in community action – a role which they have in fact carried out with great dedication and intelligence. Successful programs in over 600 American communities attest to the effectiveness of this participation.” In March 1965 Vice-President Hubert Humphrey invited thirteen mayors from the nation’s largest cities to Washington to discuss the possibilities for implementing the War on Poverty at the local level. During this meeting Welch told Humphrey that he wanted to apply for OEO grants, but he was unsure how to get the process started. In response, Humphrey and

21 Minutes of Houston-Harris County Community Council Board of Directors, 26 January 1965, Box 1, CWPA Collection; Minutes of Houston-Harris County Community Council Board of Directors, 23 February 1965, Box 1, CWPA Collection; “Poverty Funds Bid by City is Rejected,” Houston Chronicle, September 26, 1965; Sargent Shriver to Louie Welch, 26 January 1965, Welch Papers.
federal OEO officials promised to send three representatives from their office to Houston in the coming weeks to help work out a plan for implementation of the new federal antipoverty program. On March 22 and 23, 1965, two OEO officials visited Houston, and after their visit neither was optimistic about the War on Poverty's future in the city. The officials noted the presence of multiple power struggles occurring simultaneously, and all seemed to revolve around the question of who would control the War on Poverty in the city.  

Although federal War on Poverty planners wanted each city to have a community action agency to provide centralized administration of the implementation of federal antipoverty programs, Welch told the OEO representatives that he was only interested in obtaining no-strings-attached federal grants to make improvements to the city and that he in no way wanted a community action agency in Houston. In fact, the more Welch learned about the Community Action Program in the national media, the more he became opposed to its implementation in his city. The only logical avenue for federal funding in Houston, Welch told the OEO officials, was to help build the city's infrastructure as reflected in his proposal for an $8 million grant to improve the water and sanitation system in Acres Homes. Welch said that if certain groups in Houston forced him to create a community action board, then he would follow the example of Chicago Mayor Richard

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Daley and would create a “blue ribbon group,” which meant he would appoint all of the members himself from the elite business community and the board would have no authority except to investigate poverty conditions in Houston and report back to the mayor. Under no circumstances, however, would Welch share the responsibility for appointing the members of such a board with anyone, especially not County Judge Bill Elliott, whom the OEO officials called “a liberal political rival.” It became clear to OEO officials that the mayor was reinterpreting the concept of community action in order to turn the War on Poverty into a vehicle for him to increase his own political power in the city.\footnote{Fred Baldwin to Theodore H. Berry, Fred Hayes, and William Bozman, memorandum, 29 March 1965, Box 9, Folder Houston, Texas, 1965, Office of Economic Opportunity, Community Action Program, Records of the Director, State Files, 1965-1968, Record Group 381, NARA (quotation); “U.S. Aides, Welch Talk About Poverty Program,” \textit{Houston Post}, March 23, 1965; “Welch Hints Poverty War Plans Vague,” \textit{Houston Chronicle}, March 23, 1965.}

While in Houston, OEO officials also scheduled meetings with other individuals and groups in the community who were interested in the War on Poverty. In a meeting with Bill Elliott, the county judge indicated that he would be willing to accept any number of compromise positions on the appointment of an antipoverty committee for Houston, but that he would be strongly opposed to a board whose members were all appointed by Welch. During a meeting with the board of directors of the Houston Community Council, OEO officials learned that the council had developed a proposal for the creation of an antipoverty committee whereby the mayor, county judge, and the Community Council would each appoint an equal number of members. OEO officials noted that this proposal would be acceptable in Washington but would be entirely irrelevant if Welch stuck to his guns and refused to share appointment power. Members of Houston Action for Youth told the OEO officials that they planned on moving forward
with their own antipoverty plans for Houston and that they wanted to expand their services into more areas of the city. Finally, a small group of Mexican Americans who had attended a War on Poverty conference in Tucson, Arizona, that month had begun meeting weekly in an attempt to form their own antipoverty committee for Houston.24

Upon returning to Washington, the OEO officials who had visited Houston made several recommendations to the OEO office. First, they advised senior OEO staffers that if Welch insisted on appointing all the members of a central antipoverty committee, then they should press the mayor as hard as possible to make the committee community-wide and "representative of more than the conservative wing of the Democratic party." While the OEO officials were resigned to the fact that the committee would indeed probably be a "blue ribbon group," they nevertheless stressed the need to encourage some decentralization of the decision-making power in Houston in an attempt to get some policymaking authority in the hands of neighborhood organizations, if not the poor residents themselves. The OEO representatives recognized, however, that Welch would strongly and vocally oppose this because he had already made it known that he was against "a Philadelphia situation," a reference to the rumored corruption said to have already occurred with the War on Poverty there. Finally, the OEO officials recommended that while Welch organized his blue ribbon group, OEO should go ahead and fund the programs being carried out by Houston Action for Youth in some of Houston's poor neighborhoods. OEO should not, however, fund HAY at a level that would allow the organization to expand its services into additional areas of the city, as this would "give

HAY an invitation to empire-building, to which its chairman, Mrs. Helen Lewis, seems prone.” Rather, OEO should partially fund HAY as a way to put pressure on Welch to appoint a community action agency that would meet federal CAP requirements.25

Between March and May 1965 several factors came together to force the mayor to accept a compromise position on the appointment of a committee. Immediately after OEO officials left Houston at the end of March, the Mexican American group that had been meeting weekly to discuss the implementation of the War on Poverty in Houston officially formed the Anti-Poverty Council of Houston. The Reverend James Novarro, pastor of a local Baptist church in a predominantly Mexican American neighborhood and chairman of the new antipoverty council, urged the Latin American community in Houston to unify its political and social agencies into one force in order to claim a policymaking voice in the War on Poverty. During a rally at the end of March organized by the city’s chapter of the Political Association of Spanish Speaking Organization in support of bringing the War on Poverty to Houston, Novarro told his audience that rivalry among the various antipoverty agencies in Houston could threaten the whole program. “There are many power structures in Houston,” Novarro warned, and “we must encompass all these organizations or the anti-poverty program will have passed us by.” Novarro said his new council “hopes to serve as a bridge of communication between the agencies that are going to help and the people who need it.”26

Reverend Novarro and other members of the Anti-Poverty Council of Houston grew tired of waiting for Mayor Welch to act. During the first Houston City Council meeting in April 1965, Novarro and several other members spoke in an effort to put some added pressure on the mayor to appoint a central committee to administer the War on Poverty in the city. Novarro stressed to the city council that minority groups in Houston, many of whom were disproportionately affected by poverty, desperately needed help through the federal War on Poverty. Members of the city council responded by giving Mayor Welch a two-week deadline to come up with a plan for the implementation of the War on Poverty in Houston.27

Later in April 1965, the Houston Community Council’s Task Force on the Economic Opportunity Act, chaired by William Ballew, finally completed its report entitled “Tentative Proposal for Community Action Program for Metropolitan Houston,” and it revealed a level of poverty in Houston that many thought had been eradicated by the general prosperity the Sunbelt city enjoyed following the end of World War II. Using the current accepted yardstick for defining poverty, which included all families earning less than $3,000 annually and all individuals earning less than $2,000 annually, the study showed that there were 227,000 people – about one-fifth of the population of Harris County – whose total household incomes were below the poverty line, and 78 percent of these individuals lived inside Houston’s city limits. This number included 57,000 poor families and more than 76,000 children. The study found that the twenty-five poorest census tracts in Houston housed 21 percent of Houston’s population, yet also accounted for 29 percent of the city’s deaths, 36 percent of the city’s infant deaths, 58 percent of

deaths from tuberculosis, and 54 percent of the city’s homicides. The report also indicated that 41 percent of Houston’s poor families lived in deteriorated or dilapidated housing. Not surprisingly, authors of the study argued that nonwhite families were most vulnerable to poverty. The report stated that a “caste system” existed in the city for nonwhites and that African American and Mexican American families were disproportionately represented among poor families. Though nonwhites in Houston accounted for only 23 percent of the total population, half of the families living in poverty were nonwhite.\(^{28}\)

As the task force’s report suggested, a closer look at the median income of Houston’s thirty-five poorest census tracts revealed the extent of poverty in the city. There were significant sections of Houston that suffered from unemployment rates two to three times the average rate in the city and had average incomes that were less than half of the citywide average. In many of these poor sections of Houston, there was a very low rate of home ownership and a significant amount of housing was considered substandard. The statistics also showed that while much of the poverty was concentrated around the inner city, there were also many impoverished neighborhoods interspersed throughout the rest of the city and county. In other words, there was no single concentrated poverty “ghetto” in Houston.\(^{29}\)

Welch was up for reelection in November and apparently realized there was substantial popular support for at least some of the War on Poverty in Houston. Word had also gotten back to Welch that OEO officials were considering funding Houston Action

\(^{28}\) Houston-Harris County Community Council, “Tentative Proposal for a Community Action Program for Metropolitan Houston,” 30 March 1965, Box 1, CWPA Collection.  
\(^{29}\) Houston-Harris County Community Council, “Tentative Proposal for a Community Action Program for Metropolitan Houston,” 30 March 1965, Box 1, CWPA Collection.
for Youth as the major War on Poverty agency for the city, a development that both
Welch and members of the Community Council greeted with trepidation. Additionally,
the Community Council’s report confronted Welch with concrete statistics about poverty
in Houston that he simply could not ignore. In response, Welch began meeting with
representatives of the Community Council and with County Judge Bill Elliott in an effort
to find a way to appoint a central committee that would satisfy everyone and still allow
public officials to retain control of the poverty program. The compromise they reached
was that each party—the mayor, the county judge, and the Community Council—would
appoint five members to a fifteen-member executive committee that would serve as the
central antipoverty board for the city of Houston. As the Community Council’s report
recommended, the members of the Executive Committee would then select a 60-person
Advisory Council to assist in developing an antipoverty program for Houston.  

When Welch, Elliott, and members of the Community Council board got around
to naming the executive committee in May 1965, the fears that federal OEO
administrators had of a blue-ribbon group came to fruition. Many of the appointed
members came from the ranks of wealthy businessmen in the city. George H. W. Bush,
an oil industry executive, Republican politician, and recent critic of the War on Poverty,
found his name on the committee roster, as did Houston Post Vice-President William P.
Hobby Jr. and Texas National Bank Vice-President Charles W. Hamilton. The mayor,
county judge, and Community Council also appointed a few middle-class African

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30 “Poverty Funds Bid By City is Rejected,” Houston Chronicle, September 26, 1965; Fred Baldwin to
Theodore Berry, Fred Hayes, and Bill Bozman, memorandum, 10 May 1965, Box 9, Folder Houston,
Texas, 1965, Office of Economic Opportunity, Community Action Program, Records of the Director, State
Files, 1965-1968, Record Group 381, NARA; Vince Ximenes to Bill Haddad, memorandum, 11 May 1965,
Box 77, Folder Texas OEO Program (Compilation) 1965 April thru July, Office of Economic Opportunity,
Inspection Division, Inspection Reports, 1964-1967, Record Group 381, NARA.
American business leaders to the executive committee, including Sid Hillard, a real estate agent, and Francis Williams, a prominent African American attorney in Houston. The committee would be chaired by Houston attorney Leon Jaworski, who was a friend of President Johnson and had been considered for the position of Attorney General after Johnson's reelection in 1964.\textsuperscript{31}

The newly appointed executive committee charged with overseeing the creation of a community action agency for Houston used the Community Council's report as a framework for how the poverty program would operate in the city. Since the Community Council had been the coordinating agency for the traditional welfare establishment in Houston for some time, the task force's report predictably highlighted the role of social service delivery in the effort to eradicate poverty. Community Council members were willing to accept the call to increase social services and coordinate the programs of the traditional welfare agencies in Houston. What Community Council members would not accept, and what Welch would never have approved, was the idea that the poor could be empowered to reform the institutions that affected their lives. The majority of the programs suggested by the task force's report therefore were simply extensions of social services already offered by welfare agencies in Houston. The only difference was the additional funding provided by OEO that these agencies would have at their disposal.

Considering the conservative way in which members of the Community Council interpreted the concept of community action and the fact that Welch was very much in

\textsuperscript{31} Vince Ximenes to Bill Haddad, memorandum, 11 May 1965, Box 77, Folder Texas OEO Program (Compilation) 1965 April thru July, Office of Economic Opportunity, Inspection Division, Inspection Reports, 1964-1967, Record Group 381, NARA; Houston-Harris County Economic Opportunity Organization, "Articles of Incorporation," May 1965, Box 265, Folder Houston-Harris County Economic Opportunity Organization – General, Leon Jaworski Papers, Texas Collection, Baylor University Library, Waco, Texas (hereafter cited as Jaworski Papers); Houston-Harris County Economic Opportunity Organization, "By-Laws," May 1965, Box 265, Folder Houston-Harris County Economic Opportunity Organization – General, Jaworski Papers.
control, it is not surprising that the report envisioned no role whatsoever for poor people themselves in the planning, development, or implementation of antipoverty programs in Houston’s poor neighborhoods. Authors of the report indicated that the Board of Directors of the new agency would be made up of an equal number of representative directors and directors-at-large. The representative directors would come from the ranks of elected and public officials in Houston, such as the mayor, the president of the school board, and the president of the Chamber of Commerce. These representative directors would, in turn, appoint the directors-at-large during the first meeting of the board. This board of directors would serve as a repository for information on War on Poverty programs and policies, and the traditional welfare organizations would act as delegate agencies to administer the antipoverty programs. The report never even offered the possibility of including the poor on the board of the community action agency, and in fact some of the hypothetical programs presented in the report were quite paternalistic and condescending.\(^\text{32}\)

By the beginning of May 1965, OEO administrators were pleased that local officials in Houston were following at least the minimal procedures for establishing a community action agency for the city. This optimism was quickly dashed, however, when the OEO office in Washington dispatched a representative to travel to Houston and report on progress there. Vince Ximenes, an OEO consultant stationed in Lubbock, Texas, arrived in Houston in mid May and began sending highly critical reports back to Washington as soon as he arrived. His first complaint was that the appointment of the city’s poverty committee was motivated entirely by local politics since Mayor Welch was

\(^{32}\) Houston-Harris County Community Council, “Tentative Proposal for a Community Action Program for Metropolitan Houston,” 30 March 1965, Box 1, CWPA Collection.
running for reelection and County Judge Elliott was most likely going to run for the United States Representative office in 1966 from the newly created congressional district in Houston. According to Ximenes, Welch and Elliott agreed to split evenly the number of members each would appoint to the committee to satisfy the political aspirations of both politicians.\(^3^3\)

Ximenes was most troubled by the complete absence of poor people on the executive committee, and for this reason he believed the Houston antipoverty board would fail to meet the minimum community action specifications for poverty resident participation. When Fred Baldwin, an OEO official working out of the Washington community action office, read this report, he immediately contacted the Houston Community Council to urge members of the new antipoverty committee to include the poor in the planning and implementation of War on Poverty programs in Houston. A representative from the Community Council assured Baldwin that although neither Welch nor Elliott nor the Community Council appointed any poor people to the executive committee, it was the understanding of the Community Council board that the executive committee would appoint a 60-person advisory council that would indeed include poor residents.\(^3^4\)

\(^3^3\) Vince Ximenes to Bill Haddad, memorandum, 11 May 1965, Box 77, Folder Texas OEO Program (Compilation) 1965 April thru July, Office of Economic Opportunity, Inspection Division, Inspection Reports, 1964-1967, Record Group 381, NARA. County Judge Elliott later declined to run for the new Congressional seat, opening the way for Republican George Bush to win his first election to the House of Representatives from Houston in 1966.

\(^3^4\) Vince Ximenes to Bill Haddad, memorandum, 11 May 1965, Box 77, Folder Texas OEO Program (Compilation) 1965 April thru July, Office of Economic Opportunity, Inspection Division, Inspection Reports, 1964-1967, Record Group 381, NARA; Fred Baldwin to Theodore Berry, Fred Hayes, and Bill Bozman, memorandum, 10 May 1965, Box 9, Folder Houston, Texas, 1965, Office of Economic Opportunity, Community Action Program, Records of the Director, State Files, 1965-1968, Record Group 381, NARA.
When the executive committee members appointed the advisory council a few days later, they did include a few representatives from the poor neighborhoods in Houston. Of the sixty total members of the advisory council, fifteen were considered “poor,” and this included eight African Americans and four Mexican Americans. The announcement issued to the public by Welch, Elliott, and the members of the Community Council stated that the members of the advisory council “were jointly chosen to represent the viewpoints of the broadest number of people in the community, and each person accepted the nomination enthusiastically.” While on the surface it appeared that Houston’s poor residents in some small way might begin to have a voice in the planning, development, and implementation of antipoverty programs in the city, Ximenes quickly discovered that this advisory council would in fact have no influence over the executive committee and would have very little voice in making policy or developing antipoverty programs. According to Ximenes, this advisory council would “serve no purpose except window dressing.”

Ximenes attended a meeting of the new antipoverty organization’s executive committee while he was in Houston and was unimpressed with what he saw. Several individuals, including Ximenes, urged the executive committee to include the 60-member advisory council in making major decisions and in developing programs, and each time executive committee chairman Leon Jaworski and other committee members turned

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down the suggestions. Jaworski announced that the executive committee would agree to
meet with the advisory council only four times per year, and during these meetings the
executive committee, rather than seeking the advice of the advisory council, would
simply keep the advisory council abreast of the committee’s activities in the community.
Ximenes pointed out to Jaworski and the rest of the executive committee that the
Economic Opportunity Act, as well as OEO guidelines, required community participation
in the War on Poverty, but the committee members quickly dismissed Ximenes’s
argument and told him to come back and talk to them at a later date. As the meeting drew
to a close, Ximenes reported that he “was given to understand that the community
development concept has no place in Houston.”

“If Houston is an example of what is being done in other towns,” Ximenes wrote
in his report, “then I suppose the self-help ideal will once again be defeated. . . . There is
an obvious fear of including minorities or poor people in any kind of function,
administrative or operative.” Even the middle-class African American representatives on
the executive committee, according to Ximenes, would not be allowed to have any voice,
“except as it may have been pre-determined.” Ximenes urged OEO officials to take note
of the “predominance of millionaires” on the executive committee and argued that there
was “every reason to believe that the board as it is constituted now has no intention of
allowing communities to formulate their own programs much less decide policy.”
Ximenes warned that if Houston’s antipoverty committee continued to insist on its
present course of action, the residents of the poverty areas in the city would continue to
insist on true representation on the policymaking committee, possibly using mass

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36 Vince Ximenes to Bill Haddad, memorandum, 13 May 1965, Box 77, Folder Texas OEO Program
(Compilation) 1965 April thru July, Office of Economic Opportunity, Inspection Division, Inspection
Reports, 1964-1967, Record Group 381, NARA.
demonstrations to get their point across. It was just in the previous week that two
thousand African American students and supporters had marched through the streets of
Houston to demand that public school desegregation proceed more quickly. If a mass
demonstration in support of poor and minority representation on the antipoverty
committee occurred, OEO would be forced to side with the poor residents against
Houston’s public officials, a situation most OEO officials would have rather avoided.37

Federal OEO administrators were concerned enough about the events in Houston
that they passed on Ximenes’s reports to OEO Director Sargent Shriver. Ximenes
recommended that OEO go ahead and fund other antipoverty agencies in Houston, such
as Houston Action for Youth, and argued that this might put more pressure on the
executive committee to comply with OEO guidelines on representation of the poor. His
report, however, ended rather pessimistically. Ximenes warned that he was not at all
convinced that Houston’s antipoverty committee was “a sincere effort to utilize OEO
funds on any basis. It could be a typical Houston delaying tactic. The kind that finally
caused the Negroes to march in support of school integration.” Shriver agreed with
Ximenes’s assessment of the gravity of the situation in Houston and immediately issued a
memo instructing OEO officials to “please watch Houston closely.” After reading
Ximenes’s report, Fred Baldwin recommended that OEO fund Houston Action for Youth
at the highest amount possible, even though OEO had serious doubts about the

37 Vince Ximenes to Bill Haddad, memorandum, 13 May 1965, Box 77, Folder Texas OEO Program
(Compilation) 1965 April thru July, Office of Economic Opportunity, Inspection Division, Inspection
Reports, 1964-1967, Record Group 381, NARA (quotations); Vince Ximenes to Bill Haddad,
memorandum, 11 May 1965, Box 77, Folder Texas OEO Program (Compilation) 1965 April thru July,
Office of Economic Opportunity, Inspection Division, Inspection Reports, 1964-1967, Record Group 381,
NARA.
competence of HAY's staff. There were simply no other options available. As Baldwin stated, "HAY is the only vehicle for getting substantial services into its target areas."38

By the time that Welch, Elliott, and members of the Community Council got around to establishing a committee to oversee the implementation of the War on Poverty in Houston, Houston Action for Youth had become a major contender for federal antipoverty funding as its members positioned themselves as a viable alternative for a community action agency for the city. During the summer and fall of 1965, as federal OEO inspectors expressed serious reservations about the officially appointed antipoverty board in Houston, it appeared that federal administrators might designate HAY as the official recipient and coordinator of War on Poverty funds in the city. OEO officials did not want to see the city of Houston left out of the national War on Poverty during the first year of funding. Even though HAY was a traditional welfare organization, it seemed to be the most desirable outlet for OEO funding given the dearth of alternatives in Houston.

This relationship between OEO and local HAY administrators eventually provoked the newly appointed antipoverty board into action and forced them to come up with a plan for the War on Poverty in Houston acceptable to federal program officials. HAY's application for OEO funding submitted in late May 1965 revealed the traditional nature of this welfare agency that focused on social service delivery to poor residents in

Houston. HAY requested $2.8 million to continue delivering services like foster care for homeless youth, family education projects, family planning, counseling services for troubled youth, nursery school services, and Boy Scout and Girl Scout projects. HAY also had a very limited reach in the city. According to its application, HAY proposed to carry out these services in just a few neighborhoods north of downtown Houston. HAY delivered most of their social services out of neighborhood service centers, and despite HAY’s claim to include poor residents in the implementation of these services, there was no indication that there were any neighborhood residents in leadership positions at these centers. Although CAP guidelines required the maximum feasible participation of poor residents in the planning, development, and implementation of War on Poverty programs, HAY’s application remained quite vague about how poor residents would be involved at all other than informally telling HAY staffers what services they desired.  

OEO decided to approve HAY’s request in spite of the organization’s limitations and the improbability it would carry out the community action program that War on Poverty architects had envisioned. It was even more unlikely that the newly created antipoverty board that the mayor, county judge, and Community Council appointed would be prepared to implement a program that year, and it seemed that HAY offered the only possibility for any substantial OEO funding to be used in Houston. Every OEO official who visited Houston during the spring of 1965 agreed with the sentiment expressed in an internal OEO memo in early May, which stated that HAY “is the only vehicle for getting substantial services into its target area” and therefore should be funded by OEO “in large amounts.” OEO officials announced on July 2 they would immediately

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grant HAY $2 million to carry out the programs outlined in its application. In addition to
the general antipoverty grant, OEO also approved HAY’s application to administer Head
Start preschool centers in its target neighborhoods in conjunction with the Houston
Independent School District.40

When it became clear that OEO would fund HAY as the primary community
action agency for the city of Houston, the central antipoverty committee appointed by the
mayor, county judge, and Community Council – now called the Houston-Harris County
Economic Opportunity Organization (H-HCEOO) – moved into action. Fearful that their
organization would be rendered irrelevant if they were unable to secure funding and
determined to retain control of the War on Poverty in the city, members of the H-HCEOO
executive committee quickly wrote up an application for a community action grant.
Submitted during the second week in June, H-HCEOO’s CAP application requested the
relatively small amount of $40,000 to carry out an in-depth survey of poverty in Houston
and to develop a plan for action in conjunction with existing antipoverty agencies and
residents of the target neighborhoods. This initial survey and development grant,
according to the application, would allow H-HCEOO to ascertain the necessary

40 Fred Baldwin to Theodore Berry, Fred Hayes, and Bill Bozman, memorandum, 21 May 1965, Box 9,
Folder Houston, Texas, 1965, Office of Economic Opportunity, Community Action Program, Records of
the Director, State Files, 1965-1968, Record Group 381, NARA (quotation); Office of Economic
 Opportunity, “Houston, Texas (Conduct and Administration),” press release, 2 July 1965, Microfilm Reel
30, Records from Federal Government Agencies, Records from the Office of Economic Opportunity, 1964-
1968, LBJ Library; “Governor OK’s 38 More Head Start Projects,” Waco Tribune-Herald, 5 June 1965,
newspaper clipping, Box 22, Folder Miscellaneous, Records from Federal Government Agencies, Records
from the Office of Economic Opportunity, 1964-1968, LBJ Library; Howard Spergel, “School Board OK’s
Anti-Poverty Plans,” Houston Post, March 24, 1965; Houston Chronicle, August 3, 1965; Houston
information to submit a full community action grant application some time in the following months.\footnote{Houston-Harris County Economic Opportunity Organization, “Application for Community Action Program (Initial Program Development Project),” 10 June 1965, Box 265, Folder Houston-Harris County Economic Opportunity Organization Application for Community Action Program (Initial Program Development Project), Jaworski Papers; Houston-Harris County Economic Opportunity Organization, “Summary of Proposal,” June 1965, Box 2, Folder Economic Opportunity Workpapers February-June 1965, William V. Ballew, Jr. Papers, 1965-1968, MS 254, Woodson Research Center, Fondren Library, Rice University (hereafter cited as Ballew Papers).}

OEO officials, who were fed up with the delaying tactics and inadequate makeup of H-HCEOO’s executive committee and advisory board, denied the CAP grant application because H-HCEOO made no top staff positions available to any of the residents of the poor neighborhoods in Houston, despite the fact that many of these residents were well qualified for the jobs. While executive committee members promised to employ poor people in lower level jobs like clerks and interviewers, OEO officials objected because none of the poverty residents would have a voice in the policymaking decisions of H-HCEOO. To make matters worse, a Houston minister affiliated with Protestant Charities wrote an anonymous letter to OEO protesting the makeup of H-HCEOO’s executive committee and advisory board by pointing out that of the seventy-sixty members of the executive committee and board, only six were African American and only three were Mexican American. In addition to inadequate minority representation, only three of the sixty-one advisory board members actually lived in any of the poverty areas in Houston. The most blatant failure to live up to OEO guidelines, according to the minister, was the fact that none of the fifteen executive committee members, who held the policymaking power of the organization, represented the poor. The unnamed minister’s letter only reinforced the OEO officials’ original decision to fund HAY as the sole community action agency for Houston. They recommended that H-
HCEOO adjust the makeup of its governing body and resubmit an application at a later date. OEO officials held out hope that H-HCEOO’s executive committee and advisory board would comply with OEO guidelines and eventually serve as Houston’s community action agency, but they realized that this restructuring would probably not occur until the next year.42

When OEO announced that they were going to fund HAY as the community action agency for the city in July 1965, however, some H-HCEOO members panicked. H-HCEOO executive committee member George Bush sent a letter to chairman Leon Jaworski that same month and declared that he was “disturbed to see yesterday’s newspaper article” announcing OEO funding of HAY and several other smaller antipoverty projects in the city of Houston. “I think it would be a mistake,” Bush continued, “if the Office of Economic Opportunity started approving all sorts of miscellaneous requests from Houston. I hope that our Board of Directors can make a strong plea to OEO to funnel its grants through our Committee. It seems to me that if all types of groups are able to go directly to OEO, the effectiveness of your committee will be minimized and all kinds of confusion could result.” This “confusion,” of course, meant that the business elites on H-HCEOO’s executive committee might lose control of the War on Poverty in Houston.43

A majority of H-HCEOO’s executive committee and advisory board agreed with Bush’s assessment of the situation, and in late August they hastily prepared and submitted to OEO a full grant application requesting $1.2 million for a ten-month antipoverty program in Houston. In a letter included in the application, H-HCEOO Board

42 “Poverty Funds Bid By City is Rejected,” Houston Chronicle, September 26, 1965.
43 George Bush to Leon Jaworski, 19 July 1965, Box 265, Folder Houston-Harris County Economic Opportunity Organization Correspondence, Jaworski Papers (quotations).
Chairman Leon Jaworski informed OEO officials that since HAY only targeted a small section of the city north of downtown Houston, H-HCEO would direct its antipoverty programs at the rest of the city. Conveying a sense of urgency, Jaworski urged OEO officials in Washington to approve the request quickly, especially since H-HCEO was “far behind in its previous schedule for developing a complete Community Action Program.”

H-HCEO’s application outlined several antipoverty projects that members of the organization intended to initiate in Houston, including research and survey projects that had been included in the previous initial program development grant application submitted to OEO. Beyond ascertaining the nature and prevalence of poverty in Houston, H-HCEO members proposed several antipoverty programs for the city. Much like the HAY grant application, the program proposals included in this application were social services such as vocational training and child care for working mothers. In order to meet OEO requirement for including poor residents in policymaking and program development decisions, H-HCEO’s new grant application stated that the organization would appoint counselors for each poor neighborhood whose job would be to seek out opinions from the neighborhood residents concerning which services they wanted and which programs they would like to see initiated in their communities.

In September OEO once again rejected H-HCEO’s application and its bid to become Houston’s community action agency. Despite the new proactive attitude


evidenced by H-HCEO O’s application, OEO officials continued to be critical of the organization’s provisions for including poor residents in policymaking and program development. Donald Mathis, regional OEO director based in Austin, Texas, explained to H-HCEO O members that not only were the poor not sufficiently represented on the staff and in leadership positions within the organization, but there were also no provisions or procedures to establish cooperation between the social service agencies in Houston necessary to carry out H-HCEO O’s programs. “The law is quite specific,” argued Mathis, “in requiring representation from these groups to the maximum extent feasible. . . . There are only one or two on the board of directors representing the poor.” Mathis continued his criticism of H-HCEO O’s application by stating, “Most of the projects require the cooperation of several organizations and we see no evidence of how they would achieve this cooperation.” Though he offered several ways to remedy these problems, Mathis reminded H-HCEO O members that the solution should come from the people of Houston.46

This most recent rejection of H-HCEO O’s application for a community action grant set off a firestorm of criticism directed at OEO from high-ranking officials in Houston. Mayor Welch blasted OEO’s decision in the newspapers the next day and proclaimed that he had no intention whatsoever of naming a new antipoverty committee for Houston to meet OEO guidelines. Referring to Mathis’s statement about H-HCEO O’s shortcomings, Welch replied, “Apparently a bureaucrat is setting up new rules. I have full

46 “Poverty Funds Bid By City is Rejected,” Houston Chronicle, September 26, 1965.
confidence in the committee and in Leon Jaworski, the chairman. I have no intention of naming a new committee because I think the present committee is doing a good job.”

H-HCEOO Executive Committee Chairman Leon Jaworski echoed Welch’s remarks and argued that it was “illogical, to put it mildly,” to think that simply appointing additional poor members to the advisory board would improve the function of H-HCEOO as a community action agency. Jaworski continued, “The mayor and the county judge with the advice of civic leaders carefully selected this committee and it is to be regretted that an individual who knows so little about the qualifications of those selected should undertake arbitrarily to say that a number of other persons should be added to this group whose sole qualification needs to be that of being poor.” In a statement that clearly indicated his complete rejection of the new antipoverty philosophy of the War on Poverty, Jaworski argued that the boards of the “great charitable organizations in our community consist of men and women dedicated to aiding those in need, and one’s financial standing has never been a test for serving.” These men and women, according to Jaworski, were “dedicated and determined in the pursuit of endeavors for the benefit of others.”

Jaworski’s statements once again revealed an unwillingness to accept the philosophy that drove the architects of the federal War on Poverty, namely that poor people themselves should be very much involved in the planning, development, and implementation of antipoverty programs in their own communities. While it seemed “illogical” to Jaworski to include members on the committee simply because they were poor, the logic behind this OEO guideline was based on the notion that poor residents

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themselves were most familiar with the nature of poverty in their communities and therefore were in the best position to plan and develop antipoverty programs to be implemented in their own neighborhoods. Further, War on Poverty architects believed that rather than developing programs and services from afar and then implementing them in poor neighborhoods – how traditional welfare organizations typically operated – the new antipoverty initiatives of the 1960s would ask poor residents to take active leadership roles in carrying out whatever programs they planned and developed. H-HCEO remained steadfast in its refusal to adhere to these OEO guidelines because the city’s elected officials and members of the traditional welfare bureaucracy were fearful of losing control of federal funding and the administration of antipoverty services in the city.

The furor over this latest OEO rejection, however, died down rather quickly as H-HCEO members, under threat from HAY, quickly searched for ways to comply as best they could with OEO guidelines. During a closed-door meeting of the executive committee a few days after OEO officials turned down their grant request, H-HCEO members agreed to create a seventy-five-member board of directors with fifteen members coming directly from the poverty neighborhoods. Though both Jaworski and Welch claimed that there had simply been a misunderstanding between H-HCEO and OEO and that the plan had always been to add poor residents to the board once H-HCEO was funded, it seems unlikely that this explains why the H-HCEO executive committee had such a quick change of heart. If Jaworski and other members of the executive committee had originally planned on adding more poor people to the board of directors eventually, it seems unlikely he and Welch would have made such harsh statements about OEO’s
recent rejection of their grant application. It is more likely that enough members of H-HCEOO’s executive committee were in favor of doing whatever it took to get funding approval before the organization was excluded completely from the implementation of the War on Poverty in Houston. A clear indication of this was Jaworski’s statement to the press after the organization made the decision to comply with OEO guidelines. He said, “Some of these requirements in my view are unsound but we will work it out with them.” Clearly the H-HCEOO executive committee was not happy about sharing any power with poor residents, but it seems many were willing to work toward a compromise if it meant retaining control over the War on Poverty in Houston.49

In October 1965 H-HCEOO submitted its revised grant application to OEO, and War on Poverty officials in Washington expressed relief that the showdown ended peacefully. OEO staffer Bill Crook, soon to be appointed southwest regional director of OEO and who had recently admitted that the situation in Houston “could have been a bad one,” sent a memorandum to Sargent Shriver lauding the resolution as “an excellent example of what the courteous but unrelenting pressures of ‘maximum feasible participation’ can bring about in a city. . . . I consider the favorable turn of events to be an important breakthrough that will make easier the work that we have to do state-wide.” Shriver passed this memo on to the White House and stated, “The President can see in this specific case exactly how 90% of the ‘fighting’ develops, and how solutions have been reached in more than 1,100 cities, towns, and counties.” Although they still wanted further indications that H-HCEOO members shared their commitment to community action and maximum feasible participation of the poor, OEO officials had a renewed

sense of confidence after their apparent victory. For the time being, OEO decided to fund a portion of H-HCEOO’s grant request to get the organization off the ground and begin planning some antipoverty programs for the city of Houston. Rather than fund the entire $1.1 million that H-HCEOO asked for, OEO officials decided on a lesser amount of $130,000 to fund exploratory projects designed to ascertain the needs of Houston’s poor communities. OEO informed H-HCEOO that once it was able to plan a few antipoverty programs, the Washington office would grant funding for those projects.50

By the end of 1965 Houston Action for Youth and the Houston-Harris County Economic Opportunity Organization had been funded for a combined total of $3 million, had planned programs for various poor neighborhoods in the city, and were ready to begin implementing the War on Poverty in Houston. In October Harlem Congressman Adam Clayton Powell brought his House Committee on Education and Labor to Houston as one of thirty-three major cities to receive an investigation of the progress of the War on Poverty around the country. Following two days of meetings with antipoverty organization staff and touring the target neighborhoods, Powell’s committee concluded that after a shaky beginning, the War on Poverty was progressing smoothly in Houston. A Powell aide told the local newspapers, “We have received no flack or letters or anything else from Houston so you must have a very model program down there.” Sam Price,  

50 Leon Jaworski to Community Action Program Office, Office of Economic Opportunity Southwest Region, 20 October 1965, Box 76, Folder Texas OEO Program (Compilation) 1965 October thru November, Office of Economic Opportunity, Inspection Division, Inspection Reports, 1964-1967, Record Group 381, NARA; Minutes of Houston-Harris County Economic Opportunity Organization Board of Directors, 26 October 1965, Box 1, CWPA Collection; Bill Crook to Marvin Watson, memorandum, 30 September 1965, Box 16, Folder HE-HOVZ, White House Central Files, LBJ Library (first quotation); Bill Crook to Sargent Shriver, memorandum, 1 October 1965, Box 16, Folder HE-HOVZ, White House Central Files, LBJ Library (second quotation); Donn Mitchell to Edgar May, memorandum, 7 November 1965, Box 76, Folder Texas OEO Program (Compilation) 1965 October thru November, Record Group 381, NARA; Theodore Berry to Charles Kelly, 15 November 1965, Box 265, Folder Houston-Harris County Economic Opportunity Organization Correspondence, Jaworski Papers; “Grant Made for Poverty Project,” Houston Chronicle, November 5, 1965; “$128,137 for Anti-Poverty Granted to Harris County,” Houston Post, November 5, 1965.
HAY’s director of neighborhood organization, reported, “From all indications, we got a perfectly clean bill of health.”\textsuperscript{51}

Yet more trouble lay ahead for the implementation of the War on Poverty in Houston. At the end of October, OEO in Washington sent Ivan Scott, an inspector hired by War on Poverty administrators to investigate community action boards and report on compliance with federal guidelines, to Houston to spend a day at H-HCEO\textsuperscript{O} headquarters. Though he recommended that OEO approve the grant application, Scott had serious concerns about H-HCEO\textsuperscript{O}’s outright refusal to include poor residents in any decision making processes. Scott discovered that of the fifteen additional members of the board of directors that the H-HCEO\textsuperscript{O} executive committee appointed to comply with OEO guidelines, only two were actually poor. H-HCEO\textsuperscript{O} administrators assured Scott, however, that they would reorganize the board once OEO funded the organization and promised that more poor people would be included. Scott also uncovered a problem of a different sort that would continue to hamper antipoverty activities in Houston for the next two years. A rivalry had emerged between H-HCEO\textsuperscript{O} and HAY over which organization could operate in particular areas of the city and what types of programs each group could offer. While Scott concluded that most of the problems could be solved in a satisfactory way for each antipoverty organization, important questions remained about whether H-HCEO\textsuperscript{O} and HAY would be able to work together to administer the War on Poverty in Houston. It would take the next two years to answer these remaining questions in any satisfactory way.\textsuperscript{52}

\textsuperscript{52} Ivan Scott to Edgar May, memorandum, 2 November 1965, Box 76, Folder Texas OEO Program (Compilation) 1965 October thru November, Record Group 381, NARA.
Even though the War on Poverty was a national program, local circumstances profoundly shaped its implementation in Houston. The conservative way in which local elected officials and members of the city’s traditional welfare bureaucracy interpreted the concept of community action had significant consequences for the early years of the federal antipoverty initiative. Yet Houston’s “pervasive conservatism” that McComb described did leave open a small window of opportunity for those who had a different understanding of what the Community Action Program should be. Although in their first year of operation members of the city’s official community action agency interpreted the community action concept conservatively, the possibility remained that at any time the H-HCEO Board could decide to reinterpret their federal mandate and change the direction of the entire poverty program. Beginning in 1966, this is precisely what happened. Before this shift could transpire in Houston, however, grassroots antipoverty activists operating outside of H-HCEO would have to present an alternative interpretation of the concept of community action and maximum feasible participation of the poor.
In May 1966 Winifred Pollack, a volunteer with the federal War on Poverty’s Volunteers in Service to America (VISTA) program working in an impoverished African American neighborhood in Houston’s old Fifth Ward, helped organize a group of forty area residents to protest several recent actions by the Houston Independent School District board. When Pollack had first arrived in the neighborhood a few months earlier, one neighborhood resident had approached her for assistance after school board members offered to buy his Fifth Ward home to build a new elementary school. According to this resident, the school board offered the meager sum of $7,000 for his home even though it was valued at more than $20,000. The school board’s offer to buy the home was also accompanied by a threat; if the homeowner failed to sign the necessary paperwork to sell the house within seven days, school board members, as they had done in other neighborhoods, would petition the city to condemn the property and turn it over to the school district. Pollack immediately recognized the unfairness of the situation and promised to arrange a meeting of all neighborhood residents who had received similar threats from the school board.

Forty neighborhood residents met with Pollack a few days later to discuss the school board’s efforts to purchase their homes. While Pollack came into the meeting convinced that the real issues that needed to be addressed were the unfair prices being offered by the school board and the threatening tone of their communications with
residents, she quickly discovered that area residents had a larger critique of the school board’s actions. Despite pressure from the federal government and civil rights activists in the city, many Houston school board members continued to resist public school desegregation in the mid and late 1960s by using subtle and devious tactics to prevent African American and Mexican American students from attending white schools. One way they accomplished this was to build new schools in African American neighborhoods that bordered white areas of the city where white schools were sometimes in close proximity to nonwhite residents. Fifth Ward residents explained to Pollack that the school board’s effort to build a new school in their neighborhood was simply another part of their plan to transform the crumbling system of de jure segregation into a more permanent system of de facto segregation. As Pollack stated in an interview shortly after the meeting, she “was very impressed that these elderly and not particularly literate people were so aware of the situation.”

As a VISTA volunteer, Pollack had received some training in the tactic of community organizing, and the response of Fifth Ward residents to the school board’s exploitative actions provided her with an opportunity to try the strategy on the ground. After holding a series of neighborhood meetings to discuss the issue and develop a plan of action, Pollack mobilized this group of forty residents to appear at several school board meetings to voice their disapproval. Much to the surprise of Pollack and the residents, school board members, undoubtedly caught off guard by this politically mobilized group, agreed to back off from their coercive actions. This small victory emboldened Pollack and the residents to continue their efforts to organize the Fifth Ward in order to empower the poor to make demands on the institutions that affected their
lives. As Pollack stated in an interview shortly after the protest, the only way for VISTA volunteers to leave a lasting impact on the area was to help residents learn how to organize in order to gain power. "This power," continued Pollack, "can help them acquire many of their smaller, mutual needs such as streetlights and better facilities. . . . If the fight against the School Board works, [community] organization may lead in the long run to the possibility of a quality education." Pollack's antipoverty philosophy and her efforts to attack poverty in one of Houston's poor neighborhoods were in stark contrast to the vision laid out by the conservative members of the Houston-Harris County Economic Opportunity Organization (H-HCEOO), the city's official community action agency. The preceding narrative documents only one example of the many ways in which grassroots antipoverty activists operating outside the official community action agency in Houston used the War on Poverty to empower the poor by organizing them to confront powerful city institutions and bring about meaningful social change.¹

Experiences like Pollack's show that one of the ways local circumstances shaped the War on Poverty was the manner in which grassroots antipoverty activists constructed the intellectual ground upon which the War on Poverty was implemented in Houston. Between 1964 and 1966, grassroots antipoverty activists unaffiliated with H-HCEOO created a local context in which to implement the War on Poverty that was much more diverse in its intellectual and political influences than the rather narrow confines of New Deal-Great Society liberalism, with its inherent commitment to social harmony and

¹ Cate Ewing and Joy Hodge, "Winifred Pollack: Census Tract 18, Houston, Texas," Box 1, Houston Council on Human Relations VISTA Collection, Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library, Houston, Texas (hereafter cited as HCHR VISTA Collection) (quotations); "VISTA," Houston Council on Human Relations Newsletter, Box 2, Folder 3, Houston Council on Human Relations Collection, Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library, Houston, Texas (hereafter cited as HCHR Collection).
reluctance to offend the middle class or challenge entrenched interests. The moderate liberalism that motivated the architects of the federal War on Poverty certainly helped galvanize local antipoverty activists in Houston. Even more prominent in the antipoverty philosophy of many grassroots activists in Houston, however, were Prophetic Christianity, radical civil rights activism, and the vision of participatory democracy and community organizing espoused by members of the New Left and iconoclastic figures like Saul Alinsky. These local Houston activists promoted a radical interpretation of the community action concept and created an environment in which it became possible to imagine using the War on Poverty to advance an agenda of social change by empowering the poor and helping them engage in confrontations with the city's public officials and other elites. Most importantly, local activists helped open a small window of opportunity for members of Houston's official community action agency to reinterpret the concept of community action and begin to implement a more radical and confrontational program in the city. In Houston, therefore, the local political and intellectual environment, even more than federal politics, determined how the War on Poverty was fought.

Perhaps no one did more to create the local context for the implementation of the War on Poverty in Houston than Reverend Wallace B. Poteat, a local minister of the Ecumenical Fellowship United Church of Christ, whose grassroots antipoverty organization became one of the official sponsors of the Volunteers in Service to America (VISTA) program in the city in 1966. His influence on the manner in which local activists implemented the War on Poverty in Houston, however, extended far beyond the VISTA program. By 1967, nearly all of the community organizers affiliated with the War on Poverty in Houston had begun implementing Poteat's model of community
organization and empowerment of the poor that the young minister articulated through his use of VISTA volunteers in the city.

When the War on Poverty was launched in 1964, the recent history of the Ecumenical Fellowship helped shape the way its members would interpret their role in the fight against poverty. The Ecumenical Fellowship emerged out of a bitter church split between two factions within the Garden Villas United Church of Christ, an all-white congregation in southeast Houston, that occurred during the summer of 1964. Garden Villas was located in an area of the city that was gradually transitioning from an all-white neighborhood to a majority African American and Latino neighborhood. Many Garden Villas members, including Poteat, the young pastor of the congregation, wanted to reach out to welcome their new neighbors to the area. In order to begin this outreach program, Poteat and several members teamed up with a nearby African American congregation to sponsor a racially integrated vacation church school for children during the summer of 1964. A significant majority of Garden Villas’s members, however, remained steadfastly opposed to challenging entrenched patterns of segregation in that part of the city. After several months of factional battles within the walls of Garden Villas, the congregation voted to dismiss Poteat as pastor in October. This decision prompted several dozen members of the church to withdraw their membership from Garden Villas and to commit themselves to establishing a new church under Poteat’s leadership.²

² "Splinter Group Has Its Own Church Now," Houston Chronicle, March 9, 1965; Ecumenical Fellowship United Church of Christ, “Contract with Wallace B. Poteat,” 23 September 1964, Box 1, Folder Ecumenical Fellowship, Volunteers in Service to America Collection, Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library, Houston, Texas (hereafter cited as VISTA Collection); Vince Maggio to Council Members, 25 September 1964, Box 1, Folder Ecumenical Fellowship, VISTA Collection; Garden Villas United Church of Christ Board of Trustees to Garden Villas Members, 28 October 1964, Box 1, Folder Ecumenical Fellowship, VISTA Collection; Garden Villas United Church of Christ, “The Community Courier,” 31 October 1964, Box 1, Folder Ecumenical Fellowship, VISTA Collection; Garden
Poteat maintained that he and the younger Garden Villas members who left the congregation were simply trying to carry out the mission of the United Church of Christ, which had a strong commitment to supporting multiracial and multicultural congregations. When the prospect of racial integration appeared, however, Poteat exclaimed that “the traditional patterns of Houston’s characteristic church life of serving the interest of constituents only and the interests of the immediate vicinity reasserted themselves.” The group of Garden Villas members who opposed his actions, according to Poteat, “have made the decision to participate in the mission of the church only in those areas of life which would not violate the ‘time honored’ taboos, patterns, and prejudices of the ringed in and defensive community of Garden Villas.” Above all, Poteat and his followers believed that the “race issue” was the most important problem confronting the modern church and must be overcome in order for the church to be a positive force in Houston.

The desire to be actively involved in the communities of Houston beyond the church walls propelled Poteat and his supporters to create the Ecumenical Fellowship United Church of Christ immediately upon leaving Garden Villas. Poteat argued that the city of Houston desperately needed a new congregation whose members engaged with the outside world because most churches in the city had become “spiritual retreats from the rapidly changing patterns of urbanization.” Rather than cutting itself off from the social

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problems in Houston like Garden Villas had done, this new church congregation would seek solutions for societal ills and attempt to be a transformative force in the city.\(^4\)

Poteat and his followers had been profoundly influenced by several recent trends advanced by prominent Protestant theologians in the early and mid-1960s, particularly the renewed emphasis on original sin and the Old Testament prophets spearheaded by Reinhold Niebuhr, the call for people of faith to engage with the world more directly by Harvey Cox, and the ecumenical push coming from the National Council of Churches. In creating the Ecumenical Fellowship United Church of Christ, Poteat and his supporters hoped to combine these three elements into a theology that called church members out into the slums of Houston to be a prophetic voice exposing the evil of poverty in an ecumenical way. These trends had significant implications for the way Poteat and his congregation viewed the opportunities created by the federal War on Poverty.

In January 1965 Poteat urged members of his new congregation to read carefully *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, Reinhold Niebuhr’s most widely known book. Often labeled a neo-orthodox theologian by contemporary observers, Niebuhr called for a renewed emphasis on man’s original sin and the depravity of humankind and criticized liberal theology (and postwar liberalism in general) for purporting that man could be ultimately perfected. American liberals, going back to John Dewey and other political theorists during the first few decades of the twentieth century, had an unshakeable faith in the inevitable progress of human civilization that would be brought about by education and democracy. As society improved, conflict between groups and individuals would accordingly decline. Niebuhr, on the other hand, disagreed with this faith in progress and

argued that social conflict was inevitable because of man’s depraved and fallen nature. Liberals, Niebuhr said in the book, “completely disregard the political necessities in the struggle for justice in human society by failing to recognize those elements in man’s collective behavior which belong to the order of nature and can never be brought completely under the dominion of reason or conscience. They do not recognize that when collective power, whether in the form of imperialism or class domination, exploits weakness, it can never be dislodged unless power is raised against it. If conscience and reason can be insinuated into the resulting struggle they can only qualify but not abolish it.” In other words, the liberal’s belief in inevitable human progress and the perfectibility of man failed to take into account that man’s very nature was imperfect because of original sin. Once this basic fact about human nature was accepted, Niebuhr argued that the only way justice could be achieved on earth was through conflict and coercion. “Conflict is inevitable,” Nieburh stated, “and in this conflict power must be challenged by power.”

Niebuhr also tried to restore the prophetic voice to Christianity, and according to historian David L. Chappell, this was his most significant intellectual contribution to mid-twentieth century struggles for justice in the United States. In his provocative book *A Stone of Hope: Prophetic Religion and the Death of Jim Crow*, Chappell argued that the core beliefs of civil rights intellectuals, particularly Martin Luther King, Jr., consisted not of liberalism, with its faith in the ability of education and inevitable moral progress to bring about racial justice and an end to segregation, but rather by a prophetic brand of Christianity advanced by Niebuhr. Contrary to the views of most American liberals,

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Niebuhr argued that real evil existed in the world. For many African Americans, living with segregation and racism meant that they too had firsthand experience with human depravity and societal evil. The Jim Crow system in the American South and the white racism that propped up that racial caste system were evils that had to be confronted. According to Chappell, King and other movement leaders believed that whites would relent and the Jim Crow system would crumble only when those in power were coerced into allowing it to occur. By bringing the prophetic voice to the American South, civil rights activists hoped to expose this grave societal evil and deliver blacks in the South from its clutches. It was also this brand of Prophetic Christianity that sustained the civil rights movement and brought about some measure of success while many liberals abandoned the goals of the movement.  

Poteat and his followers were similarly influenced by Niebuhr and a prophetic brand of Christianity. In response to a question about whether the new church congregation would be “liberal” or “conservative,” Poteat responded by arguing that “the words Liberal and Conservative which we sometimes use with abandon really confuse the issue because of the varied connotation of these terms.” Rather than being concerned with where the new church would fall on the American political or theological spectrum,  

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6 David L. Chappell, A Stone of Hope: Prophetic Religion and the Death of Jim Crow (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004). See also Taylor Branch, Parting the Waters: America in the King Years, 1954-63 (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1988), 81, 84-87. Chappell disagrees with the effort to paint Niebuhr as a neo-orthodox theologian, arguing instead that Niebuhr had a foot in both the neo-orthodox and liberal theological camps. Chappell states, “Niebuhr insisted that he was not ‘neo-orthodox’; he rejected Karl Barth’s pessimism, Barth’s Augustinian rejection of this world. Niebuhr sought to engage in political conflict, to fight oppression, and ‘to mitigate the brutalities’ of modern life, even while he held that complete success in such efforts was impossible. His biographers and other students of his work now emphasize that Niebuhr greatly exaggerated his own rejection of liberal theology. He was really criticizing liberal from within, seeking to curb its excesses, not rejecting its engagement with this world and efforts to reform it. Fundamentalists routinely lumped Niebuhr with liberal theologians; to suggest that he was neo-orthodox, as historians persist in doing, is an equal and opposite error.” Chappell, Stone of Hope, 27. Regardless of whether Niebuhr was truly a neo-orthodox theologian, what is significant for the present discussion is that Niebuhr had an incisive critique of liberalism and its relation to the possibility for social change and struggles for justice, and this criticism rang loud and clear for Poteat and his supporters.
Poteat insisted that he and his supporters were concerned to maintain a “creative dialectic between the priestly and prophetic aspects” of their faith. “If we sound weighted to prophecy,” Poteat concluded, “it is perhaps because we believe that the prophetic voice in the local church needs to be strengthened in Houston.”

In addition to being greatly influenced by Niebuhr, Poteat and his followers saw themselves as part of a religious movement whose participants were dedicated to establishing Christian missions in the country’s urban centers. Foremost among the influential theologians in this movement was Harvey Cox, whose 1965 publication *The Secular City* synthesized an increasing number of calls to reengage with the outside world. In January 1966 Poteat asked his congregation to read this book in which Cox lambasted Christians who were fearful of secularization. Rather than being something to fear, Cox argued that the process of secularization was “the liberation of man from religious and metaphysical tutelage, the turning of his attention away from other worlds and toward this one. . . . The task of Christians should be to support it and nourish it.” In the secular city, which Cox argued every part of the country was quickly becoming, traditional religion, with its preoccupation with otherworldliness, had no place. Modern Christians, Cox said, should reject that kind of traditional religion and enter freely into the secular world as full participants. Most attractive to Poteat and his congregation, however, was Cox’s attempt to develop a theology of social change. “We are trying to live in a period of revolution without a theology of revolution,” exclaimed Cox. “Our task is that of developing a theology of politics, and in particular a theology of revolutionary social change. . . . The secular city provides the starting point for such a theology.”

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grassroots antipoverty activists like Poteat and his congregation, Cox provided a theological justification for a radical political philosophy by advocating a thorough democratization of the economy as a whole to produce a world without the evils of poverty.\(^8\)

Poteat looked to theologians like Harvey Cox for guidance in his attempt to establish an urban church in Houston. As Poteat explained to his congregation, the trend of contemporary church congregations to leave the inner city and retreat to the suburbs meant that the city of Houston needed a new church that would actively and ambitiously reach out to the urban poor. “It is our conviction,” proclaimed Poteat, “that those who stand outside the doors of the churches in an exploding metropolis with its problems and promise deserve to be served by faithfully witnessing churches rather than pious professions of concern.”\(^9\)

In a brochure advertising the founding of the Ecumenical Fellowship, Poteat asked, “Will Sunday morning begin your eager week of involvement or will it hear your prayer of relief that toil is done? Will you attend a sanctuary where an inordinate claim on your time drags you out of the world and makes life one big retreat? . . . where the emphasis is on ceremony, ritual, narrow-minded minutiae, pious platitudes? . . . where exalted ideals are proclaimed but no attempt is made to implement them or live up to them? . . . where charity is only a food basket from Lady Bountiful?” Or, Poteat asked, will you attend a “Church . . . where the whole church means the whole world? . . .

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where the emphasis is on our common needs, racial and social justice, the brotherhood of man? . . . where concern is courageous and the church will take a stand on issues? . . . where charity recognizes human dignity and helps others raise themselves?" The Ecumenical Fellowship, according to Poteat, would be this new brand of urban church "committed to seeking a faith adequate to the challenge of today and the promise of tomorrow."

In addition to Prophetic Christianity and a commitment to establishing an urban mission in Houston, a significant national trend that had a profound effect not only on Poteat and his supporters but on the entire United Church of Christ body was the ecumenical movement that began slowly at the turn of the twentieth century. In 1950 the National Council of Churches was formed, capping off a half century of efforts to create an interdenominational organization capable of encouraging dialogue between believers of different faiths. Members of the National Council of Churches wanted to shift the focus away from the relatively small doctrinal differences that served to divide people of faith and toward the many commonalities among the denominations. As they stated in their message "To the People of the Nation" during their founding meeting in 1950, "we have forged an implement for cooperation such as America has never seen before. . . . The Council itself is a demonstration of [Jesus’s] power to unite his followers in joyous cooperation. Let nation and nation, race and race, class and class unite their aims in his broad purposes for man, and out of that unitedness there will arise new strength like that of which we ourselves already feel the first sure intimations."

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10 Ecumenical Fellowship, "Out of Adversity," n.d., Box 1, Folder 3, VISTA Collection.
As Poteat explained to his congregation in March 1966, “Denominational parochialism, static concepts, and competition [were] and [are] the worst enem[ies]” of the modern urban church, and they represented “a curse on the seamless robe of Christ.” Whereas suburban church congregations could cling to their denominational differences and remain financially viable, Poteat argued that “competition and isolation spells doom to the inner city church,” as evidenced by the fact that “in the cruel heart of the city, traditional middle class neighborhood churches are closing their doors and are objects of indifference and hostility.” To cling to outdated denominational differences and peculiarities, while holding up one’s own as the only true way to worship, according to Poteat, is “to take the historical position that the Christian Church in 2000 years has only produced a limited few models for the development of churches and missions that can be both Christian and successful... To claim that there is only one structure, one way of development, one valid way of becoming a self sustaining church, one restricted mission of the church is ultimately to castrate the future of the church and its mission.” There was, however, reason for hope. The growth of the National Council of Churches and the increasing strength of the ecumenical movement, according to Poteat, were encouraging developments showing that “the walls of hostility between diverse religious groups, ethnic groups, economic groups, between suburb and inner city are being broken” in order to serve “the poor, the blind, the deaf, the oppressed, the captives.”

These diverse theological trends played a determining role in the creation of the Ecumenical Fellowship in Houston. As members of the congregation set out to engage with the secular world, they quickly discovered that the problem of urban poverty would

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12 Wallace B. Poteat, “Theology and Structure, Ecumenical Fellowship-LAC Project,” 1 March 1966, Box 1, Scrapbook, VISTA Collection.
also require a political solution. Poteat believed that Niebuhr provided a coherent philosophy for exposing and attacking the evils of poverty, but he also attempted to combine Niebuhrian Prophetic Christianity with the radical political vision of Saul Alinsky. Over time, Poteat became a firm believer in what was known as the Saul Alinsky method. Alinsky was the radical community organizer who in 1939 helped create the Back of the Yards Neighborhood Council in Chicago and had received national attention by traveling the country training organizers in his methods. Alinsky argued that individuals, especially those trapped in poverty, had little hope of successfully dealing with any city’s public officials, government agencies, or welfare organizations because of the overwhelming amount of power an urban bureaucracy possessed over its poor citizens. According to Alinsky, it was only through organization, as labor had accomplished through the creation of industrial unions, that the poor could attempt to match the power of a city’s government and bring about needed changes in their communities. Alinsky’s method of organizing and mobilizing poor communities was incredibly attractive to some antipoverty workers across the country because Alinsky seemed to understand that the problems of poverty boiled down to one core issue – power relations. Alinsky’s followers believed that only through upsetting the traditional balance of power between a city’s power structure and its poor residents and implementing a vision of participatory democracy could the evils of poverty be resolved.\textsuperscript{13}

\textsuperscript{13} For the life of Saul Alinsky, see Sanford D. Horwitt, \textit{Let Them Call Me Rebel: Saul Alinsky – His Life and Legacy} (New York: Knopf, 1989). The term “participatory democracy” refers to a form of democracy articulated by Jean-Jacques Rousseau in \textit{The Social Contract} (1762) that envisioned citizens participating fully in collective decisions. Representative democracy, according to this view, was not a legitimate form of democracy at all because, Rousseau argued, citizens forfeit their own participatory power by electing others to act for them. In the 1960s, many intellectuals and grassroots activists, particularly those associated with the emerging New Left, began calling for a political revolution in order to implement a more participatory form of democracy in America. The Port Huron Statement of the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), issued in 1962, spelled out this vision. See Robert A. Dahl, \textit{Democracy and Its Critics} (New
Alinsky's most coherent articulation of his ideas was his 1946 book *Reveille for Radicals*. In the first half of the book, Alinsky defined what it meant to be an American radical and differentiated radicals from American liberals. He explained, "The Radical is not fooled by shibboleths and facades. He faces issues squarely and does not hide his cowardice behind the convenient cloak of rationalization. The Radical refuses to be diverted by superficial problems. He is completely concerned with fundamental causes rather than current manifestations. He concentrates his attack on the heart of the issue. . . . The Radical recognizes that constant dissension and conflict has been the fire under the boiler of democracy." Alinsky warned that radicals should not be confused with liberals, who "are hesitant to act" and whose "opinions are studded with ‘but on the other hand.’" Alinsky continued, "Caught on the horns of this dilemma, [liberals] are paralyzed into immobility. They become utterly incapable of action. They discuss and discuss and end in disgust." The true American radical, however, "does not sit frozen by cold objectivity. He sees injustice and strikes at it with hot passion." Because of the American radical's propensity for action, according to Alinsky, "Society has good reason to fear the Radical. Every shaking advance of mankind toward equality and justice has come from the Radical. He hits, he hurts, he is dangerous. Conservative interests know that while Liberals are most adept at breaking their own necks with their tongues, Radicals are most adept at breaking the necks of Conservatives."\(^{14}\)

The most important difference between liberals and radicals with regard to bringing about meaningful social change, according to Alinsky, was in their disparate understandings of power. "Liberals fear power or its application," he argued. "They labor

in confusion over the significance of power and fail to recognize that only through the achievement and constructive use of power can people better themselves. They talk glibly of a people lifting themselves by their own bootstraps but fail to realize that nothing can be lifted or moved except through power.” Radicals, on the other hand, “precipitate the social crisis by action – by using power.” Alinsky concluded that the only sure way for common people to attain and use power effectively was through organization. He argued, “If we strip away all the chromium trimmings of high-sounding metaphor and idealism which conceal the motor and gears of a democratic society, one basic element is revealed – the people are the motor, the organizations of the people are the gears. The power of the people is transmitted through the gears of their own organizations, and democracy moves forward.”

In the second half of Reveille for Radicals, Alinsky offered a blueprint for establishing “People’s Organizations” capable of organizing communities and empowering them to challenge any structure or institution that oppressed them. A People’s Organization, according to Alinsky, was not simply a community council designed by liberals merely to remedy the symptoms of the problems of a community but rather a radically inspired group of citizens empowered to attack the root causes of society’s ills. Alinsky explained, “You don’t, you dare not, come to a people who are unemployed, who don’t know where their next meal is coming from, whose children and themselves are in the gutter of despair – and offer them not food, not jobs, not security, but supervised recreation, handicraft classes and character building! Yet that is what is done! Instead of a little bread and butter we come to them with plenty of bats and balls!”

Highlighting the futility of job training programs, Alinsky argued, “To train men for a job

15 Ibid., 29-30, 70.
when there is no job is like dressing up a cadaver in a full-dress suit; in the end you still have a cadaver.” Alinsky readily admitted that most charity and social workers would surely disagree with his assessment, primarily because the traditional charity and social workers “pride themselves upon their techniques and talents for adjusting people to difficult situations. They come to the people of the slums under the aegis of benevolence and goodness, not to organize the people, not to help them rebel and fight their way out of the muck – NO! They come to get these people ‘adjusted’; adjusted so they will live in hell and like it too. A higher form of social treason would be difficult to conceive – yet this infamy is perpetrated in the name of charity.” Alinsky designed the People’s Organizations to be a radical alternative to the largely ineffective liberal programs of the various community councils around the country.¹⁶

In order to build an effective People’s Organization, Alinsky argued that native leadership must be identified through which the organization could be created. Only the people themselves, according to Alinsky, could form an organization that would be respected by a majority of any community’s members. The role of the radical community organizer was to come to a thorough understanding of the life of the community, including specific customs and traditions. Though many members of the community would initially view the radical organizer with suspicion and distrust, the organizer must remain honest and selfless as he or she reached a level of personal identification with the community as a whole. By respecting the dignity of the people, Alinsky argued, the organizer would eventually earn the trust of the community and would be able to begin organizing its members and start solving the problems of the community. According to Alinsky, once a community was organized it would become imperative for the People’s

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 82-83 [emphasis in original].
Organization to engage in conflicts that would upset the status quo. He stated, “A People’s Organization is dedicated to an eternal war. It is a war against poverty, misery, delinquency, disease, injustice, hopelessness, despair, and unhappiness.” Alinsky argued that only by empowering People’s Organizations to disrupt the status quo could its members begin to solve the problems of their community.\textsuperscript{17}

Alinsky concluded his book by arguing that the continuation of democracy itself was dependent upon the successful organization of the American people. “The fundamental issue that will resolve the fate of democracy is whether or not we really believe in democracy,” he concluded. “The only hope for democracy is that more people and more groups will become articulate and exert pressure upon their government.” Alinsky also issued a dire warning to those who opposed the organization and empowerment of relatively powerless communities. “Those who fear the building of People’s Organizations as a revolution also forget that it is an orderly development of participation, interest, and action on the part of the masses of people. It may be true that it is revolution, but it is \textit{orderly revolution}. To reject orderly revolution is to be hemmed in by two hellish alternatives: disorderly, sudden, stormy, bloody revolution, or a further deterioration of the mass foundation of democracy to the point of inevitable dictatorship. The building of People’s Organizations is orderly revolution, it is the process of the people gradually but irrevocably taking their places as citizens of a democracy.”\textsuperscript{18}

Poteat recognized the value of combining his religious beliefs with Alinsky’s powerful message about community empowerment in order to attack poverty in the city of Houston. In February 1965 he urged members of the Ecumenical Fellowship to read a

\textsuperscript{17} \textit{Ibid.}, 154.
\textsuperscript{18} \textit{Ibid.}, 208, 213, 215 [emphasis in original].
recent article in the United Church of Christ’s “Social Action” newsletter titled “Strategies for Community Change,” which outlined the Alinsky method. In a church newsletter that same month, Poteat also criticized an editorial in *The Christian Century* that “unwarrantedly leveled its guns at the Saul Alinsky approach” that had been advocated by officials at the UCC Department of Urban Church. A few months later Poteat sent a representative from his congregation to a UCC Denominational Executive meeting to hear a church official speak about the cooperation between several inner city churches and Alinsky’s antipoverty organization in northern cities. The speaker said UCC churches were involved in community programs organized by Alinsky’s group in Syracuse, Rochester, and Buffalo, New York, and he implored members present to follow the same trend in their own cities or risk become irrelevant.19

Poteat and his supporters envisioned the Ecumenical Fellowship carrying out this prophetic Christian mission in Houston’s inner city neighborhoods through the use of Alinsky-style community organization, and he and the members of the congregation immediately went about implementing this vision in their community in the fall of 1964. The most important role of a prophet, of course, is to expose evil, and Ecumenical Fellowship members explicitly set out to expose and confront a racial caste system that kept certain Houston residents mired in poverty. In exposing the evils of poverty, Poteat and his followers most likely sought to emulate the Biblical prophet Amos, who in the eighth century BCE criticized Israel’s leaders for neglecting the plight of the poor in the midst of staggering economic affluence. As a beginning, Poteat and his congregation

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founded the Ecumenical Fellowship Latin American Channel (EF-LAC) project, a program designed in conjunction with Protestant Charities of Greater Houston that focused on the predominantly Mexican American population living near the ship channel in southeast Houston. As Poteat told a reporter with the Houston Chronicle, “Building a church must be based on mission, not just going out to some suburb and building.” The stated goals of the project included a commitment to support “the development of indigenous ‘grassroots’ community organizations through which they can together prevent further deterioration of the area, effect community redevelopment, and attack the root causes of economic, political, social, cultural, and spiritual deprivation, alienation, and discrimination,” and to “provide a means whereby the barriers which prevent the exercise and enjoyment of the rights and responsibilities [of] full and equal citizenship by all the residents of the area may be overcome.”

Poteat and EF-LAC activists attempted to enhance their commitment to New Left ideas about participatory democracy by welcoming members of Houston’s chapter of Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) into the ranks of their antipoverty crusade. SDS was a radical New Left organization formed in 1962 whose members set out to transform the United States into a participatory democracy. In their “Port Huron Statement” issued the year of their founding, SDS activists stated, “As a social system we seek the establishment of a democracy of individual participation, governed by two central aims:

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that the individual share in those social decisions determining the quality and direction of his life; [and] that society be organized to encourage independence in men and provide the media for their common participation.” In 1965 Houston SDS members decided to try implementing their radical vision of turning America into a participatory democracy by working with the EF-LAC project. As the Houston SDS newsletter stated in November 1965, by working closely with EF-LAC volunteers on “programs ranging from literacy work to recreation to tenants’ organization work, we will get to know the community, and then perhaps branch out into more specifically political programs – whatever issue, be it garbage, schools, housing or jobs, that the community feels is of importance . . . and at the same time work to involve the people in political action.” Reverend Poteat even arranged a training session with Houston SDS to teach the students how to go into communities and organize the poor and named a Houston SDS member, Gil Campos, as the EF-LAC project’s youth director. The attitude of many SDS members about the possibilities of transforming the War on Poverty into a vehicle for radical political action was revealed in their announcement of this training session: “Do come! The possibilities for a dedicated, militant and sensitive organization are fantastic. The dedication, the militancy, and the sensitivity to people’s needs depends on YOU.” Although the EF-LAC project would receive ample criticism for welcoming student radicals into their ranks, EF-LAC organizers remained steadfast in their support for Houston SDS and saw it as a major accomplishment that theirs was the only antipoverty organization in Houston that welcomed the involvement of this increasingly high profile New Left organization.²¹

²¹ Students for a Democratic Society, “Port Huron Statement,” The Sixties Project, University of Virginia, http://www2.ith. virginia.edu/sixties/HTML_docs/Sixties.html (first quotation); Houston SDS Newsletter, 12 November 1965, Box 1, VISTA Scrapbook, VISTA Collection (second quotation); Ecumenical Fellowship-Latin American Channel Project, “Why Does the Ecumenical Fellowship UCC-LAC Project
Before applying for OEO funding or requesting VISTA volunteers from Washington, EF-LAC project activists initiated several programs in poor neighborhoods on the east side of Houston near the ship channel. Early in 1965 EF-LAC volunteers established a teen recreation center to provide activities for youth, especially in the summer months when school was out and nearly all of the parents worked full time. They also created a “Swap Shop” where neighborhood residents could swap items no longer needed for ones they did need. In addition to these service-oriented programs, EF-LAC volunteers also began organizing the poor into action groups such as the East End Teen Club, the Manchester Broadway Mothers Club, and the Golden Age Sewing Club. In the spring of 1965 the teen club staged a peaceful protest against the Houston school district’s policy of busing African American students past white schools to majority black schools, and the mother’s club spearheaded the creation of a credit union to serve the needs of neighborhood residents. EF-LAC volunteers also organized a citizenship education and voter registration drive in the area. As the projected program for the EF-LAC project stated, “Political indifference of Latin Americans and Ghetto Negros [sic] has enabled [Houston’s] political establishments to persuade the few who vote to often vote against their interests.” The authors of EF-LAC’s projected program also recognized the need to develop grassroots community organizations to put pressure on the city’s elected officials. These types of activities would continue to grow with OEO funding. EF-LAC activists established a few service-delivery programs in their neighborhoods, but it was clear early on that they recognized the value of empowering the poor through community organization. Although these early efforts were small in scale and lacked

Ask You to Support Our Cause?“ Box 1, VISTA Scrapbook, VISTA Collection; Bud Poteat to EF-UCC Church Council Members, 1 August 1965, Box 1, Folder Ecumenical Fellowship, VISTA Collection.
clear direction, they nevertheless represented the beginning of significant community organizing initiatives in the city of Houston.22

Poteat and his followers designed their antipoverty program to be the first of its kind in Houston and recruited volunteers to make an ambitious effort not only to provide services to the poor, but more importantly to empower the city’s poor residents through community organization. As Poteat explained to a potential EF-LAC project volunteer, Houston had the ability to escape the fate of the northern ghettos “not by lady bountiful with a charity basket at Christmas, not by professional ‘do-gooders,’ not by expecting the government to do it all – but by voluntary, person-to-person involvement in projects in which the people, the churches, the businessmen, the clubs, and the schools are motivated and given an instrument and the necessary outside support by which they can unite in a concerted common effort to break the bonds of poverty – themselves!” Neighborhood residents would be organized with the goal of effecting widespread social change in Houston, according to Poteat, such as pressuring local businesses and institutions to comply with federal desegregation laws, registering voters and mobilizing them politically to prevent them from voting “against their own interests,” and organizing residents to demand more public housing options from the city of Houston and from the federal government, more rapid desegregation of local schools, adequate funding for schools in poor neighborhoods, the creation of more job opportunities, the upgrading of medical and welfare services, and an end to police harassment of poor and minority residents. As Poteat and other EF-LAC members stated in a recruitment brochure, “We believe in grassroots democracy. . . . We believe in Racial Justice now. . . . We believe in

community organization and action... We work with religious and secular organizations for justice now, for a new day in Houston.” The time had come, according to Poteat, to force the churches in the city “to practice what [they] preach – i.e., Peace, instead of killing. Brotherhood instead of Segregation. Release of the Captives and Oppressed of our cities instead of Subjugation and Oppression of the weak.” Poteat and the members of the EF-LAC project stood poised to use the federal War on Poverty to organize and empower the poor in Houston, but first they had to contend with a city bureaucracy vying to control the implementation of the federal antipoverty program in the city. 23

Soon after Poteat and other members of the Ecumenical Fellowship initiated the EF-LAC project, Houston Mayor Louie Welch, Harris County Judge Bill Elliott, and members of the city’s welfare bureaucracy created H-HCEO to administer the War on Poverty in the city. Reverend Poteat and other members of the EF-LAC project had little hope for the recently created community action agency to make much of an impact in Houston. In response, Poteat and EF-LAC members began to look for ways to become actively involved in implementing the federal antipoverty program in the city. While it was unlikely federal War on Poverty officials would fund more than one community action agency for the city, Poteat and EF-LAC project activists turned their attention toward the VISTA program and proposed using the young volunteers to continue the project’s efforts to organize and empower the poor in Houston.

23 Wallace B. Poteat to Lawrence H. Noonan, 30 September 1966, Box 1, Folder 4, VISTA Collection (first quotation); Jan Morgan, “Churchmen to Work in Harrisburg Area,” Houston Chronicle, September 11, 1965 (second quotation); Wallace B. Poteat, “The LAC (LACK) Project,” 16 May 1966, Box 1, Scrapbook, VISTA Collection; EF-LAC, “Why Does the Ecumenical Fellowship UCC-LAC Project Ask You to Support Our Cause?” nd., Box 1, Scrapbook, VISTA Collection (third quotation).
Scholars have paid a surprising lack of attention to the significant role of the VISTA program in the War on Poverty, presumably because it has been difficult to discover exactly what these volunteers were doing in the country’s poor neighborhoods. As a result, historians know very little about VISTA experiences on the ground or the ideologies of grassroots VISTA-sponsoring organizations. Contrary to the view of many historians of the War on Poverty, the VISTA program was often crucial for the implementation of the War on Poverty at the grassroots level and greatly contributed to the proliferation of community organizing and confrontational tactics. By placing young and idealistic volunteers in poor communities under the supervision of local activist organizations, the VISTA program produced several unintended consequences that caught many liberal policymakers in Washington by surprise. Broadening the original intent of the War on Poverty, many VISTA volunteers employed the use of widespread community organization, mobilization, and confrontational tactics in order to empower the poor to demand increased participation in the local democratic process. And in Houston, the VISTA program had a direct impact on the activities of the official community action agency as well.\footnote{Many historians downplay or altogether ignore the contributions of VISTA volunteers to the overall War on Poverty. Several histories of the War on Poverty do not include a discussion of the VISTA program at all. These include Allen J. Matusow, *The Unraveling of America: A History of Liberalism in the 1960s* (New York: Harper & Row, 1984); Gareth Davies, *From Opportunity to Entitlement: The Transformation and Decline of Great Society Liberalism* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1996); and John A. Andrew, *Lyndon Johnson and the Great Society* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1998). Historian Irwin Unger briefly mentioned the VISTA program only to dismiss its importance by pointing out that VISTA “never became the same burr and irritant as community action and the Job Corps, perhaps as much for its lilliputian scale as for any other reason.” See Irwin Unger, *The Best of Intentions: The Triumphs and Failures of the Great Society Under Kennedy, Johnson, and Nixon* (New York: Doubleday, 1996), 185. Similarly, Susan Youngblood Ashmore has argued that the VISTA program was largely inconsequential across the South. See Susan Youngblood Ashmore, *Carry It On: The War on Poverty and the Civil Rights Movement in Alabama, 1964-1972* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2008), 59. Important exceptions to the general neglect of the VISTA program are Kent B. Germany, *New Orleans After the Promises: Poverty, Citizenship, and the Search for the Great Society* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2007),}
To most national and local government officials in the 1960s, most of whom were committed to the ideals of social harmony and preservation of the status quo, the VISTA program seemed benign enough. Attorney General Robert Kennedy and his task force on juvenile delinquency first came up with the idea for a "domestic Peace Corps" in 1962 to give young people a way to serve their country at home. Though a bill to establish the National Service Corps stalled in Congress, architects of the War on Poverty picked up the idea and included the volunteer program, now called VISTA, in the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964. The federal government would train and fund volunteers to serve one-year tours of duty in the War on Poverty, most often in conjunction with local antipoverty organizations. What Peace Corps volunteers had done in remote villages in distant lands would be translated domestically, and many believed the young volunteers would assist families who lived in poverty in meeting everyday challenges associated with being poor.\footnote{Michael L. Gillette, Launching the War on Poverty: An Oral History (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1996), 237-241; See also William H. Crook and Ross Thomas, Warriors for the Poor: The Story of VISTA, Volunteers in Service to America (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1969); T. Zane Reeves, The Politics of the Peace Corps and VISTA (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1988); Marvin Schwartz, In Service to America: A History of VISTA in Arkansas, 1965-1985 (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 1988); Michael Balzano, "The Political and Social Ramifications of the VISTA Program: A Question of Ends and Means" (PhD diss., Georgetown University, 1971); and David Jacob Pass, "The Politics of VISTA in the War on Poverty: A Study of Ideological Conflict" (PhD diss., Columbia University, 1975).}

Most historians of the War on Poverty agree with this contemporary assessment, and this seems to be the main reason why the VISTA program remains one of the most understudied parts of the poverty war. There were some individuals, however, including a few early architects of the federal War on Poverty, who recognized the potential of the VISTA program to become a transformative force in American society. According to particularly chapter 4; and Thomas J. Kiffmeyer, "From Self-Help to Sedition: The Appalachian Volunteers in Eastern Kentucky, 1964-1970," Journal of Southern History 64 (1998): 65-94.
War on Poverty planner Stephen J. Pollak, the most progressive members of the War on Poverty Task Force – people like Robert Kennedy, Richard Boone, and David Hackett – were the strongest proponents of including the VISTA program in the federal antipoverty effort.\textsuperscript{26}

Edgar May, another War on Poverty task force member, argued more than a decade after the War on Poverty ended that the VISTA volunteers had undoubtedly been “agents of change.” During an interview in 1981 May described how a VISTA volunteer could have inevitably become a force for social change in his or her community:

It didn’t take the VISTA volunteer a hell of a long time, whether he was in Harlem or in the South Side of Chicago or in Appalachia or in a Navajo reservation . . . to figure [out] who the bad guys are in these dramas. . . . In the latter, for example, it didn’t take him long to figure out that if the white people have got a municipal water system, and the Indians have got to travel in the same county five miles to get enough water in a bunch of five-gallon cans, then there’s something the matter with the public system, and if you’re down there to do something about poverty, you begin showing up at the water authority meetings, and you say things that they really don’t want to hear. That’s when the genie’s out of the bottle. Yes, they’re agents of change. We didn’t need social workers. We didn’t need a lot of people to teach little kids how to read.\textsuperscript{27}

May’s description of how the local context in which the VISTA volunteers were placed played a significant role in determining the tactics they would use to attack poverty


\textsuperscript{27} Edgar May quoted in Gillette, \textit{Launching the War on Poverty}, 249-250.
applied to many VISTAs who came to Houston in the 1960s. Although the national legislation had within it the seeds of possibilities for the VISTA program to become a vehicle for social change, it was in the grassroots implementation of the program that these seeds were fertilized and allowed to grow. Many volunteers, as they began discovering that the roots of many of the problems of the poor were tied to their relative powerlessness and were exposed to a wide array of ideas about social change through their sponsoring agencies, became more radical and confrontational the longer they lived in Houston’s impoverished neighborhoods.

The first VISTA volunteer arrived in Houston in late February 1966, and a steady stream of them trickled into the city over the next several months. By the end of April, the city had twenty VISTAs who were actively working in the targeted areas. Faced with the extreme deprivation of many of Houston’s poor neighborhoods, most of the VISTA volunteers upon arriving immediately set out to provide desperately needed social services. They established after-school tutoring sessions in their homes, set up information centers directing young people to employment centers and the Job Corps, and held informal meetings with neighborhood residents to come up with solutions to the most pressing problems in these impoverished areas. What is evidenced by the following narrative of the volunteers’ activities in Houston’s poor neighborhoods, however, is that the VISTAs modified much of their antipoverty philosophy and tactics after spending just a few months in the target neighborhoods. Whereas initially many VISTAs focused on the delivery of services, within a short period of time most of the volunteers shifted to an emphasis on community organizing and empowerment of the poor. Actual on-the-ground
experiences and the influence of Poteat and the EF-LAC project activists, therefore, shaped the VISTA volunteers’ philosophy and methods in significant ways.28

Michael Hayward, a 21-year-old former Navy seaman from Indiana, completed his VISTA training early in 1966 and was assigned to work in an African American neighborhood in northeast Houston in the old Fifth Ward. Immediately Hayward recognized the stark reality in the neighborhood: crowded and inadequate schools with skyrocketing dropout rates, desperately poor housing, exploitative white business owners, absentee landlords, a general lack of any sense of community spirit, churches aloof from community issues, a prevalence of low-paying unskilled jobs, and persistent racism among business owners and hiring officials. Most distressing to Hayward was a pervasive sense of hopelessness among the area’s residents.29

After finding a house to rent in which to live and to provide a central meeting place for community organizations he hoped to create, Hayward spent his first few days trying to make contacts with influential members of the community in churches, bars, and pool halls. After assessing some of the most significant needs of the community, Hayward began with a service-delivery approach. One of the most pressing issues, according to neighborhood residents, was not necessarily unemployment but the lack of jobs that paid well and offered opportunities for advancement. Hayward began expanding an existing training program to equip black workers with the necessary skills to become machine operators for various types of mechanized industry. In order to build some

28 Minutes of HCHR Executive Committee, 17 February 1966, Box 2, Folder 4, HCHR Collection; Waring Fincke, “The VISTA Volunteer,” HCHR Newsletter, February 1966, Box 2, Folder 3, HCHR Collection; Minutes of HCHR Board of Directors, 31 March 1966, Box 2, Folder 4, HCHR Collection.
29 Rebekah McBride and James Byron Smith, “A Report on the Action of VISTA Volunteers in Census Tract 18,” Box 1, Houston Council on Human Relations VISTA Collection, Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library (hereafter cited as HCHR VISTA Collection); “VISTA,” HCHR Newsletter, April 1966, Box 2, Folder 3, HCHR Collection.
community spirit, Hayward also began to organize Little League baseball teams in the neighborhood both to keep the young people occupied and to create a sense of cohesiveness among the neighborhood’s youth.  

After a few months in the neighborhood, however, Hayward learned from residents that the problems of poverty did not necessarily stem from inadequate services but from a lack of power among poor residents. In order to remedy this power imbalance between the city’s poor people and local public officials and institutions, Hayward and several residents began using the tactic of community organizing to empower the neighborhood’s poor people. A group of African American workers who belonged to several union locals under the AFL-CIO umbrella worked with Hayward to pressure union leaders to commit themselves to addressing problems like hiring discrimination and unequal access to union membership. Although this commitment produced few tangible results, Hayward and the union members recognized that the process of organizing and putting pressure on a large and powerful institution showed many poor residents that they could organize and use their collective power to effect change. Just a few months after arriving in the Fifth Ward, Hayward was convinced that the organization of the community was “essential if the work of the [VISTA] volunteers is to be of lasting value.” Only through organized action, Hayward argued, could poor residents begin to challenge the urban structures that kept them mired in poverty.  

Hayward also began laying the groundwork for the future use of the tactic of community organizing to empower the poor. He convened periodic neighborhood meetings during which residents could get to know each other and select leaders who

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would serve as advocates for the interests of the neighborhood at city hall and other bureaucratic institutions. Hayward believed that the organization of neighborhood residents into a self-conscious bloc was the only way reforms and improvements to the neighborhood would remain permanent. At these meetings Hayward encouraged neighborhood dwellers to voice their concerns about the condition of their neighborhood and to come up with some solutions to the problems.\footnote{McBride and Smith, “A Report,” HCHR VISTA Collection.}

Winifred Pollack, the VISTA volunteer who helped organize neighborhood residents to protest the Houston School Board’s exploitation of poor homeowners in Houston, also arrived in the city in 1966. Like Hayward, Pollack gradually shifted from a focus on social service delivery to community organizing and empowerment tactics. Whereas Michael Hayward lived and worked in a predominantly African American neighborhood, Pollack worked in a majority Mexican American neighborhood in the industrial section of the Fifth Ward. Despite the different racial makeup of the two neighborhoods, Pollack identified many of the same problems when she arrived, such as poor public educational facilities, few community organizations, general idleness among neighborhood residents, alienated churches, and horrible condition of rental properties. Pollack was struck by the visible inequality in the neighborhoods, particularly with regard to the quality of schools and the level of services provided by the city. One of the junior high schools in the area was very old and overcrowded and in obvious need of repair. Just across town, however, was a school in a white neighborhood that was brand new and often had empty classrooms because it was so large. City services were almost nonexistent; Pollack was appalled when she discovered that in the Fifth Ward few streets had proper lighting and the roads were almost impassable because of huge potholes.
There was also a clear lack of drainage, as evidenced by puddles in many roads that had been there so long that they were full of tadpoles. After quite a rough start due to her lack of transportation or any prearranged community contacts, Pollack slowly began building a network of concerned residents to combat the negative effects of the neighborhood's poverty.\(^{33}\)

Like Hayward, Pollack initially set out to solve the immediate needs of neighborhood residents, and this required social programs. One of the first issues Pollack and neighborhood residents attempted to tackle was the lack of material needs of those living in destitute poverty. She gathered a group of members from the two churches in the neighborhood and organized a collection and distribution system providing food and clothing to families in need. Clothing was a particular concern once Pollack realized that many families were not sending their children to school because they did not have adequate clothing for them. Pollack also set up a tutoring project in her home and began organizing recreational activities in which schoolchildren could take part after school and on weekends. To meet the needs of a group of unemployed women, she set up a training center in which neighborhood women taught each other secretarial and other office skills.\(^{34}\)

After spending the first few months trying to provide much needed services in the neighborhood, Pollack began modifying her philosophy and tactics to attack poverty in a more direct way. Like Hayward, Pollack came to believe that only through community organizing could any real positive changes occur in her neighborhood. Accordingly, she arranged meetings of neighborhood residents to discuss their common interests and make

\(^{33}\) Cate Ewing and Joy Hodge, “Winifred Pollack: Census Tract 18, Houston, Texas,” Box 1, HCHR VISTA Collection; “VISTA,” HCHR Newsletter, Box 2, Folder 3, HCHR Collection.

\(^{34}\) Ewing and Hodge, “Winifred Pollack,” HCHR VISTA Collection.
decisions about actions to take. One of these actions was the organized protest of the Houston School Board. Through community organizing and the achievement of small victories, Pollack hoped to help empower poor residents to take control of their own lives. In addition to organizing protests to address specific neighborhood problems, Pollack also tried to unite residents to make a concerted effort to gain power. While organizing residents to protest, Pollack discovered that there was mutual dislike and distrust between Mexican Americans in her neighborhood and African Americans living in surrounding areas. Pollack quickly realized that only a united community of poor residents could effectively challenge the institutions that had such a profound effect on their lives. To encourage a more united community in the Fifth Ward, Pollack focused much of her energy toward alleviating tensions between the Mexican American population in her immediate vicinity and the African American population in the surrounding neighborhoods. At the local community center on the edge of her neighborhood, which was frequented mostly by young African Americans, Pollack organized a fiesta event to bring members of the two groups together and open channels of communication. She also included black residents who lived close to the Mexican American neighborhood in the organizational meetings in order to get a wide array of perspectives on what needed to be done, and she helped ease the tension created when an African American family bought a house in the Mexican American neighborhood by scheduling discussion groups where residents had an opportunity to air their particular concerns. This was a clear attempt by Pollack to bridge racial divides within the community and organize residents along class lines. As she told an interviewer,
improving relations between the two groups would “show them that they will both gain if they work together.”

Whether the designers of the War on Poverty intended it or not, Pollack saw no way of addressing issues of poverty without taking race and racism into consideration simultaneously with economic factors, and this determination ultimately meant challenging the white power structure. While Pollack claimed that she had no preconceived intentions of becoming involved in local politics, increasingly she saw her role as one of initiator of organized action on behalf of poor residents in order to show them how to attain “real power” to challenge the “white establishment.” While she entered Houston’s Fifth Ward determined to provide services to poor residents, her on-the-ground experiences convinced her that community organization and empowerment of the poor were the most effective avenues through which to attack the ills of poverty.

Stuart Buman and Donald Szeszycki were two VISTAS assigned to an area in northwest Houston known as South Heights, a rather oddly placed low-income and predominantly African American area surrounded by a white middle-class neighborhood on the north side and River Oaks on the south side, one of the wealthiest areas in the entire city. Buman was a graduate of the University of North Dakota with a degree in public administration who was especially interested in politics and social problems, and Szeszycki was a high school graduate from Chicago who had spent the previous year in the United States Army stationed in Germany. Buman and Szeszycki, like other VISTAs in Houston, attempted to establish service programs in their target neighborhoods such as tutoring and recreation centers. They quickly realized, however, that residents had no

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35 Ibid.
36 Ibid.
desire for those types of services. Neighborhood residents were suffering from chronic unemployment and underemployment, and they wanted Buman and Szeszycki to help with this most pressing problem of poverty.\textsuperscript{37}

Unlike the Fifth Ward where the major employment problem was not a lack of jobs but a lack of skilled and well-paying jobs, in South Heights the biggest issue was persistent unemployment. Buman and Szeszycki began a recruiting effort for the Job Corps in their neighborhood as a way to channel unemployed workers into training programs that would prepare them for skilled jobs in Houston’s factories and plants. The VISTA volunteers also created job training facilities to provide typing, general office, and secretarial skills, and they assisted the neighborhood residents open an employment club for teenagers to find work outside of school hours to supplement their family incomes. Buman and Szeszycki also initiated a neighborhood clean-up project, a voter registration and education drive, a campaign for the construction and funding of a public health facility, and a neighborhood center that would serve as a staffed day care center for working parents. Only by living in the target neighborhood and ascertaining what types of programs residents wanted could these VISTAs initiate service programs that residents would approve of.\textsuperscript{38}

Like Hayward and Pollack, Buman and Szeszycki quickly concluded that the delivery of services alone was inadequate for solving the problems of poverty. Soon after they initiated these modest service programs they began receiving criticism from a wide array of established interests in the neighborhood. This criticism came from traditional charities that wanted to continue their discriminatory practices, middle-class

\textsuperscript{37}“VISTA,” HCHR Newsletter, Box 2, Folder 3, HCHR Collection; David Gipson, “Report on VISTA Project in Census Tract #12,” Box 1, HCHR VISTA Collection.

\textsuperscript{38}Gipson, “Report,” HCHR VISTA Collection.
organizations like the Heights Community Council whose members felt their authority threatened, a conservative city councilman who represented the area and was fearful of political organizing, middle-class business interests who were paranoid about possible demonstrations and boycotts, and even Houston Action for Youth leaders who wanted their organization to be the sole poverty agency in the neighborhood. All of this resistance from established interests in South Heights convinced Buman and Szeszyci that poor residents must organize and use their power to attack the effects of poverty on their daily lives. And like Winifred Pollack, Buman and Szeszycki worked to ease racial tensions between the black children in their neighborhood and the white children in the adjacent areas by organizing mutual sports and recreational events and community meetings. By creating lines of communication between the children, Buman and Szeszcki hoped to bridge the racial divisions between their parents and create biracial alliances based on class.39

By the end of 1966, Poteat and EF-LAC project activists were supervising more than twenty VISTA volunteers in the city. VISTA volunteers in other parts of Houston contributed to the operation of Head Start centers and other tutoring programs, taught classes to help Latin American immigrants on their way to obtaining American citizenship, and administered youth education programs. One volunteer, a registered nurse, opened a free health clinic funded by donations from area businesses, while another VISTA created a public information center and held voter education classes that focused on local issues that were important to area residents. Finally, all of the VISTA

volunteers working with the EF-LAC project began organizing neighborhood residents in order to empower them to claim a voice in the decisions that affected their lives.\(^{40}\)

In Houston, a broad range of ideas and philosophies shaped the intellectual ground upon which the War on Poverty operated. This local ideological environment included Prophetic Christianity, religious ideas about Christian missions in the nation’s urban centers, ecumenism, participatory democracy, and the Saul Alinsky method, all of which were outside the paradigm of New Deal-Great Society liberalism that shaped national policy. Yet these ideas were integral to the implementation of the federal antipoverty program in Houston and therefore defined the War on Poverty just as much as the moderate liberalism that drove national policymakers. The story of the implementation of the War on Poverty in Houston offers further proof of the importance of the local context, particularly in the realm of ideas.

Although the EF-LAC project was small and meagerly funded, Poteat and grassroots antipoverty activists were able to create a local intellectual and political environment conducive to a radical interpretation of the community action concept. In so doing, they provided an important model for how the War on Poverty could be implemented in Houston that differed sharply from the vision offered by local public officials and the conservative members of the city’s official community action agency. In fact, this alternative interpretation of the concept of community action offered by Poteat and other grassroots antipoverty activists had an immediate effect on the official community action agency in Houston. Initially the majority of H-HCEO Board members had conservatively interpreted the meaning of community action. Once Poteat and grassroots activists affiliated with the EF-LAC project began implementing their own

\(^{40}\) *The LAC Project VOICE*, 22 January 1967, Box 2, Folder 2, VISTA Collection.
vision of what the War on Poverty could become in the city of Houston, however, several members of the H-HCEO0 Board took notice. And when William Ballew, himself a believer in the Saul Alinsky method and very much impressed with Poteat's use of VISTA volunteers in Houston, assumed the chairmanship of H-HCEO0, the War on Poverty in the city took a decidedly more radical turn.
Chapter 3


If the first twelve months of the War on Poverty in Houston had been little more than a minor skirmish, the year 1966 proved to be a much more eventful and conflict-ridden episode. Precipitating this dramatic shift was a change in the leadership of the Houston-Harris County Economic Opportunity Organization (H-HCEO), the city’s official community action agency. William Ballew, a prominent Houston attorney with a reputation of being a champion of the rights of the city’s underprivileged population, replaced Leon Jaworski as board chairman in January. This change in leadership ushered in a new direction for the organization because of Ballew’s radical interpretation of the concept of community action. Following the example set by Reverend Wallace B. Poteat and grassroots antipoverty activists affiliated with the Ecumenical Fellowship’s Latin American Channel (EF-LAC) project, Ballew placed heavy emphasis on community organization and empowerment of the poor in order to challenge the local public officials and institutional bureaucracies and upset the status quo that kept poor residents locked in a cycle of poverty. Ballew and his supporters in H-HCEO began implementing a radical Community Action Program in Houston through a three-pronged attack on poverty that included the creation of a robust Legal Services program in the city, the expansion of crucial social service programs in many of Houston’s poor neighborhoods, and, most importantly, a clear focus on organizing poor residents to challenge local officials and institutions in an effort to bring about lasting social change in the city. Meanwhile, Houston Action for Youth (HAY) leaders continued to implement their conservative
interpretation of community action by focusing on the delivery of small-scale social services through the city’s traditional welfare agencies and refusing to entertain any suggestion of organizing residents or challenging the status quo. By the spring of 1967, OEO officials were clearly favoring Ballew’s approach to community action and encouraging H-HCEO members to continue its application in Houston.

The radical direction the War on Poverty took in Houston beginning in 1966 showed that local circumstances continued to dictate the shape and contours of the federal antipoverty program. For a brief moment between the fall of 1966 and the spring of 1967, grassroots antipoverty activists in Houston were able to shape national War on Poverty policies by implementing their own radical interpretation of the community action concept and locating sympathetic allies in Washington. Ballew and other H-HCEO members implemented a radical Community Action Program that called for the organization and empowerment of Houston’s poor communities, and this approach showed some encouraging signs of effectiveness in forcing the city’s public officials and local institutions to begin responding to the demands of poor residents. While HAY leaders continued carrying out a conservative vision of community action, Ballew and his staff were proving that if given the chance to succeed, a radical Community Action Program could be effective in winning some small victories in the fight against poverty. Armed with a radical ideology that placed human rights above property rights and called for the empowerment of the poor, Ballew and other H-HCEO members not only challenged HAY’s conservative approach to community action and the local power structure’s resistance to change, but also exposed the fallacies and naiveté of the liberal dream of a War on Poverty that would neither challenge entrenched middle-class interests
nor confront city governments or other pillars of local power. By illustrating very vividly that the problems of the poor were often structural and institutional in nature, H-HCEOOL leaders, through their implementation of a radical interpretation of the community action concept, showed that confrontational tactics could be effective in addressing the needs of the poor.

The first step in the transition of H-HCEOOL into a radical community action agency was the change in leadership that occurred in January 1966. Leon Jaworski made it clear to Houston Mayor Louie Welch and Harris County Judge Bill Elliott when the two men approached him to head up the city’s new antipoverty organization in 1965 that due to his rather busy schedule, he would only be able to assist in getting the new agency started. Jaworski told the mayor and the county judge that once the H-HCEOOL Executive Committee named the members of the Board of Directors and the organization became operational, he would resign as chairman in order to pursue other activities. In early January 1966 Jaworski was satisfied that H-HCEOOL was operating effectively, and as promised, he tendered his resignation to Welch and Elliott. President Johnson had recently appointed Jaworski to the President’s Commission on Law Enforcement and Administration of Justice, and Texas Governor John Connally had appointed him to his committee on public education in the state. Because of these added responsibilities, in his resignation letter the 61-year-old Jaworski asked to be immediately relieved of his duties as chairman of H-HCEOOL.¹

¹ Leon Jaworski to Louie Welch and Bill Elliott, 10 January 1966, Box 265, Folder Houston-Harris County Economic Opportunity Organization – Correspondence, Leon Jaworski Papers, Texas Collection, Baylor University Library, Waco, Texas (hereafter cited as Jaworski Papers); Leon Jaworski to Houston-Harris County Economic Opportunity Organization Board of Directors, 10 January 1966, Box 265, Folder Houston-Harris County Economic Opportunity Organization – Correspondence, Jaworski Papers; Noe Perez, “Jaworski Quits Local Antipoverty Group,” Houston Chronicle, January 11, 1966; Bo Byers, “Jaworski to Head Group To Study Texas Education,” Houston Chronicle, January 6, 1966.
Jaworski’s resignation brought Houston attorney William Ballew into the position of H-HCEO chairman and signaled dramatic changes for the poverty program in the city. Ballew had been a member of the Houston Community Council’s Board of Directors for several years and had chaired the organization’s task force that studied the possibilities of implementing the Economic Opportunity Act in Houston in 1965. The Community Council appointed Ballew as the first vice-chairman of the antipoverty committee created for the city in 1965, and when Jaworski resigned in January 1966, Ballew was the logical choice for his successor. Not only did he have ample experience with welfare and antipoverty efforts in the city, but Ballew was also an early advocate among Community Council members for the implementation of the new federal War on Poverty in Houston and had remained a strong proponent of an active antipoverty program in the city. The composition of the H-HCEO Board and Executive Committee also changed at the beginning of 1966 as some of the wealthier and more conservative members resigned and Ballew replaced them with poor residents from the target neighborhoods. For example, George Bush resigned from the H-HCEO Board in mid-January in order to launch his campaign to capture the Republican Party’s nomination for Congress representing the newly created Seventh Congressional District on the west side of Houston. As a federal inspector commented about the new leadership of the poverty program in Houston, “the course and pace of Houston’s War on Poverty may have changed for the better.” The next few years would indicate that whether or not the changes Ballew brought to the War on Poverty in the city were viewed with acclaim or hostility depended on one’s philosophy for attacking poverty; this proved to be a contentious issue in both Houston and Washington.²

² Minutes of Houston-Harris County Economic Opportunity Organization Board of Directors, 10 January
Though observers of the War on Poverty in Houston would be divided over how the programs developed over the next several years, there was one issue on which almost everyone involved could agree in early 1966 – the election of William Ballew as the new head of H-HCEOO certainly meant a dramatic shift in the focus and direction of the War on Poverty in Houston. While most of the early H-HCEOO organizers appointed by city officials had a conservative interpretation of community action and were cautious about maximum feasible participation of the poor, Ballew firmly believed that community organization and mobilization with the goal of empowerment of the poor to challenge the city’s elected officials and institutions were the most important parts of the War on Poverty. This was fundamentally a different definition of community action from the one adopted by Jaworski and other H-HCEOO members when they created the organization the previous year. It is doubtful that very many of these conservative members of the H-HCEOO Board were aware of Ballew’s radical political views because they unanimously elected Ballew to replace Jaworski. They would find out soon enough exactly what the new chairman had in mind for the War on Poverty in Houston.  

The story of Houston’s official community action agency illustrates that terms such as “community action” and “maximum feasible participation of the poor” had no


3 W. V. Ballew, Jr., “The Way We Were,” Address Delivered at the Twentieth Anniversary Symposium of the Gulf Coast Community Services Association, 19 November 1986, Box 1, W. A. V. Ballew Collection, Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library, Houston, Texas (hereafter cited as Ballew Collection); Minutes of Houston-Harris County Economic Opportunity Organization Board of Directors, 10 January 1966, Box 266, Folder H-HCEOO Board of Directors Minutes, Jaworski Papers;
real meaning outside of the local context in which the War on Poverty was implemented. Federal legislators and War on Poverty policymakers ambiguously defined these terms, and as a consequence grassroots implementers of the poverty program were responsible for interpreting the meanings of these concepts and for giving them clear definitions for local foot soldiers in the poverty war. When Mayor Welch and County Judge Elliott created Houston’s first incarnation of the city’s community action agency in 1965, it was clear that the two men interpreted these concepts very narrowly and intended to keep the War on Poverty small and focused on improving the city’s infrastructure and delivering a few social services. Leon Jaworski, H-HCEOO’s first chairman, agreed with Welch and Elliott’s assessment, and for the first few months of the poverty war members of the city’s community action agency simply gathered data and had no intention of expanding the War on Poverty beyond Welch’s and Elliott’s narrow vision. William Ballew had a radically different interpretation of the meaning of concepts like “community action” and “maximum feasible participation,” and his tenure as H-HCEOO chairman provides further evidence that the local context in Houston, particularly the grassroots intellectual environment that existed in the city, profoundly determined the shape of the War on Poverty.

As soon as Ballew took over as H-HCEOO chairman, it became apparent that not only did he have a radically different interpretation of community action, but like Poteat and EF-LAC project activists, he was also a believer in the Saul Alinsky method. To remove any doubt about his antipoverty philosophy and commitment to community organizing, Ballew required that all H-HCEOO Board members carefully read Alinsky’s
Reveille for Radicals, a book published in 1946 that laid out Alinsky's blueprint for the organization of poor communities to challenge urban power structures.⁴

In February 1966, one month into Ballew’s tenure as head of H-HCEOO, Alinsky brought his radical message directly to Houston’s poverty workers when he spoke on the campus of the University of Houston about his experiences organizing several poor communities and how these organizational tactics could be used in the federal War on Poverty. The main shortcoming of the national antipoverty effort, according to Alinsky, was that it “looks at deprivation only in terms of money and not of power. . . . To expect to funnel federal funds through local administrations is like giving an employer money to funnel into the organization of labor unions that someday might strike against him.” Alinsky argued that the only way to make the War on Poverty successful in eradicating poverty in Houston was to organize poor people into powerful blocs that could confront the city’s public officials and force them to address the needs of impoverished neighborhoods. Apparently this suggestion that poor people should organize to claim power and control over their own lives was too much for some audience members to withstand. After just a few minutes of Alinsky’s speech, one woman in the front row jumped out of her seat and shouted, “Well, that’s enough for me!” and walked out of the auditorium. About twenty-five others followed her, including about a dozen Ku Klux Klan members in full regalia. When asked about Alinsky’s visit a few days later, Mayor Welch stated, “I don’t think extreme philosophies of either side are needed in this community. Any philosophy which sets class against class is, in my opinion, un-

American.” Ballew undoubtedly faced an uphill battle in following the Alinsky model of community organizing in Houston.⁵

In the spring and summer of 1966, Ballew personally launched a public relations campaign in Houston to explain how the Alinsky method would be applied to the implementation of the War on Poverty in the city. During a speech delivered to a group of Houston businessmen during the summer of 1966, Ballew echoed Alinsky’s sentiments and argued that the grassroots antipoverty activists were “fast replacing the Civil Rights movement as the number one domestic effort of our people.” Ballew continued, “Its basic concept is radical, yes, even revolutionary; but so was the beginning and the development of our American democracy and economy. . . . Recall the labor movement in America. Most manufacturers did not improve wages and working conditions until workers in America organized and became a political and economic force in our country.” Ballew argued that just like the labor movement, poor people in the United States must be organized to put pressure on and if necessary to force confrontations with the city’s local elected officials to make sure their needs are addressed. For this reason, argued Ballew, “the war on poverty cannot be a mere extension of existing social and welfare programs. Existing agencies, for all their decent efforts and good intentions, were not getting through to the poor.” Instead, Ballew pledged that H-HCEO would encourage poor people themselves to plan, develop, and implement antipoverty programs in their own communities, even though this plan was “not necessarily welcomed by existing power structures.” This goal would be reached through community organization, a tactic Ballew referred to as “our single most

important program. This is more than an extension of social and welfare services; it is a new departure – it is grass roots involvement of the poor in their own programs and decisions in connection with meeting their needs in the community. . . . When these people meet in their civic organizations and clubs, get to know each other and articulate their needs, requests are bound to be made upon the county courthouse, the city hall for services, etc. As labor organizers in the 20s and 30s were labeled agitators, or worse, community organizers today in the war on poverty may be likewise reviled. If we are wise, we will exercise extreme patience and understanding while these people go about their work.”

Ballew was committed to the Saul Alinsky method and to a confrontational antipoverty philosophy, but he still needed a way to turn the War on Poverty into a vehicle for social change in the city. As he was searching for a way to implement his vision in Houston, Ballew increasingly turned to Reverend Poteat and the EF-LAC project activists who were using federal VISTA volunteers to organize the poor. Near the end of September 1966, Ballew arranged an informal meeting between himself, Poteat and other EF-LAC project activists, and their recently arrived VISTA volunteers. Ballew reported being struck by the effectiveness of the city’s VISTA volunteers who, after being in the city for only a few months, were organizing residents around important issues and empowering them to make demands on local officials and institutions. While H-HCEOO’s current community organizers were mostly social workers who traveled daily into Houston’s poor neighborhoods and were under strict supervision from the H-HCEOO Board, the VISTA volunteers lived in the neighborhoods where they worked

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6 W. V. Ballew, Jr., “The Anti-Poverty Program in Houston,” Address Delivered to the Young Presidents’ Club of Houston, Texas, 17 August 1966, in author’s possession.
and enjoyed the freedom to pursue courses of action they deemed necessary for the empowerment of the residents. The result was a suspicion of H-HCEO community organizers, while residents seemed to trust the VISTA volunteers. Ballew concluded that “we are doing it precisely wrong” and that H-HCEO administrators must reevaluate the purpose of the organization and the role of their community organizers.

After witnessing how Poteat and EF-LAC activists were using the VISTA program to bring about social change in Houston, Ballew decided to commit the majority of H-HCEO’s resources to the organization and empowerment of Houston’s poor. In early November 1966, Ballew sent a confidential memorandum to H-HCEO Executive Director Charles Kelly in which he stated, “Since money . . . is not only in short supply but is also restricted in many cases, our effective area of operation is in community organization, development and action. Our primary effort, I repeat, is in the neighborhoods and our primary responsibility is placing good people there as community organizers and neighborhood developers. This is essential.” Just like the VISTA volunteers in the city, Ballew argued that H-HCEO community organizers should live in Houston’s poor neighborhoods with the residents they were attempting to empower through community organization. Community organizers, therefore, should be chosen based on whether or not they could commit to this new focus. “This requires a special commitment,” Ballew continued, “not normally found in some social worker types who want a good paying job and spend too much time protecting that job. In the war on poverty, we are all expendable.” Like the VISTA program, Ballew also advised giving individual community organizers as much freedom as possible to carry out their efforts.

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“Once we have good people working in the neighborhoods,” Ballew stated, “we should give them as much independence and responsibility as possible.” The ultimate goal, according to Ballew, was to get community organizing activities initiated quickly in order to begin empowering the poor to make demands on the public officials and local institutions that affected their daily lives.8

As Ballew laid out his plans for the course of the War on Poverty in Houston, and particularly after he saw how Poteat and EF-LAC project activists were using VISTA volunteers, he remained steadfast in his commitment to Alinsky-style community organization and maximum feasible participation of the poor despite some opposition. Although some conflict did arise with other board members, Ballew was able to lead H-HCEOO in a more activist direction focused on organizing poor communities to challenge the city’s public officials primarily because he located an important ally in the regional OEO office. William Crook, regional director of the southwest division of OEO and who would later become national director of the VISTA program in 1967, strongly supported the use of community organizing and favored more activist community action agencies like the one Ballew was trying to build in Houston. Ballew arranged for Crook to speak at H-HCEOO’s first annual dinner meeting in 1966, and Crook used the occasion to highlight the centrality of the Community Action Program to the overall War on Poverty in cities like Houston. Though the program had come under fire from mayors of some of the nation’s largest cities, and despite the fact that Welch had tried to avoid creating a community action agency in Houston, Crook argued that community action “contains whatever hope we have for a successful conclusion to the war on poverty.” In response to those who opposed the idea of community organization, Crook pointed out

8 William V. Ballew to Charles Kelly, memorandum, 2 November 1966, Box 1, Folder 3, Ballew Papers.
that it was the only part of the federal antipoverty effort that attempted to restore the
initiative to local citizens and for this reason should be welcomed rather than feared.
According to Crook, the ideas fueling the Community Action Program, including the
prospect of organizing and empowering the poor, "is as valid a form of democratic
decision [making] as the Constitution of the United States. It is as much a part of the
tradition of this land as the old New England town meetings. . . . It is the philosophy of a
free people applied practically to a local situation." Rather than bowing to the irrational
fears of local politicians, Crook implored those present at the H-HCEOO meeting to
expand the Community Action Program and the use of community organization in
Houston and use it to bring about lasting change in the city's poor communities.9

Effecting lasting social change in Houston's poor communities was, of course,
Ballew's ultimate and abiding goal throughout his time as H-HCEOO chairman, and he
attempted to realize this goal in three significant ways between the spring of 1966 and the
spring of 1967. First, Ballew placed heavy emphasis on the establishment of a Legal
Services program for the poor in Houston because he firmly believed the legal system
was one of the best vehicles for empowering poor residents. Second, he sought the
expansion of those social services he believed were absolutely necessary for a decent
standard of living in the city's poor neighborhoods and were also capable of bringing
about institutional reform. Finally, and most importantly, Ballew redirected H-HCEOO's
board and staff toward a clear focus on community organizing in an effort to empower
poor Houston citizens to confront local institutions and the city's public officials.

9 Minutes of Houston-Harris County Economic Opportunity Organization Board of Directors, 7 June 1966,
Box 265, Folder H-HCEO Information, Jaworski Papers.
Through this three-pronged attack on the root causes of poverty, Ballew hoped to effect lasting change in Houston.

Upon taking control of the Community Action Program in Houston, Ballew made it a priority to assist in the creation of a massive and far-reaching Legal Services program in the city. H-HCEO0 officials designated the Houston Legal Foundation as the delegate agency to administer the Legal Services program. After the Supreme Court began handing down a series of decisions in the early 1960s upholding the rights of citizens accused of a crime to be provided an attorney if they were unable to afford one, a group of Houston attorneys began raising money to create an organization that would provide attorneys free of charge to needy Houstonians. After securing a sizeable grant from the Ford Foundation, these attorneys formed the Houston Legal Foundation to operate a public defender program in the city and named retired District Judge Sam Johnson as the organization’s director. By the spring of 1966 Johnson was able to secure a service commitment from more than 3,000 attorneys in the city, enabling the Houston Legal Foundation to begin providing legal defense to Houston residents who were without the means of hiring a lawyer.10

It quickly became apparent to members of the Houston Legal Foundation, however, that a significant number of Houston’s poor residents had not been charged with any crime but desperately needed legal assistance of a civil nature. Director Sam Johnson began exploring the idea of creating a civil division that would supply attorneys to poor residents in civil cases involving divorce and child custody issues, property

disputes, and consumer credit problems. More than doubling the number of clients the Houston Legal Foundation would serve required a substantial increase in the level of funding, and Johnson decided to seek War on Poverty money through the newly created Legal Services division to accomplish his goal of expanding the foundation's services in Houston. In March 1966 Johnson submitted a request for $700,000 to OEO to initiate the Houston Legal Foundation's civil law division and begin providing legal services to all of the city's poor residents who were in need.¹¹

Ballew was very enthusiastic about bringing the Houston Legal Foundation into the city's War on Poverty during the spring of 1966, and over the next year he worked to make the foundation live up to his vision of using the War on Poverty to empower Houston's poor. First and foremost, however, the Houston Legal Foundation would provide an important service to those living in poverty. The poor seldom had access to legal counsel, advice, or representation in cases involving divorce, child custody, and other domestic legal issues. Attorneys working through the Houston Legal Foundation would help remedy this situation by providing free legal services in neighborhood law centers. Ballew certainly understood the value of providing these much needed legal services in Houston's poor neighborhoods, but even more attractive was the potential of the Houston Legal Foundation to empower the city's poor residents. By providing legal educational programs and attorneys who could help the poor initiate lawsuits, the Houston Legal Foundation could help level the playing field when it came to legal matters. For example, the Houston Legal Foundation could make poor residents more aware of their legal rights and provide attorneys to represent the poor in their dealings with landlords, the local welfare office, the police, local businesses, employers, and any

¹¹ Donnie Moore, "Legal Aid Fund for Poor OK'd," *Houston Post*, April 26, 1966.
other individual or institution affecting their lives. As Ballew recognized, in addition to providing an important service, the Houston Legal Foundation could also contribute to empowering the poor to deal more equally with the city's public officials and institutions. And as the program grew larger and as poor neighborhoods became more politically organized, the Houston Legal Foundation could also pursue institutional reform through the legal system.

The Houston Legal Foundation's application for OEO funding laid out plans for one of the most far-reaching legal services programs in the entire country. Clinton Bamberger, national director of OEO's Legal Services Program, commented on the foundation's funding application during an address he delivered to the southwest regional OEO office in March 1966. Bamberger told his audience that attorneys working in conjunction with legal services programs around the country not only provided legal aid to poor citizens but also served as agents of change in their communities. He stated, "Some may think it curious to consider lawyers as leaders of what may be called a social revolution. Yet no role could be more true to the traditions of our profession. It is and has been for centuries the task of lawyers to change the status quo. It is fallacious to think of lawyers as guardians of tradition. Rather, we are the guardians and watchdogs of orderly change. . . . Lawyers have been the architects – as well as the artisans – of social reform; to redesign, reform and create not only legal institutions but social, economic and political institutions as well." Bamberger praised the Houston Legal Foundation for living up to these expectations and reminded his audience that in order for the Houston program to be successful, the attorneys "must be free to challenge even the local government and the community action agency if the cause warrants and the client's interest demands."
Bamberger was confident that Houston’s program would become “one of the most comprehensive and extensive programs in the country.” These statements undoubtedly bolstered Ballew’s confidence in the Houston Legal Foundation because Bamberger shared his vision of a strong Legal Services program in Houston that could potentially upset the city’s traditional balance of power by providing a more equal footing for the poor in the legal arena.\(^{12}\)

With Ballew’s assistance and encouragement, the Houston Legal Foundation quickly established an extensive Legal Services program in Houston. OEO approved the foundation’s application in April 1966 and granted the organization more than $700,000 to create its proposed civil law division. According to the plan, the public defender program would continue to be funded by the grant from the Ford Foundation, but the two programs would work in conjunction with each other. Once the Houston Legal Foundation had received the funds, members began establishing neighborhood law centers in several of the target communities in the city. Although the foundation began with only three neighborhood centers, over the course of the next several months the Houston Legal Foundation established a law center in each of H-HCEO’s target neighborhoods with two attorneys assigned to each center. According to Judge Johnson, the attorneys working for the Houston Legal Foundation were allowed to accept any civil case whatsoever except for personal injury lawsuits, which were fee generating cases that a private attorney would most likely accept. The only other limitation was that the person

receiving legal aid from the Houston Legal Foundation must be considered living below
the poverty level. Houston Legal Foundation attorneys envisioned themselves accepting
cases involving disputes with landlords, unfair contracts for home repairs, adverse rulings
on Social Security and welfare benefits, and an array of other cases where the relative
powerlessness of poor residents would otherwise hamper their ability to resolve these
legal issues in a satisfactory way.\textsuperscript{13}

By the fall of 1966 the Houston Legal Foundation had accepted more than 700 of
these types of cases. In September, however, the Houston Legal Foundation reached a
turning point in the development of the Legal Services program in the city when local
circumstances forced attorneys to decide whether they would become a catalyst for social
change in Houston. The question that prompted this development was whether Houston
Legal Foundation attorneys would be allowed to handle civil rights cases. As Houston’s
public schools reopened that fall, Mrs. Melvyn Davis and her school-aged son Darrell
walked into a Houston Legal Foundation neighborhood office and complained that the
Houston Independent School District had not allowed the black student to attend a
predominantly white school in the city, despite recent court rulings ordering Houston’s
public schools to desegregate. Davis wanted to sue the school district to allow her son to

\textsuperscript{13} Office of Economic Opportunity, “Justice: Legal Services: First Annual Report of the Program of the
Office of Economic Opportunity to the American Bar Association at the Annual Convention,” August
1966, Box 12, Records from Federal Government Agencies, Records of the Office of Economic
Opportunity, 1964-1968, LBJ Library; Minutes of Houston-Harris County Community Council, Committee
on Economic Opportunity and Related Programs, 6 May 1966, Box 1, Records of the Community Welfare
Planning Association of Greater Houston, Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library,
Houston, Texas (hereafter cited as CWPA collection); Sargent Shriver to Lyndon Johnson, memorandum,
17 May 1966, Box 16, White House Central Files, LBJ Library (hereafter cited as WHCF); John Johnson to
Charles Kelly, 15 August 1966, Box 10, Folder Audit, Office of Economic Opportunity, Southwest Region,
Community Action Programs, District Supervisors, Records Relating to City Economic Opportunity
Boards, 1965-1968, Record Group 381, National Archives and Records Administration, Southwest Region,
Fort Worth, Texas (hereafter cited as NARASW); Donnie Moore, “Legal Aid Fund for Poor OK’d,”
\textit{Houston Post}, April 26, 1966; “Legal Aid for Poor Gets Funds,” \textit{Houston Post}, May 18, 1966; Harold
Scarlett, “Poverty’s Hostages: Money for Chards – or Bread?” \textit{Houston Post}, November 11, 1966; “Legal
Foundation Opens 2 New Branch Offices,” \textit{Houston Post}, November 10, 1966;
attend the school that year, but attorneys at the neighborhood center soon discovered that she earned too much income to qualify for free legal services through the foundation. The attorneys subsequently turned down her case for that reason, but the matter was complicated a few days later when HLF Director Judge Johnson reviewed the denial of services. Johnson stated to the press that even if the mother had qualified for free legal services, attorneys at the neighborhood center would have refused this particular case because national legal services program requirements and federal War on Poverty policies forbade the Houston Legal Foundation from accepting cases involving alleged civil rights violations. Johnson reasoned that since the Civil Rights Act of 1964 gave the United States Attorney General the authority to initiate lawsuits of this kind and since the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964 prevented any War on Poverty agency from duplicating the duties or services of other government agencies, the Houston Legal Foundation could not legally prosecute civil rights cases because that would indeed be a duplication of services and duties.\(^\text{14}\)

Judge Johnson’s pronouncement to the Houston press set off a flurry of activity among War on Poverty officials in the southwest regional office and in Washington, and it was undoubtedly an unsettling development in Ballew’s effort to use the Houston Legal Foundation to bring about social change in Houston. The issue finally reached the desk of

\(^{14}\) Robert D. Ford to Robert Eckels, 7 September 1966, Box 1, Folder Legal Services Program, William V. Ballew Papers, 1965-1968, MS 254, Woodson Research Center, Fondren Library, Rice University, Houston, Texas (hereafter cited as Ballew Papers); Robert D. Ford to Mrs. Melvyn Davis, 15 September 1966, Box 1, Folder Legal Services Program, Ballew Papers; Fred P. Graham, “Houston to Avoid Rights Legal Aid,” New York Times, September 26, 1966, newspaper clipping, Box 2, Folder Anti-poverty Material and Speeches 1965-1966, Ballew Papers; William H. Crook to William V. Ballew, September 1966, Box 59, Folder Houston Texas CAA 1968, OEO CAP Records of the Director, Subject Files, 1965-1969, Record Group 381, NARA; Theodore M. Berry to Earl Johnson, memorandum, 21 September 1966, Box 59, Folder Houston Texas CAA 1968, OEO CAP Records of the Director, Subject Files, 1965-1969, Record Group 381, NARA; Earl Johnson to Theodore M. Berry, 22 September 1966, Box 59, Folder Houston Texas CAA 1968, OEO CAP Records of the Director, Subject Files, 1965-1969, Record Group 381, NARA.
Anthony Partridge, Deputy General Counsel for OEO in Washington, in October.

Partridge disagreed with Judge Johnson and offered his legal opinion that the Economic Opportunity Act did not prevent local legal services programs from accepting civil rights cases because the clause of the act in question only prohibited the duplication of services offered by the federal government. The Houston Legal Foundation, however, was a private nonprofit organization, and despite the fact that it received funding from the federal government, it was not technically a federal agency. The national OEO office forwarded Partridge’s opinion to Southwest OEO Regional Director William Crook, who notified Judge Johnson and other members of the Houston Legal Foundation that their organization should indeed accept cases involving civil rights laws. OEO officials in Washington stressed that the situation in Houston had received national media attention and that the outcome would have consequences for legal services programs all over the country. In response, Crook informed Ballew that not only was the Houston Legal Foundation allowed to accept civil rights cases, but the organization’s attorneys were in fact required to accept these cases to fulfill their obligations under War on Poverty guidelines. Judge Johnson agreed to comply, but it was evident he was bristling under this latest criticism. “It’s like being a bird dog,” Johnson said of leading the Houston Legal Foundation in the wake of the civil rights controversy. “If you get too far ahead of the hunter, you get shot. If you stay too close, you get kicked.” Despite Johnson’s uneasiness and much to Ballew’s satisfaction, Houston Legal Foundation attorneys were further encouraged to act as agents of change rather than restrict themselves to handling only cases of family law.15

15 Ibid.; Anthony Partridge to Earl Johnson, memorandum, 12 October 1966, Box 59, Folder Houston Texas CAA 1968, OEO CAP Records of the Director, Subject Files, 1965-1969, Record Group 381,
By the beginning of 1967, the Houston Legal Foundation seemed to be off to a promising start toward fulfilling Ballew’s hopes for a Legal Services program in Houston that could not only provide important services to the poor, but also possessed the potential to bring about social change in Houston. In just a few months, the Houston Legal Foundation had opened eight neighborhood law offices in the city’s poor neighborhoods, served hundreds of clients, initiated a legal education program, and opened the door to pursuing civil rights cases to speed the pace of school desegregation in the city. The fiasco over whether or not Houston Legal Foundation attorneys could accept these kinds of cases, however, should have indicated to Ballew that the H-HCEO Board would need to keep pressuring Houston’s Legal Services administration to continue pursuing cases that had the potential to empower the poor. Without this pressure and support from Houston’s community action agency, the Houston Legal Foundation might not be as willing to pursue such a confrontational strategy.\(^\text{16}\)

After successfully initiating an active Legal Services program in Houston through the Houston Legal Foundation, Ballew turned his attention to the second component of his vision for the Community Action Program in the city – the expansion of services in poor neighborhoods that both were needed to ensure a decent standard of living and also had the potential to encourage institutional reform. Ballew first worked to expand the Head Start program in the city. During the previous year the small and relatively unorganized Head Start program administered by Houston Action for Youth and the

\(^\text{16}\) Houston Legal Foundation, “Report to the Board of Directors of H-HCEO on the Opening of Law Offices and the Hiring of Lawyers,” 1966, Box 1, Folder Legal Services Program, Ballew Papers.
Neighborhood Centers Association was able to show some positive results despite the uncoordinated nature of the operation. A team of researchers from the University of Texas in Austin published a study in February 1966 in which they compared low-income first-grade students in several Houston elementary schools who had participated in a Head Start program the previous summer with similar students who had not been enrolled in a Head Start center. The results showed that those first-graders who had been participants in the Houston Head Start program exhibited great improvement in reasoning skills, social competence, and verbal knowledge. Dr. Alberta Baines, the Houston school official who administered part of the Head Start program the previous summer, commented on the report by stating, “The evidence is in classrooms in our district this year. We have noted great change in both the children and their parents when compared with those who did not choose to participate in Head Start last summer. I believe it is fact to say that the average IQs of our children in the program were raised several points and I am convinced that at least 40 percent – 1200 of 3000 in Houston public school classes – moved toward the middle class level in classroom performance.” Now that the city of Houston had a central community action agency in H-HCEO, many Head Start proponents were hopeful for a more organized program for the summer of 1966 that would reach many more underprivileged preschoolers in Houston.17

Ballew undoubtedly recognized the potential for institutional reform that Head Start offered. Not only did the preschool program provide an important educational service to low-income families, but it also held possibilities for educational reform in Houston’s schools, particularly with regard to desegregation efforts. Federal program guidelines prohibited racial segregation in Head Start centers, and since most of the

centers were located in Houston public school buildings, many local reformers hoped to use Head Start to expose the irrationality of attempts to keep the city's schools segregated. Armed with the report showing the success of the Head Start program in Houston, Ballew and other supporters persuaded the city's school board to approve a plan that nearly doubled the capacity for the number of students who would be able to enroll in Head Start during the summer of 1966. Members of the H-HCEOO Board of Directors and the Houston school board collaborated on a plan for an expanded program that would reach more than 6,000 preschool age children in sixty schools all across the city and county. Though several OEO officials in Washington expressed some reservations about using the Head Start program to promote desegregation efforts in Houston, Southwest Regional OEO Director William Crook convinced the national office to approve H-HCEOO's $1.4 million Head Start funding request by pointing to Mayor Welch's recent display of goodwill toward the poverty program in Houston, the apparent restiveness of residents of the target areas anxious to see concrete programs implemented in their neighborhoods, and Sargent Shriver's pending visit to Houston. In early June OEO announced its approval of H-HCEOO's request, and the Head Start program was once again underway in Houston. As with the Legal Services program, the success of using Head Start to encourage reform in Houston's educational system and to promote desegregation efforts depended on reformers like Ballew keeping the pressure on the local school board and on local Head Start administrators.18

Contrary to the charge Ballew’s critics later leveled at H-HCEO that the organization completely neglected social service programs in Houston, Ballew and the H-HCEO Board expanded some programs in several of Houston’s poor neighborhoods that they deemed vital to the overall War on Poverty effort in the city. Ballew attempted to take seriously all elements of the community action concept, and a significant part of community action was the expansion and coordination of social services available to the poor. In March 1966 OEO approved funding for a parent education program to be administered by H-HCEO and Houston’s Family and Children’s Service Center in the Fourth Ward to deal with an array of family problems through family counseling discussion groups. According to the program description, topics of discussion would include family budgeting, teenage problems, job seeking, and the availability of educational and welfare services in the area. H-HCEO members also began administering a summer youth recreation program in 1966 that reached 6,000 young people in Houston between the ages of six and eighteen. The stated goal of the program was “to channel their energies during school vacation into constructive rather than destructive channels.” The recreation program operated out of twenty-six community centers spread out all over the city and provided activities such as organized sports competitions and trips to Houston’s many cultural attractions. In July Houston’s Alley Theatre, a small theater company started by a high school drama teacher in the 1940s and funded by the Ford Foundation, treated 600 of the program participants to a free production of “Winnie the Pooh.” A few weeks later all of the youths involved in the

program got to see the Houston Astros play the New York Mets in an afternoon baseball

Ballew’s third component of his three-pronged attack on poverty in Houston
placed much more emphasis on including poor residents living in the target
neighborhoods in the development and implementation of antipoverty programs and,
most importantly, to organize communities, politicize and empower poor residents, and
force institutional change in the city. To increase the participation of poor residents, H-
HCEO0 obtained an OEO grant of $1.7 million in June 1966 to establish thirty fully
staffed neighborhood centers all across the city. Through the neighborhood centers H-
HCEO0 would be able to hire neighborhood residents to staff the centers and offer
meeting rooms for neighborhood organizations and periodic workshops to bring residents
into the decision-making processes of the poverty program and allow them to play a role
in determining program policy. As the OEO press release stated, these neighborhood
centers in Houston “will greatly enhance the concept of community action, . . . increase
the scope of services to be performed, and will provide direct participation of target area
residents in the selection of programs designed to help them help themselves.” H-
HCEO0 members estimated that 300,000 poor Houston residents would greatly benefit
from the creation of these neighborhood centers in addition to the more than 250 staff employees that H-HCEOO promised to hire directly from the target neighborhoods.\footnote{Houston-Harris County Economic Opportunity Organization, newsletter, 21 July 1966, Box 265, Folder H-HCEOO Information, Jaworski Papers; Office of Economic Opportunity, “Houston, Texas (Conduct and Administration),” press release, 15 June 1966, Microfilm Reel 30, Records from Federal Government Agencies, Records from the Office of Economic Opportunity, 1964-1968, LBJ Library (quotation); Bess Attwell to H-HCEOO Board of Directors, memorandum, 11 March 1966, Box 1, Folder Correspondence January-June 1966, Ballew Papers.}

As an extension of his efforts to carry out the directive of maximum feasible participation of the poor, Ballew strove to begin organizing Houston’s poor communities in order to reform local institutions and challenge the status quo. Poteat and EF-LAC project activists had had a profound impact on Ballew earlier in the year with their use of VISTA volunteers to organize poor neighborhoods in order to empower poor Houston residents to make demands on local public officials and institutions, and by mid-1966 Ballew was itching to use the H-HCEOO staff to experiment with Alinsky-style community organization. During the summer of 1966 Ballew and H-HCEOO Executive Director Charles Kelly hired a community organizing specialist from Chicago to administer a four-week training program to prepare an army of H-HCEOO community organizers to go into Houston’s poor neighborhoods and begin organizing residents.\footnote{Charles Kelly to Don Hess, 26 July 1966, Box 13, Folder Administrative, Texas, 1966, OEO CAP Records of the Director, State Files, 1965-1968, Record Group 381, NARA; “Resume of Proposals,” 23 March 1966, Box 1, Folder Minutes 1966, Ballew Papers; William Ballew to Lucile Johnson, 8 April 1966, Box 1, Folder Correspondence January-June 1966, Ballew Papers; Minutes of H-HCEOO Board of Directors, 10 April 1966, Box 1, Folder Minutes 1966, Ballew Papers.}

In order to give H-HCEOO’s community organizing effort clear direction, as well as to build some credibility in the poor neighborhoods, Ballew appointed Reverend Earl Allen as director of community organization. Allen was a native Houstonian, a local Methodist minister, and director of the Wesley Foundation at Texas Southern University, Houston’s all black university located in one of H-HCEOO’s target neighborhoods in the
Third Ward. Allen certainly had plenty of experience with community organizing. He had been a regional representative of the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) in Dallas while he attended seminary at Southern Methodist University, and in that position Allen had organized a month-long civil rights protest in 1964 to desegregate downtown restaurants and cafeterias. Like Ballew, Allen had read Saul Alinsky’s work on community organizing and was committed to the idea of empowering the poor in Houston to confront the city’s public officials and institutions. “I wanted to change the status quo,” Allen said in a recent interview, “so I was abrasive and not afraid of confrontation.” In hiring Allen to focus solely on community organizing, Ballew sent a clear message that neighborhood organization, community empowerment, and even protest activity would be a major thrust of H-HCEO O’s effort to implement the War on Poverty in the city of Houston.22

Beginning in the fall of 1966, Ballew began shifting the majority of H-HCEO O’s resources and energy into community organizing. In November Ballew asked Allen to head up an H-HCEO O project called Operation Discovery, which Ballew had designed in order to begin applying some of Saul Alinsky’s ideas about community organization in Houston’s poor neighborhoods. Because Ballew was an Alinsky disciple, he understood perfectly well that power relations were at the heart of the problems of poor people. Ballew often could be heard during these months in the fall of 1966 repeating a phrase he had picked up from one of his aides: “Poverty isn’t the absence of money; it’s the absence of power.” Operation Discovery was meant to rectify the imbalance of power

between Houston’s poor population and the city’s institutions by organizing the poor into powerful groups of citizens with the ability to put pressure on city hall, local welfare agencies, and other representatives of the city’s power structure. During the month leading up to its launch, Ballew decided to give Operation Discovery top priority and reassigned several key staff members to Allen’s special task force dedicated to community organizing.23

As soon as Allen took charge of the community organization task force and Operation Discovery, he immediately recognized that the staff would need to be retrained in Alinsky-style community organizing. For example, Allen discovered that many H-HCEO staff members lacked even the basic skills needed to relate to poor Houston residents on a personal basis. In order to define clear goals and objectives for his staff, Allen issued a memorandum in early December in which he stated that the purpose of Operation Discovery was to determine an effective method for organizing Houston’s poor residents so as to allow them to take control of their own lives. Rather than simply gathering more statistical information about the target neighborhoods, Operation Discovery was an attempt to find what was “both a relevant and a realistic approach to achieving the maximum feasible participation of the poor in the total decision-making process in Houston-Harris County. More specifically, Operation Discovery is the vehicle we have chosen to determine what are the quickest and best possible methods for

perfecting indigenous organization[s] within the poverty areas of Houston-Harris County through which the poor can ‘help themselves.’” What is evident from these kinds of statements is that Allen had an extremely broad interpretation of the meaning of community action and maximum feasible participation of the poor. Allen certainly agreed with both Ballew and federal War on Poverty planners that poor residents should be involved in the planning and implementation of antipoverty policies and programs in their own communities, but he carried this edict even further by arguing that poor Houston residents should also enjoy full participation in the social, political, and economic life of the city. In short, Allen advocated the New Left philosophy of participatory democracy and believed that the Community Action Program called for the use of community organizing in order to restore to Houston’s poor population a degree of power over their own lives.24

Operation Discovery allowed Allen to design a comprehensive plan for organizing the poor communities of Houston, and the plan itself was an excellent illustration of how differently Allen and his community organization team viewed both the causes of and the possible solutions for poverty compared to the traditional welfare agencies and many social workers. The traditional view of poverty posited that poor people themselves were the cause of their own poverty because they had failed to adapt to an advanced industrial economy with an increasing number of highly skilled jobs. In

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order to remedy this, welfare agencies and social workers sought to change the individual
behavior of poor people. Other antipoverty activists, however, including Allen and a few
national War on Poverty planners, believed there were structural limitations that severely
reduced the power poor people had over their own lives. Institutional racism,
discrimination, complex and aloof municipal bureaucracies, cumbersome local welfare
service agencies, and a lack of educational and employment opportunities were just a few
examples of the structural forces that oppressed poor people and that were completely out
of their control. One of the solutions to poverty, therefore, which was included as a small
but significant component of the Community Action Program within the federal War on
Poverty, was community organizing with the ultimate goal of empowering the poor.

According to Allen and other community organization proponents, Saul Alinsky had been
correct; the only effective solution to the problem of poverty was to restore power to poor
communities through organization.25

In his plan for community organization in Houston, Allen argued that there were
myriad reasons why poverty existed, but four significant factors stood out above the rest:
1) inadequate housing; 2) inadequate educational opportunities and facilities; 3)
inadequate health facilities; and 4) inadequate employment opportunities. To begin
addressing these inadequacies, Allen, as a good Alinsky disciple, instructed his
community organization staff first to enter a poor neighborhood and develop a profile of
the community that would present a "realistic picture" of the particular area and uncover
specific problems that needed to be resolved. Once the community organizer had

25 Earl E. Allen to All H-HCEO Personnel, memorandum, 21 December 1966, Box 59, Folder Houston
Texas CAA 1968, OEO CAP Records of the Director, Subject Files, 1965-1969, Record Group 381,
NARA; Marlene Futterman, "Inspection Report for H-HCEO and HAY," February 1967, Box 73, Folder
CAP, Houston, Harris County, Texas, Jan-Mar 1967, OEO Inspection Division, Inspection Reports, 1964-
67, Record Group 381, NARA.
identified the major problems of a particular neighborhood, Allen instructed them to draw
the attention of neighborhood residents to a “gut issue,” which was a specific situation
that served to dramatize a particular problem. For example, specific gut issues stemming
from the problem of inadequate housing in poor neighborhoods could be rat infestation,
high rents, unresponsive landlords, a lack of trash cans, or a wide array of other issues
that would serve to dramatize the larger problem of inadequate housing. Allen told his
community organizers to rally residents around this gut issue and bring those citizens
who were concerned about this particular issue together in order to work on possible
solutions and initiate any necessary action. Allen stated, “Your job is to dissect a poor
community and find out what’s buggin’ it. You have to build a concern for participation –
find a gut issue, but find one which can be solved quickly. We need victories. Victories
build confidence.” By bringing residents together to work on common problems in the
community, according to Allen, organizers would be able to identify leaders within the
community and could begin developing this leadership to tackle future problems and
issues. This process could be repeated for a series of gut issues until the neighborhoods
were organized into action groups capable of successfully confronting the city’s public
officials and dedicated to solving the problems of the community. Allen stated that these
various action groups should eventually be brought together to form neighborhood
councils that would try to deal with problems affecting the entire neighborhood.
Similarly, these neighborhood councils would eventually be brought together to form
area councils that would be sufficiently large and diverse to address problems affecting
an entire area of Houston. Allen argued that once these area councils had been formed,
community organizers should work to strengthen each organizational group so they would be able to carry on without the leadership provided by the professional organizer. Ballew was so impressed with Allen’s plan for community organization that he immediately assigned a 140-member staff to Allen’s community organizing department. Ballew and Allen decided to focus H-HCEO’s first community organizing efforts on a large African American neighborhood northeast of downtown Houston known as Settegast. Allen himself had once been a resident of Settegast, so he knew firsthand that residents of the area had registered various complaints to the city government for several years about the poor and unsanitary living conditions in their neighborhoods but had very little success in getting any of their grievances addressed. In many ways the Settegast area was an attractive location to experiment with community organizing. As Allen stated, Settegast had clear geographic boundaries that would allow organizing efforts to be concentrated where they were needed most and there existed several indigenous community groups in the area that could be mobilized to put pressure on local institutions and on the city’s public officials.

H-HCEO staff members already had broad knowledge about the Settegast area. The H-HCEO Board’s interest in this section of Houston began in the summer of 1966 when staff members conducted an extensive survey of the neighborhood that resulted in the publication of “The Settegast Report,” a study commissioned by H-HCEO Executive Director Charles Kelly to gain a better understanding of the problems and

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issues in one of the city’s poorest neighborhoods. At one time Settegast had been a haven for lower-middle-class African Americans who wanted to own their own homes, but by the mid-1960s the neighborhood had deteriorated primarily because it failed to keep pace with standard city improvements through the years such as modern sewage systems and paved roads. By 1960 the median income in Settegast was little more than half of the average income for Harris County, and despite the fact that homeownership rates remained high, housing conditions were among the worst in the city. During the summer of 1966 Kelly sent a team of researchers and interviewers into the Settegast area in order to ascertain the root causes of poverty in that part of the city, and what they discovered shocked many people who were completely unaware of the magnitude of deprivation in the area.28

Authors of the report identified four major areas of concern in Settegast, the first of which was the rampant profiteering and exploitation of area residents by unscrupulous businessmen, especially those in the homebuilding and home mortgage lending industries. H-HCEO interviewers found that neighborhood residents were “too trustful” of representatives from these types of businesses who scoured the area selling substandard homes and offering loans that could never be paid off. Because homes were already being built before the Settegast area was officially incorporated into the city of Houston, homebuilders were not required to conform to Federal Housing Authority (FHA) standards, and as a result most of the homes did not qualify for FHA mortgage insurance. Surveyors found that more than 30 percent of the homes in Settegast were in a

deteriorated or dilapidated condition, and they reported that as a result “the cost in human suffering is high.”29

Surveyors found that even though 80 percent of respondents in Settegast owned their own home, “the term ownership must be used in the loosest possible sense.” [emphasis in original] H-HCEO staff discovered that mortgage lenders in Settegast had found a way to take advantage of residents who could not afford to make a large down payment to purchase a home in the area. Lenders had devised a “contract for deed” arrangement whereby a prospective homebuyer was allowed to make payments each month until an agreed upon amount had been collected by the lender that would be used as the down payment. Once this amount was reached, the buyer would acquire the title to the property and the balance of the total purchase price would be financed through a mortgage loan. Although on the surface this arrangement appeared to offer new homebuyers the means to make a down payment when they would otherwise be unable to afford it, H-HCEO surveyors found that in reality many of these contracts for deed were designed in such a way that borrowers found it impossible to reach the agreed upon amount because of a multitude of hidden fees and exorbitant finance charges. For example, the surveyors interviewed one prospective homeowner whose contract price was $6,100 and called for monthly payments of $52. After paying this amount every month for almost nine years, the total payments equaled $5,608. According to the contract, however, the unpaid balance on the contract remained at $5,800. Mortgage lenders were clearly exploiting Settegast residents, who were often unable to decipher the contract terminology and unaware of their own legal rights.30

29 Ibid.
30 Ibid.
The second major area of concern that the H-HCEO staff found in Settegast involved the closely related issues of poor health and sanitation services. The most shocking discovery was that there were absolutely no healthcare facilities in Settegast or in any of the surrounding communities. There was not a single doctor or dentist who practiced in the area, and if residents needed medical attention, they were forced to travel twenty miles to Ben Taub Hospital, which was the nearest public health facility to the Settegast community. Many residents lacked the means of transporting themselves or family members to the hospital, and since ambulance services were only available to those who could pay for them, most Settegast residents simply received no medical attention when they were sick or injured. With regard to sanitation in Settegast, surveyors also found open sewage ditches and a complete lack of drainage facilities, which provided extremely favorable environments for the breeding of rodents and other vermin. They estimated that the size of the rat population in Settegast was easily three times as large as the human population in the area. The water supply in Settegast was also a major problem because nearly 70 percent of residents received their water from shallow wells that were often contaminated from septic tanks and sewage backups from outhouses. Though no official study had been conducted, H-HCEO staff believed that the extraordinarily high rate of kidney and bladder diseases among Settegast residents was directly connected to the contaminated water they drank on a daily basis.31

The third major area of concern was a general lack of educational and employment opportunities. H-HCEO interviewers found that a majority of Settegast

31 Ibid. In addition to Ben Taub Hospital, a public health facility that was closer to Settegast was Jefferson Davis Hospital, but it had such a high mortality and infection rate that it seems no one in Houston who was interested in living would walk through the doors. The disgusting conditions and the ineptitude of Jefferson Davis’s staff were revealed in Jan de Hartog, The Hospital (New York: Atheneum, 1964).
residents desperately wanted a Head Start program initiated in their neighborhood, and many more expressed a desire for some type of day care program so their children would not be left at home alone. Surveyors also found that there was no community library in the area. While more than two-thirds of residents lacked a high school education, interviewers found that most were not content to remain uneducated; many expressed a strong desire for an adult education program in their community. The authors of the report concluded that an adult education program would be impossible without an adequate library. Surveyors also recognized the need for a consumer education program in Settegast to alert residents to the premium prices they were paying for consumer goods in neighborhood stores. There were no supermarkets in the area, so H-HCEO staff conducted a shopping survey in Settegast and compared prices with those paid at supermarkets just outside the neighborhood. The results were surprising. The prices for nearly every item most families bought on a regular basis were considerably higher at the local neighborhood stores than at the nearby supermarkets. With minimal transportation options, Settegast residents were forced to use their limited income to buy overpriced goods from local grocers. Surveyors also found that there was no adult or youth vocational training program in Settegast, even though nearly 70 percent of the residents stated they wanted these types of programs for their neighborhood.32

The final problem area in Settegast discovered by H-HCEO surveyors was insufficient transportation options for residents. Interviewers found that poor residents constituted the largest group of Houstonians who needed access to public transportation, but they were also in the group who resided in parts of the city often neglected by urban transportation planners. Surveyors discovered that public transportation in Houston was

32 Ibid.
inadequate, slow, and expensive, and in Settegast it was also incredibly inefficient, inconvenient, and time consuming. Three main bus lines served the city of Houston, all of which radiated out from downtown. For Settegast residents, this often meant they had to take a lengthy bus ride into downtown Houston just to transfer to another bus line that would take them to their destination that was often closer to Settegast than it was to downtown. All riders on Houston’s buses paid a $1 roundtrip fare, but for many Settegast residents this amounted to more than their hourly take-home pay.33

H-HCEO’s “Settegast Report” exposed a neglected area of Houston many people in the city were totally unaware of and revealed a degree of deprivation most thought had been eradicated during the post–World War II economic boom. Settegast residents suffered from a number of problems, not the least of which stemmed from the indifference of the city’s public officials to their problems and the exploitation committed by business and real estate developers of the relatively powerless and uneducated community. When the H-HCEO Board of Directors reviewed the report, they were presented with two options for how to address the problems in Settegast. Since there was a clear lack of services being provided in the neighborhood, H-HCEO staff could have implemented federally funded service projects in Settegast by coordinating local agencies to improve housing conditions, clean up the water supply, help people with their mortgage payments, assist residents who needed medical attention, recruit the unemployed into programs like the Job Corps, or a whole array of ways to deliver needed services to the area. If the traditional welfare bureaucracy in Houston had targeted the Settegast area, residents could have reasonably expected those service-oriented

33 Ibid.
organizations to begin providing these types of social welfare programs in their neighborhood.

Earl Allen was able to convince the H-HCEO V Board of Directors, however, that the delivery of services to Settegast residents would only provide a temporary solution to their problems. What was needed in the area, argued Allen, was community organization to bring about lasting social change capable of producing permanent improvements in the lives of Settegast residents. Only by organizing the residents of Settegast could they be mobilized and empowered, which would enable them to make demands on the city government, local businesses, and other institutions to remedy the problems associated with poverty in the neighborhood. Allen believed that only by empowering area residents to put pressure on and make demands of the local power structure could the people of Settegast begin to see their problems addressed. Ballew agreed with Allen that Settegast could be used to experiment with an Alinsky-style community organization project, and he was able to convince enough H-HCEO V Board members to agree to a ninety-day demonstration program in the area. With H-HCEO V Board approval, in the last two months of 1966 Allen placed eighty members of his community organizing staff in Settegast with the hopes of proving that his philosophy of community organization would be effective in addressing the problems of the poor in Houston.34

The community organization tactics developed by Ballew and Allen produced almost immediate results. When Allen’s community organization staff began searching for a gut issue in Settegast in November, it was clear that the grotesquely unsanitary water supply in the area would serve as a very effective issue to dramatize the problem of

inadequate city services in this poor section of Houston. Organizers discovered that the majority of homes in Settegast were served by backyard water wells, which frequently became contaminated with bacteria and parasites because disease-carrying sewage was seeping into the wells from septic tanks and outhouses. Armed with this information, H-HCEO community organizers and a large group of Settegast residents walked into a city council meeting and demanded that Mayor Louie Welch extend city water services to their neighborhoods. Faced with this delicate political issue and clearly not wanting to appear to deny Houston residents sanitary drinking water, Welch immediately ordered city workers to place emergency water spigots on the city’s fire hydrants in Settegast to provide clean water to the residents. Welch also quickly drew up a plan to extend city water services to the area with a minimum of funds that would need to be provided by Settegast residents and instructed one of Houston’s city attorneys to investigate the possibility of filing a lawsuit against the company that knowingly sold water from contaminated wells to unsuspecting families in Settegast. Ballew immediately claimed victory for this exercise in Alinsky-style community organization and pointed out that at the urging of community organizers, residents “went to City Hall and demanded a city water supply to replace their contaminated one. They got it.” The event produced such a surprising victory that a Houston Post reporter covering the story declared that the “dawn of a quiet revolution may have broken over Houston” when the Settegast group arrived at City Hall to begin receiving a redress of grievances that were a long time coming.\(^{35}\)

Ballew and Allen even encouraged the community organizers to help plan and participate in organized protest activities to bring attention to the plight of their communities. While some Settegast residents were putting pressure on Welch and the Houston City Council to address their water problems, others began staging demonstrations at their local schools protesting the lack of sanitary conditions there. Not only was there contaminated water coming into many of the schools, but there simply was not enough water pressure for the use of drinking fountains or even to flush toilets. Many students and teachers had to bring thermoses to school filled with enough water for the entire day. After protesting for several weeks with no response from the all-white Northeast Houston School District Board, several Settegast neighborhood councils, which had been formed with assistance from Allen’s staff, launched a write-in campaign to get elected to the board two African American residents who promised to address these problems. These two candidates lost by a very narrow margin, but nevertheless these neighborhood councils were successful in encouraging more residents to assume an active role in the administration of their local schools. A Houston Post reporter commented, “With almost 1,000 Settegast votes to reckon with, it is doubtful that the school board out there will ever be quite the same again.” The protests also had an effect on Welch – he ordered his staff to obtain water samples from Settegast schools to check for contamination.36

After achieving some success getting city officials to address the problem of sanitation in Settegast, Allen’s community organizers focused on the absence of medical treatment facilities. Rather than establishing a temporary federally funded health clinic or hospital in the area, members of Allen’s staff began organizing neighborhood residents to put pressure on the Harris County Hospital District to build and maintain a permanent branch of the public hospital system in Settegast. One H-HCEO organizer argued that the proposed Settegast healthcare facility would set an example for the rest of the city and become the first of several clinics established in poverty neighborhoods. One H-HCEO staff member in the area stated, “These clinics would help decentralize charity medicine in Harris County and make services available to the poor in outlying areas, many of whom have no means of transportation to Ben Taub,” the central general hospital in Houston. As Allen’s staff began organizing residents into pressure groups, Harris County Hospital District officials responded slowly but generally favorably to the idea of creating a branch of the city’s charity hospital in Settegast. By early January the hospital district board had placed the issue on the agenda for their meeting that month.37

In order to make sure members of the Harris County Hospital District would address the absence of healthcare facilities in Settegast, H-HCEO community organizers and neighborhood residents held a rally in downtown Houston near where the meeting was taking place to demand the creation of a branch of the charity hospital in their neighborhood. The strategy worked – the hospital district voted to establish a branch

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of the charity hospital in Settegast immediately. Hospital district member Quentin Mease, a prominent African American civic leader in Houston and executive director of the downtown YMCA, was especially receptive to the idea of establishing branch hospitals in poor neighborhoods, and he worked tirelessly to obtain the approval of the Settegast Clinic. Located inside a building donated by the Houston City Council, the new Settegast Clinic opened during the last week in January and served 175 poor residents in its first week of operation. The staff consisted of hospital district employees and volunteers from the Houston Medical Forum, an organization made up of African American doctors in Houston. In the wake of the clinic’s opening, Ballew expressed optimism about the course of the War on Poverty in the city. The opening of the Settegast Clinic was “a breakthrough event,” Ballew told Texas Senator Ralph Yarborough, and clear evidence that the “War on Poverty in Houston is beginning to go.”

After some early successes, Ballew encouraged the spirit of organized protest to carry beyond the neighborhood of Settegast. For example, H-HCEOO community organizers and a group of residents from a mostly African American neighborhood on the west side of town called Blossom Heights organized a twenty-mile protest march to call attention to the fact that their children were bused that far to attend school when an all-white school was just two miles from their homes. In the Sunnyside neighborhood, a poor area south of downtown, H-HCEOO community organizers found that residents had

recently formed the Sunnyside Housing Committee through which they were attempting to put pressure on the Houston City Council to prevent slumlords from building inadequate and unsafe housing in that part of the city. Members began showing up at Houston City Council meetings in October to demand a change in the city’s building code and an end to land zoning practices that allowed unscrupulous residential builders to erect high-density, low-quality housing that had a tendency of turning older neighborhoods into “instant slums.” When H-HCEO community organizers arrived in Sunnyside, they did not have to search for very long to find a major gut issue. With the help of the organizers, Sunnyside Housing Committee members launched a protest campaign against the real estate developers who were beginning to build slum housing in the area. In November 1966 approximately fifty people marched in front of the proposed building sites carrying signs that read “Don’t Move In” and “I Wouldn’t Let My Dog Live in These Shacks.” Clarence White, leader of the protest, told members of the press to spread their message all across the city of Houston. “This is pathetic,” White exclaimed. “What kind of kids could you raise in those shacks? This is what breeds crime. People say, ‘Why so much crime among the Negroes?’ Then they come out here and help build crime.” Addressing the other marchers, White pointed out that the slums were being built by two real estate developers – one white and one black, although the race of the guilty parties was of no real importance. White continued, “It doesn’t matter what color your skin is. If you’re moving shacks into Sunnyside, we’re your enemy.” Other marchers told the reporters that this protest was only the beginning of their effort to take control of their own neighborhood.39

The involvement of H-HCEOO employees in protest activities provoked many questions from city officials and Houston residents about the proper role of poverty workers and community organizers around the city. In response to these questions, Ballew defended both the organizers' actions and the use of protest demonstrations. "It seems to me our organizers are going to have to be with the people and work with them," argued Ballew to a Houston Post reporter. "As long as the protests are peaceful, I see nothing wrong with our people taking part in them." Federal OEO officials helped bolster Ballew's confidence in Allen and the use of Alinsky-style community organization.

During an official inspection of the War on Poverty in Houston conducted in February 1967, members of an OEO inspection team concluded in their report that one of the ways Ballew had improved the antipoverty effort in Houston when he became H-HCEOO chairman was the hiring of Earl Allen and the increased focus on community organizing. One OEO inspector noted that the success of the community organizing effort was apparent all over the city and that Allen's community organization staff was "reaching someone in Houston since they are creating a great deal of foment." Another inspector commented that Allen was "bright, imaginative, and knowledgeable about the process of community organization" and possessed the necessary competence to iron out any problems that naturally arise from trying to organize the poor. This kind of encouragement from federal War on Poverty administrators undoubtedly made it easier for Ballew to answer local criticism of the Alinsky method in Houston.40

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40 Harold Scarlett, "Poverty's Captives: Planners Finally Get Some Action," Houston Post, November 10, 1966 (first quotation); E. R. Brown to Marlene Futterman, memorandum, 13 February 1967, Box 73, Folder CAP, Houston, Harris County, Texas, Jan-Mar 1967, OEO Inspection Division, Inspection Reports, 1964-67, Record Group 381, NARA (second quotation); Marlene Futterman, "Inspection Report for H-
It was clear by the spring of 1967 that Earl Allen’s community organizing efforts, particularly in the Settegast area, were paying dividends to poor residents. Ballew could finally boast that the Community Action Program being carried out by H-HCEOO was waging a concerted attack on the root causes of poverty in Houston and was enjoying a degree of success and a series of small but important victories. The organization’s neighborhood centers were bringing poor residents into the administration of the poverty program, and Allen’s staff was organizing residents into powerful blocs capable of forcing the city’s elected officials and institutions to respond to the needs of poor communities. The Saul Alinsky method seemed to be working quite satisfactorily during Ballew’s first year as H-HCEOO chairman, primarily because he enjoyed a tremendous amount of support from his staff and OEO officials in Washington. Ballew’s organization was not the only agency attempting to implement a Community Action Program in Houston, however, as Houston Action for Youth (HAY) members continued to compete with H-HCEOO leaders to make their organization the sole community action agency in the city.

While H-HCEOO members focused on community organizing in an attempt to empower poor communities to challenge Houston’s public officials and local institutions, HAY directors continued to use a service-delivery approach and employed professional social workers in their attempt to eradicate poverty in one small section of the city on the north side of town. In January 1966 HAY contracted with Houston’s Day Care Association to administer a small Head Start program in their target neighborhood that would reach approximately ninety preschoolers. In April HAY members teamed up with

HCEOO and HAY,” February 1967, Box 73, Folder CAP, Houston, Harris County, Texas, Jan-Mar 1967, OEO Inspection Division, Inspection Reports, 1964-67, Record Group 381, NARA (third quotation).
the Texas Employment Commission to seek out neighborhood residents considered unemployable and begin training them for unskilled and low-skilled jobs in the city. The assumption driving the program, of course, was that Houston’s unemployed citizens lacked jobs simply because they were unaware of how to locate them. A representative from the Texas Employment Commission (TEC) stated that “it’s quite possible that we can tap a labor supply that heretofore we were not able to reach.” There is no evidence that the HAY-TEC program developers ever considered the role of institutional racism and discrimination, or the lack of power poor citizens had over their own lives, in their unemployment status. Soon after HAY and TEC initiated the program, many neighborhood residents began complaining about the attitudes of the HAY canvassers who were seeking out the unemployed. It seems a paternalistic and condescending attitude had taken hold among the HAY staff. One antipoverty activist who worked in the target neighborhood but was not affiliated with HAY commented that several residents “say some of the canvassers act as though they are afraid of getting dirty when they enter the neighborhood.”

HAY members also administered traditional services that dated back to the organization’s founding mission to address problems of juvenile delinquency in Houston. For example, HAY continued funding homeless shelters for runaway youths, family counseling services, home management programs, counseling services for troubled youths, day care and nursery services, and neighborhood activity centers. In addition to these services, HAY launched a new program in the spring of 1966 called Operation Medicare Alert. When OEO officials realized late in 1965 that only a few eligible elderly

persons across the country had registered for Medicare benefits, planners developed a program to increase the number of older Americans enrolled in the new federally funded hospital insurance program. OEO officials exported this new program to local community action agencies in January 1966, and HAY personnel decided to participate in its implementation in their target neighborhood. With a $7,500 grant from OEO, HAY staff members knocked on doors in their target neighborhood in search of elderly residents who had not yet signed up for Medicare benefits. By the end of March, they had assisted more than 1,000 residents apply for Medicare.\(^\text{42}\)

Ballew realized that although the services offered by HAY administrators were indeed helpful to poor residents, the fact remained that HAY leaders were doing virtually nothing in Houston’s poor neighborhoods to address the problem of powerlessness. Indeed, there were fundamental philosophical differences between the way each antipoverty organization approached the War on Poverty and particularly the Community Action Program. The federal OEO inspection team that visited Houston in February 1967 recognized the clear dichotomy between HAY’s nearly total focus on the delivery of social services to the exclusion of community organizing and H-HCEO’s devotion to community organization and reluctance of the organization’s leaders to administer programs or services. OEO officials unanimously agreed that H-HCEO was more

successful than HAY in attacking the root causes of poverty and in making a real difference in their target neighborhoods. One OEO inspector stated in her report that H-HCEOO was clearly the stronger antipoverty organization and that Earl Allen’s efforts to provide a way for the poor to identify their own needs and exert pressure on the city’s public officials were proving fruitful. Because H-HCEOO community organizers were successful in “creating ripples” in the power structure, they had been able to achieve some small victories and cause some changes to occur. The inspection team concluded that Ballew’s pronouncement that the city’s white power structure was “afraid of us” might indeed be true given the responsiveness of local institutions to the various protests and demonstrations that H-HCEOO had been involved in over the previous few months. Another OEO inspector stated that H-HCEOO more clearly resembled a legitimate and effective community action agency and that Allen’s community organization effort was enjoying some success in mobilizing the poor communities of Houston and empowering poor residents to exert pressure on the city’s institutions. While they expressed some concern about the lack of service programs offered by H-HCEOO, OEO officials concluded that Ballew’s agency, and especially Earl Allen’s community organization efforts, were showing clear signs of effecting needed change in Houston.43

The OEO inspection team’s assessment of HAY’s antipoverty activities in Houston, on the other hand, was in sharp contrast to their evaluation of H-HCEOO.

Though OEO officials recognized that HAY’s social service programs were well administered, they nevertheless reported that the majority of these programs were in the “low-priority category.” One federal inspector was especially concerned that HAY only operated in one fairly isolated part of the city and that even in this small area, HAY directors had been unable to perform any comprehensive community planning. While a few of the programs provided social services that residents desperately needed, the inspection team reported that the programs were “geared toward alleviating the symptoms of poverty rather than effecting its causes.” Though HAY enjoyed a good reputation among the traditional welfare and social service organizations in the city, unfortunately it had “minimal success in mobilizing those resources” to initiate a concerted and unified assault on poverty. Another federal inspector commented that HAY’s Board of Directors was “primarily a rubber stamp” and had very little control over the actual operations of the agency. More alarming to the inspection team, however, was the assessment that although HAY had been operating in Houston for five years, it “has had almost no impact” on the plight of the poor in the city and had the reputation of being a “nice program” that did not “rock the boat.” To make matters worse, federal OEO inspectors discovered that many African American and Mexican American residents of HAY’s target neighborhood considered HAY Director Helen Lewis to be quite prejudiced in her decisions concerning the poverty program.44

The relatively safe and non-confrontational tactics of HAY sharply contrasted with the direct-action approach of H-HCEOO under Ballew’s leadership, and federal OEO inspectors clearly favored Ballew’s radical interpretation of the community action concept because it seemed to offer an effective method for attacking the root causes of poverty in Houston. While HAY’s professional staff delivered a few social services in one isolated community in the city, H-HCEOO members organized poor residents into powerful blocs capable of making demands on the city’s officials and institutions. Ballew recognized the fact that when the federal War on Poverty funding inevitably dried up, most of HAY’s service programs would disappear and the agency itself would return to being a small-scale traditional welfare organization with a severely limited impact on poverty in Houston. By bringing about lasting social change in the city, Ballew and other H-HCEOO leaders hoped to address the needs of the poor by empowering residents to take control of their own lives. As any good Saul Alinsky disciple would have argued, Ballew operated on the idea that community organization and empowerment of the poor held the keys to effecting significant and permanent change in Houston’s poor neighborhoods and attacking the root causes of poverty in the city.

Although Ballew’s radical interpretation of the community action concept delivered some significant victories in Houston’s poor neighborhoods in the fall of 1966, it is clear in hindsight that there were several external factors that allowed H-HCEOO members to implement their radical vision uninhibited, despite the city’s “pervasive conservatism” that Houston historian David G. McComb described. First, the overwhelming support Ballew received from OEO officials in Washington was essential.
for H-HCEOO leaders to continue implementing a radical Community Action Program in Houston. In the days before a conservative mood took hold in Washington in 1967 that resulted in the decision to allow public officials to take control of the Community Action Program, OEO officials were often openly supportive of radical and confrontational community action agencies around the country. When OEO officials began retreating from this radical interpretation of the community action concept in 1967, however, it produced a negative effect on antipoverty organizations like H-HCEOO whose leaders had depended on support from Washington. Second, for a few months during the fall of 1966, Ballew implemented his radical vision in a relatively friendly environment free of vocal opposition from Houston’s elected officials, primarily because H-HCEOO staff members initiated their activities quickly and the city’s public officials had little time to devise an attack on Ballew and Allen’s methods. By the spring of 1967, however, the situation had changed as Houston’s mayor and police chief began cracking down on Ballew’s activities, particularly with regard to community organization. Finally, during the fall of 1966, Ballew enjoyed the support of the majority of the H-HCEOO Board and staff, and this undoubtedly emboldened him to implement his ambitious program without restraint. During the following year, however, as local elected officials launched an attack on H-HCEOO and OEO officials backed away from their open support of Ballew’s radical vision, H-HCEOO Board and staff members began defying Ballew’s leadership. While Ballew had all three of these things working in his favor as 1966 drew to a close, the spring of 1967 brought significant changes to the situation in Houston that threatened to undo Ballew’s radical Community Action Program and completely destroy the reputation of the Saul Alinsky method in the city.
Chapter 4

The War Within the War on Poverty: Houston’s Public Officials and the Taming of the Community Action Program, 1967

For several months in the winter of 1966-1967, William Ballew encountered few obstacles in his quest to implement a radical vision for Houston’s Community Action Program based on the Saul Alinsky method. Ballew helped launch a comprehensive Legal Services program, expanded certain social services in the city’s poorest neighborhoods, and most importantly dedicated much of H-HCEO’s resources to community organizing. With the hiring of Earl Allen to supervise a 140-member community organization staff, Ballew made a clear statement that H-HCEO would place a heavy emphasis on empowering poor communities to challenge Houston’s public officials and effect lasting social change in their neighborhoods. For a brief moment it appeared that the Saul Alinsky method would be efficacious in the city as Ballew, Allen, and the community organization staff achieved a series of small yet significant victories ranging from improved city sanitation services to the creation of a badly needed health clinic in one of Houston’s most impoverished neighborhoods. Ballew was able to make Houston’s radical Community Action Program a success mainly because he enjoyed a supportive environment for the implementation of his vision and little organized opposition from local elected officials or other conservative defenders of the status quo. Between September 1966 and February 1967, OEO officials in Washington and Austin provided almost unconditional support for Ballew’s radical vision during a time when Houston’s public officials had yet to devise their own plan for resisting the rapidly increasing number of demands being made upon city officials by poor residents.
During the spring of 1967, however, many of Houston’s public officials, particularly Mayor Louie Welch, United States Congressman George Bush, and Police Chief Herman Short, launched a concerted assault on H-HCEO and its leaders in order to reassert some degree of control over what was occurring in the city and specifically over the activities of Allen’s community organization staff. Welch and Bush had been active participants in the creation of H-HCEO in 1965 and had handpicked several members of the organization’s Board of Directors and Executive Committee. When William Ballew became H-HCEO chairman in January 1966, however, he distanced the organization from city officials and curtailed any influence Welch and Bush might have previously enjoyed over the poverty program in the city. Since he was a believer in the Saul Alinsky method, Ballew cut H-HCEO’s ties with the city’s public officials because he planned to organize Houston’s poor residents to challenge that very structure and make demands on city officials. Only by liberating H-HCEO from the constraints of Welch and Bush could Ballew effectively implement his radical vision for the Community Action Program in Houston. Police Chief Short, on the other hand, who had a reputation as a notorious racist, seems to have opposed the idea of a War on Poverty in the city from the very beginning and was prepared to attack H-HCEO’s activities as soon as he could gain Welch’s approval. By the spring of 1967 Welch and Bush found themselves completely alienated from the poverty program in Houston and were growing increasingly alarmed at the speed with which Ballew, Allen, and the community organization staff had mobilized many of the city’s poor neighborhoods to engage in collective political action. Beginning in February 1967, Welch, Bush, and Short worked together to attack the community organization strategy developed by Ballew and Allen.
and to discredit the organization that had left the three of them out of the poverty program in Houston.

A series of events during the spring of 1967 provided members of Houston’s public officials with the ammunition they needed to attack Ballew’s radical vision for the city’s Community Action Program. Welch, Bush, and Short, growing more impatient with the community organization strategies developed by Ballew and Allen, exploited these events in order to discredit the Saul Alinsky method and reassert their control over the War on Poverty in the city. While Ballew, Allen, and the H-HCEO community organization staff had won some small yet important victories by organizing poor residents all over the city and helping empower them to make demands on the city’s public officials and local institutions, their efforts in Settegast, where they had enjoyed their greatest achievements in the spring of 1967, backfired when several powerful figures in the neighborhood revolted against H-HCEO’s efforts in the area. The turmoil this revolt caused in Settegast provided the city’s public officials with ammunition to attack H-HCEO’s activities in the area. On the heels of the Settegast revolt, several H-HCEO staff members became involved in a disturbance on the campus of Texas Southern University that became known as the “TSU Riot.” With the accompanying media coverage, several of Houston’s public officials launched a public attack on H-HCEO by appealing to widespread fear and paranoia about the threat of urban rioting – the specter of another Watts or Newark or Detroit – and associating H-HCEO’s activities with events at TSU. Finally, as the fallout from the Settegast revolt and the TSU riot pushed the H-HCEO Board of Directors into a defensive position and persuaded them to attempt to rein in some of their community organization efforts, an uprising
erupted among the H-HCEO staff that split the agency into two competing factions. To complicate matters even further, OEO officials in Washington and Austin decided in the spring of 1967 that they could no longer fund two separate community action agencies in Houston, meaning H-HCEO and HAY would have to merge to form a single organization. Meanwhile, a citywide backlash formed against the practices of H-HCEO community organizers, who were now viewed by many simply as troublemakers. This backlash, coupled with sustained attacks from the city's public officials, forced the H-HCEO Board of Directors into an even more defensive posture as a conservative philosophy began to take hold among the board members.

These four events during the spring of 1967 – the Settegast revolt, the TSU Riot, the H-HCEO staff uprising, and the forced merger of H-HCEO and HAY – were the precipitating factors that forced the H-HCEO Board of Directors on the defensive and opened up a space for Houston's public officials and conservative defenders of the status quo to attack H-HCEO's activities. This sequence of events ultimately resulted in the abandonment of Ballew's radical vision for community organization and empowerment of the poor and allowed Welch, Bush, and Short to reassert their control over the poverty program. In only four months the concerted attack waged by Welch, Bush, and Short tamed H-HCEO's activities in Houston, and by the end of May 1967 the environment in which H-HCEO operated in Houston had changed dramatically. Just a few months after Ballew, Allen, and the H-HCEO community organization staff achieved some of their greatest accomplishments, the H-HCEO Board of Directors, in response to the attack from the city's public officials, quickly retreated from its radical interpretation of the community action concept, forced Ballew out of office, reined in the activities of
Allen and his community organization staff, and committed themselves to a conservative program of social service delivery. Ballew's experiment in the Saul Alinsky method in Houston thus ended just as it was beginning to achieve some small but important victories.

In Settegast, where Allen's community organization staff had experienced the most success, H-HCEO's activities produced a backlash from Houston's public officials that was aided by several conservative business and religious leaders in the neighborhood. These indigenous conservative forces managed to use the mounting criticism of Allen's community organization staff voiced by the city's public officials to ignite a revolt among some poor Settegast residents against many of H-HCEO's activities there. Though the marches, rallies, and other protest activities had produced tangible results for Settegast residents, they also undoubtedly alerted Houston's public officials that area residents had organized and were prepared and equipped to make demands for city services. The quest to obtain a branch of the general hospital in Settegast resulted in the final victory for residents that did not also produce a counterattack from public officials or disapproving Houstonians. About the same time as the new Settegast Clinic opened its doors to area residents, H-HCEO community organizers faced a major setback in their efforts to empower poor residents to use their constitutional right to vote.

As soon as Earl Allen's community organization staff arrived in Settegast, they began registering area residents to vote. In order to register as many new voters as possible, H-HCEO staff members went door-to-door with voter registration forms and assisted neighborhood residents with filling them out correctly. As soon as an entire
section of Settegast had been canvassed, community organizers delivered the voter registration forms to the Harris County Tax Assessor-Collector, who would add the new voters to the rolls. From the very beginning of the voter registration drive, H-HCEO's community organizers faced the accusation that since they were not official deputies authorized to register voters, their actions were illegal. The Republican Party Chairman for Harris County, who was instrumental in the effort to break the hold of the Democratic Party in Houston and across the South, issued a statement in January 1967 criticizing H-HCEO's voter registration efforts and claimed that the community organizers in Settegast were violating the Texas Election Code. George Bush, the newly elected Republican Congressman from Houston, also publicly questioned the legality of the voter registration drive in Settegast. For Bush, of course, the prospect of a large group of new voters who were poor and mostly nonwhite had political implications that struck close to home. As Bush stated in a letter to a Houston business acquaintance, “I have heard that in Houston they undertook a voter registration drive but restricted it to the Negro areas. This, of course, would not bode well for yours truly at the polls. But, more importantly, I don’t believe this has anything to do with the alleviation of poverty.” H-HCEO Executive Director Charles Kelly and Earl Allen responded to Bush's public criticism of the voter registration drive by pointing out that community organizers were not actually registering voters but simply assisting neighborhood residents fill out the forms correctly and delivering the completed forms to the appropriate office. Kelly pointed out that the forms that H-HCEO community organizers had been taking door-to-door in Settegast were the exact same forms that were printed daily in the Houston newspapers. Not only were the community organizers clearly following local election laws, but the voter
registration drive also had the prior approval of the Harris County Tax Assessor-Collector's office.¹

On the morning of January 17, 1967, Republican fears of the addition of thousands of new voters, many of whom were expected to vote Democratic, were allayed when an arsonist set fire to the H-HCEO community center in Settegast and destroyed more than 2,000 completed voter registration forms that had yet to be turned over to the tax assessor-collector. Also destroyed in the fire were records from an H-HCEO investigation into home contract sales in Settegast, which had uncovered the unfair “contract for deed” arrangements that were prevalent in the area. Houston arson investigators determined that the fire had been set deliberately, and in a more shocking discovery they concluded that there had been no forced entry into the community center building. In other words, whoever set the fire had in his or her possession a key to the center. Though Houston Police investigators questioned a few suspects, they were unable to find the person or persons responsible for the fire. Appalled by the inconclusiveness of the investigation, Charles Kelly issued a public statement in which he declared there was considerable evidence that the motive for the fire was the destruction of the voter registration forms and announced that he had requested a full investigation from the

¹ James M. Simons to Edgar May, memorandum, 26 January 1967, Box 73, Folder CAP, Houston, Harris County, Texas, Jan-Mar 1967, OEO Inspection Division, Inspection Reports, 1964-67, Record Group 381, National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, Maryland (hereafter cited as NARA); Peter Spruance to Edgar May, memorandum, 20 March 1967, Box 59, Folder Houston Texas CAA 1968, OEO CAP Records of the Director, Subject Files, 1965-1969, Record Group 381, NARA; George Bush to Frank Harmon, 25 January 1967, Box 1, Folder Correspondence January-February 1967, William V. Ballew, Jr. Papers, 1965-1968, MS 254, Woodson Research Center, Fondren Library, Rice University, Houston, Texas (hereafter cited as Ballew Papers) (quotation).
Federal Bureau of Investigation, citing a violation of the Settegast residents’ civil rights and an attempt to deny a citizen’s right to vote.²

The controversy surrounding H-HCEO’s voter registration drive in Settegast, as well as the arson that it provoked, caused some neighborhood residents to begin criticizing the activities of Earl Allen’s community organization staff. In the wake of the arson came an event that further divided the Settegast community and served to undermine Earl Allen’s community organizing efforts in the area. In January 1967 a deputy constable appeared at the doorstep of Settegast resident Betty Gentry, who was pregnant, to carry out an eviction order. The deputy constable ordered Gentry out of her home and began removing her belongings from inside the house. Gentry claimed that when she protested the eviction order, the deputy constable “shoved, cursed, and handcuffed” her and “unfairly booked [her] for aggravated assault.” A few hours later, as news of the altercation spread throughout the neighborhood, hundreds of angry Settegast residents showed up at Gentry’s home and staged a spontaneous protest that lasted until the early morning hours the next day.³

Later that evening more than 2,000 Settegast residents met at a local Baptist church and signed a petition calling for the immediate dismissal of the deputy constable who evicted Gentry and vowed to protest at City Hall until their demand was answered. Earl Allen immediately recognized this as a “gut issue” that could be used to mobilize Settegast residents to confront the city’s public officials about the problems of unfair

housing contracts and police brutality. As Allen later explained, “Eviction wasn’t the real issue. The real issues are lack of adequate housing which permits profiteers to insist on unfair terms, and the intimidation of the poor by police. But the people are concerned because a pregnant woman was roughed up. We had to help them to do something right then. Once mobilized they can get at other issues.” The way Allen and his community organization staff chose to assist the residents mobilize to protest the treatment of Mrs. Gentry was to help them secure transportation to downtown Houston to carry out a protest at City Hall. H-HCEOO representatives contracted with Pioneer Bus Company to provide three buses, but in anticipation of criticism the arrangement never allowed for federal money to be used for the protest or the buses. Settegast residents would pay the bill themselves by raising money in the community in support of Betty Gentry.4

Approximately eighty Settegast residents boarded buses a few days later headed toward City Hall in downtown Houston. Though the protest did not result in the dismissal of the deputy constable, it did force a response from city and county officials. Precinct One Constable W. H. Rankin, the deputy constable’s immediate supervisor, told the protesters that Gentry was “agitated during the eviction proceedings” and at some point during the scuffle she struck the deputy constable. “We can’t allow our men to be beaten and abused,” argued Rankin. “We only serve the papers after the court has decided on the eviction.” Earl Allen himself could not have portrayed the situation more succinctly and accurately. Betty Gentry was not simply roughed up by one county constable, but rather

4 Ed Terrones to Edgar May, memorandum, 15 March 1967, Box 73, Folder CAP, Houston, Harris County, Texas, Jan-Mar 1967, OEO Inspection Division, Inspection Reports, 1964-67, Record Group 381, NARA; Charles Kelly to Ed Terrones, 17 March 1967, Box 73, Folder CAP, Houston, Harris County, Texas, Jan-Mar 1967, OEO Inspection Division, Inspection Reports, 1964-67, Record Group 381, NARA; Minutes of Houston-Harris County Economic Opportunity Organization Board of Directors, 11 January 1967, Box 1, Folder Minutes January-April 1967, Ballew Papers; Saralee Tiede, “Settegast – A Powderkeg or a Community on the Move?,” Houston Chronicle, January 22, 1967 (quotation).
she was the victim of an intricate web of oppression that included unscrupulous profiteers, local city ordinances, the courts, and law enforcement officials. Protesting the treatment of Gentry was simply an avenue through which to confront the structural and institutional problems facing Settegast residents. As Allen had hoped, the protest at City Hall and the response by local officials were excellent illustrations of how a "gut issue" could alert poor residents to major problems like inadequate housing, unfair business practices, and police brutality.\(^5\)

Even though H-HCEOO staff members had been careful not to use any federal funds to provide buses for the protest at City Hall, controversy soon arose because the Pioneer Bus Company overcharged the Settegast group and sent the bill directly to H-HCEOO. Community organizers initially believed they would need eight buses for the protest but at the last minute decided they only needed three. An H-HCEOO official was supposed to cancel the five extra buses, but because of a miscommunication, the cancellation never happened. As a result, Settegast residents were charged for eight buses, and the amount was more than they could afford. Local public officials finally had some potent ammunition with which to attack the community action agency’s protest activities. When Mayor Welch and Congressman Bush erroneously charged H-HCEOO with using federal funds to stage the protest, the local newspapers repeated the charge and provoked a firestorm of criticism aimed at the organization. Though H-HCEOO Executive Director Charles Kelly repeatedly assured the public that no federal poverty

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funds had been used for the protest, the damage had been done and the reputation of Earl Allen’s community organization effort in Settegast suffered a major setback.6

The controversy surrounding the voter registration drive and the protests at City Hall prompted some Settegast residents, who were mostly conservative leaders in the community and had been critical of Allen’s methods since the community organization staff arrived in Settegast, to begin voicing their opposition to H-HCEO and Earl Allen’s community organizing efforts in their neighborhood more loudly. Several ministers and older residents complained that H-HCEO organizers were bypassing existing community leadership and attempting to create a new force for change that was both more confrontational and less effective than groups that had already been established in the neighborhood. Local precinct judges voiced their displeasure about Allen’s voter registration campaign because they believed there were adequate block workers and deputies to register everyone in Settegast who wanted to vote and that H-HCEO workers’ efforts were a wasteful duplication of services. Other residents of the area showed up at an H-HCEO Board of Directors meeting in February 1967 to complain about being disrespected and even threatened by H-HCEO staff members in Settegast. One neighborhood resident told the H-HCEO Board that staff members in Settegast had accomplished some good things, “but I’m saying OEO is not doing the job it was

6 James M. Simons to Edgar May, memorandum, 23 February 1967, Box 73, Folder CAP, Houston, Harris County, Texas, Jan-Mar 1967, OEO Inspection Division, Inspection Reports, 1964-67, Record Group 381, NARA; Ed Terrones to Edgar May, memorandum, 15 March 1967, Box 73, Folder CAP, Houston, Harris County, Texas, Jan-Mar 1967, OEO Inspection Division, Inspection Reports, 1964-67, Record Group 381, NARA; Charles Kelly to Ed Terrones, 17 March 1967, Box 73, Folder CAP, Houston, Harris County, Texas, Jan-Mar 1967, OEO Inspection Division, Inspection Reports, 1964-67, Record Group 381, NARA; “Welch Favors Ending Some Poverty Projects,” Houston Post, March 14, 1967; Charles Kelly to Ed Terrones, 17 March 1967, Box 1, Folder Correspondence March-July 1967, Ballew Papers.
designed to do. It is causing neighbor to look funny at neighbor. OEO people shouldn’t have a superior attitude and look down on people.”

In the wake of the demonstration at City Hall against the treatment of Betty Gentry, members of the Settegast Civic Club, an organization that had existed longer than the poverty program and included several business and religious leaders, expressed fear that protest activity in Settegast was going too far and that Earl Allen and his staff were encouraging violence. Reverend Rancier Worsham, a prominent Baptist minister in Settegast, publicly disagreed with the way Allen and H-HCEO staff members handled the eviction situation. Worsham stated, “I would have preferred to talk things over with the offended person and the constable before making a commitment. Then we would know how important it was. Instead, teen-agers have been stirred up by [H-HCEO] staff... and are going off half-cocked.” Another Settegast resident, who had been involved in the campaign to get pure drinking water for the neighborhood from the city, commented that there was danger of “a year’s hard work being lost, with people trying to start trouble.” A neighborhood resident who had been active in the effort to improve public schools in Settegast objected to the request by H-HCEO community organization staff members for parents to keep their children out of the schools so they could join the protest at City Hall and said, “It seems to me this stirs people up, that it hinders the community instead of helping it.” A rumor that the H-HCEO Board was going to bring Stokely Carmichael, the Black Power advocate and head of the Student Nonviolent

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7 Office of Economic Opportunity, Office of Inspection, “Houston CAP,” February 1967, Box 10B, Folder Inspection and Evaluation Reports, OEO, Southwest Region, Community Action Programs, District Supervisors, Records Relating to City Economic Opportunity Boards, 1965-1968, Houston, Record Group 381, National Archives and Records Administration, Southwest Region, Fort Worth, Texas (hereafter cited as NARASW); Minutes of Houston-Harris County Economic Opportunity Organization Executive Committee, 23 February 1967, Box 73, Folder CAP, Houston, Harris County, Texas, July-Sept, 1967, NARA (quotation).
Coordinating Committee, into Settegast to help organize poor people also contributed to a feeling among the established leaders that their authority was being threatened.⁸

Earl Allen responded to these complaints and criticisms with characteristic poise. “Poverty communities are highly organized,” he argued, “and the leaders feel threatened when the organization starts to change.” These changes, according to Allen, were absolutely necessary to address the problems of poverty in Settegast in any meaningful way. “The problem is that the present structure isn’t adequate for changing the situation,” he continued. “If it was, we wouldn’t have a poverty community. Either the leaders don’t represent enough people or their methods haven’t proved effective. People in these communities are apathetic, not because they don’t want to change their situation, but because they’re hopeless, deprived of dignity and frustrated from years of methods which don’t work.” Allen reiterated that his goal was to organize the Settegast community and create an environment where new and vigorous leadership could arise to help solve the problems of poverty. As for the charge that his staff was fomenting violence in Settegast, Allen responded that there “is more danger of violence in a leaderless community than in one with effective leadership.” Despite Allen’s reassuring comments about his community organizing activities in Settegast, in March a large group of Settegast

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⁸ Saralee Tiede, “Settegast – A Powderkeg or a Community on the Move?,” *Houston Chronicle*, January 22, 1967 (quotations). There is some evidence that Mayor Louie Welch and his aide Blair Justice encouraged and exploited this animosity between Settegast residents and H-HCEO community organizers; see Blair Justice to Louie Welch, memorandum, 21 February 1967, Box 33, Louie Welch Papers, Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library, Houston, Texas (hereafter cited as Welch Papers); and Blair Justice to Louie Welch, memorandum, 23 September 1966, Box 33, Welch Papers.
residents picketed H-HCEOO's neighborhood office and accused Allen's staff of "destroying our community" and "organizing children against their parents."*9*

Under Ballew's leadership, H-HCEOO had provided unequivocal support for Earl Allen and his community organization staff since the fall of 1966. Faced with the prospect of public demonstrations against H-HCEOO that might threaten the entire poverty program, however, the board changed course and launched an investigation into the activities of the community organization staff in Settegast. Though the investigation panel found no specific violations of OEO policy in Settegast, in order to cool down the immediate tensions Executive Director Charles Kelly nevertheless ordered the removal of the entire community organization staff from the area and reassigned them to other parts of Houston. Kelly issued a tepid statement with his decision that hardly justified removing the staff from the area. He explained, "Some people seem to be unhappy with the way the kids are acting. Perhaps our staff has been involved in encouraging kids to become involved in community problems. I don't know. Some people just don't want their kids doing what they're doing. That is, being concerned with . . . improving things in the community." Despite the vague explanation he provided, it was clear that one of the factors motivating Kelly to reassign the community organization staff was to prevent further protests against H-HCEOO and its activities around the city. His decision had the opposite effect, however, as approximately thirty young people staged a sit-in at the H-HCEOO office the following day and demanded the return of Allen's staff to Settegast.*10*

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*10* "EEO Staff Ordered Relocated," *Houston Post*, April 20, 1967 (quotation); Reid Beveridge, "Settegast Youth Stage Sit-In Over Transfer of EEO Staffers," *Houston Chronicle*, April 22, 1967.
By April 1967, residents of the Settegast area were deeply divided over the role of community organizing in the War on Poverty and the H-HCEO staff had been pulled out of the area. More importantly, Charles Kelly and members of the H-HCEO Board of Directors had begun a slight retreat from their determination to focus on community organizing and the empowerment of poor residents to challenge Houston’s public officials and begin reforming its institutions, and this backing off from Ballew’s radical vision greatly affected the way Ballew and Allen continued to implement their interpretation of the community action concept in Houston. The ordeal in Settegast, however, was only the first in a series of events that ultimately led to a complete retreat from community organizing and a subduing of H-HCEO as a force for change in Houston. The three other major events that occurred during the spring of 1967 – the riot on the campus of Texas Southern University, the H-HCEO staff revolt, and the forced merger of H-HCEO and HAY – followed the conflict in Settegast and together drove Ballew, Kelly, and the H-HCEO Board into a defensive position from which they never recovered.

The troubled spring semester of 1967 on the campus of Texas Southern University had its roots in the change in university leadership that occurred the previous fall. The Texas legislature had created TSU in 1947 to serve as a supposed educational equivalent to the University of Texas. Located in the lower-middle-class African American neighborhood known as the Third Ward, TSU would serve African American students and thus allow higher education in the state to remain racially segregated. TSU had been presided over since 1955 by Samuel Nabrit, who during his eleven-year tenure as president attempted to expand the role of the university in the Houston community and
supported efforts to desegregate the city. For example, during the late 1950s and early
1960s Nabrit commended TSU students who took the lead in efforts to desegregate
public facilities in Houston, which included several demonstrations and sit-ins. When
Nabrit resigned his position in 1966 to assume an appointment to the Atomic Energy
Commission, his replacement as TSU president held a different view of the proper role of
the university and its students. Joseph A. Pierce, Nabrit’s successor who served as
president of the university for only one year from the fall of 1966 to the spring of 1967,
was described by Houston historian Dwight Watson as “deferential to whites” and intent
on controlling the TSU student population. Many TSU students characterized Pierce as
“reactionary, rigid, and inflexible.” As Watson argued, Pierce’s “heavy-handed
leadership set the stage for confrontations between students and the administration.”

During the fall of 1966 a group of TSU students formed an organization they
called “Friends of SNCC” and requested official university recognition as a campus
organization. One of the requirements for securing official university recognition was that
each organization obtain a faculty sponsor, and to meet this condition the Friends of
SNCC chose Mach Jones, a seasoned civil rights worker who came to TSU as an
instructor in the social sciences department during the fall of 1966. The TSU
administration did allow the Friends of SNCC to hold meetings on campus, but despite
the fact that the organization’s members had found a faculty sponsor, administrators
never officially recognized them as a campus organization. Above all, TSU
administrators, especially Pierce, feared that the leaders of Friends of SNCC were trying

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11 Handbook of Texas Online, s.v. “Texas Southern University,” by Cary D. Wintz,
http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/TT/kct27.html (accessed November 10, 2008); Dwight
Watson, Race and the Houston Police Department, 1930-1990: A Change Did Come (College Station,
Texas: Texas A&M University Press, 2005), 78 (quotations). For an interesting report of the TSU Riot, see
to stir up trouble on campus and were especially susceptible to the influence of outside agitators. In early March 1967, members of the Friends of SNCC led a rambunctious crowd of approximately 100 participants in a downtown march protesting police brutality against African Americans in Houston, increasing Pierce's skepticism of the organization. Friends of SNCC members held the protest in response to accusations of four African American gospel singers that Texas Highway Patrolmen had brutalized them during a traffic stop just outside the Houston city limits. During the march some of the participants shouted slogans like "Black Power" and "burn baby burn" as others carried signs reading "Whitey, the days for black nonviolence are over – are yours?" and "Welch, help stop police brutality or Houston will be a billion dollar graveyard." After the demonstration, TSU administrators met with Friends of SNCC and Mack Jones, their faculty sponsor, to inform them that their organization would no longer be allowed to meet on campus and that further discussions concerning university recognition were out of the question.¹²

One week later TSU administrators further infuriated members of the organization by declining to renew Mack Jones's teaching contract for the next year. The firing of Jones rallied formerly uninterested students to the Friends of SNCC, and several members of the faculty called for an investigation into the administration's firing of Jones. The following few weeks were incredibly tense on the TSU campus as the Friends of SNCC led a series of class boycotts that spilled into the university's final exam schedule. On April 13, 1967, in the midst of the turmoil, Stokely Carmichael came to Houston to speak on the nearby campus of the University of Houston. Though Mayor

Welch and Houston Police Chief Herman Short were both fearful that Carmichael would incite TSU and University of Houston students to riot, Carmichael gave a rather moderate speech about the importance of reclaiming black culture and opposing the war in Vietnam. When asked about the demonstrations and class boycotts at TSU, Carmichael stated, “It was a long time coming,” but opted not to lead a march to the TSU campus after his speech.\(^{13}\)

Though Carmichael’s speech did not live up to the fears of Welch and Short, after Carmichael’s visit to Houston the demonstrations and boycotts on the TSU campus intensified. The Friends of SNCC began with only two demands – that their organization be recognized by the university administration and that Mack Jones be reinstated as an instructor. By mid-April 1967, however, a campus-wide student uprising had gained momentum as the students’ demands now included extended curfew hours, increased salaries for all faculty and university employees, removal of armed security officers from the campus, creation of a student court with authority equal to the dean of students, addition of black literature to the university library shelves, improved cafeteria food, freedom of student organizations to bring to campus any speaker of their choice, and removal of the dean of students from the local draft board. While the student movement was intensifying at TSU, the Houston police department began a surveillance operation on the campus designed to keep tabs on the student activists; Police Chief Short began securing arrest warrants for leaders of the boycotts. Short also increased the number of

undercover and uniformed officers in and around the TSU campus, a move that further enraged the student demonstrators.\textsuperscript{14}

Through this increased police presence city officials learned about the involvement of Houston’s poverty workers in the demonstrations at TSU. Carl Moore, a TSU student and part-time employee of Houston Action for Youth, had participated in the demonstrations on campus in early April. Police also discovered that Reverend Bill Lawson, who was the director of the Upward Bound program at TSU and often served as an informal advisor to H-HCEO Board Chairman William Ballew, had provided blankets and food to students staging a sit-in at the city courthouse to demand the release of several activists who had been arrested at TSU. Most damaging, however, was the revelation that Pluria Marshall, a full-time H-HCEO community organizer, actually led one of the major demonstrations at TSU during the month of April and supplied a bullhorn for student protesters making speeches on campus. Though Marshall had been a frequent critic of the antipoverty efforts of H-HCEO and once called for the immediate resignation of Executive Director Charles Kelly, Ballew and Kelly had hired Marshall in December 1966 and placed him on Earl Allen’s community organization staff. Police Chief Short eagerly turned over this information to Mayor Welch, who in turn demanded an investigation by the H-HCEO Board and OEO officials in Washington.\textsuperscript{15}


\textsuperscript{15} Gus Taylor to Pluria Marshall, 2 December 1966, Box 73, Folder CAP, Houston, Harris County, Texas, Apr-Jun 1967, OEO Inspection Division, Inspection Reports, 1964-67, Record Group 381, NARA; Spencer Bayles to William P. Hobby, Jr., 9 December 1966, Box 73, Folder CAP, Houston, Harris County, Texas, Apr-Jun 1967, OEO Inspection Division, Inspection Reports, 1964-67, Record Group 381, NARA; Pluria Marshall to Gus Taylor, 30 December 1966, Box 73, Folder CAP, Houston, Harris County, Texas, Apr-Jun 1967, OEO Inspection Division, Inspection Reports, 1964-67, Record Group 381, NARA; Pluria Marshall to Gus Taylor, memorandum, 3 March 1967, Box 73, Folder CAP, Houston, Harris County, Texas, Apr-Jun
After the events in Settegast over the previous few months, H-HCEOO Board members were becoming more cautious in their approach to community organizing efforts and in their response to mounting criticism. After Houston Action for Youth officials terminated Carl Moore’s employment for his participation in the TSU demonstrations, Ballew and Kelly decided that Pluria Marshall’s actions also required a response from the H-HCEOO Board of Directors lest public officials use the incident to discredit their organization even further. Rather than firing him, Earl Allen convinced Ballew and Kelly that Marshall should be placed on an indefinite leave that would allow him to continue leading protest demonstrations at TSU without being affiliated with the poverty program in Houston. Marshall agreed that this arrangement provided the best solution to the problem. In his letter requesting a leave of absence from his community organizing duties with H-HCEOO, Marshall stated that an indefinite leave was necessary “in order to maintain communication with the [TSU] students to help them keep going in a rational direction. I feel that the respect that they have for me forces me to honor it and do whatever I can to help them.” To prevent the appearance of being too soft on Marshall, Ballew and Kelly, in addition to accepting his request for a leave of absence from the organization, also docked Marshall’s pay for the six days he abandoned his community organizing responsibilities to participate in demonstrations on the TSU campus.16

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16 Edwin Becnel to Earl E. Allen, memorandum, April 1967, Box 73, Folder CAP, Houston, Harris County, Texas, Apr-Jun 1967, OEO Inspection Division, Inspection Reports, 1964-67, Record Group 381, NARA; Pluria
Kelly, Ballew, and Allen had underestimated the determination of certain local public officials to attack H-HCEO. The disciplinary action against Marshall was not enough to satisfy Police Chief Short or Mayor Welch, and in response the two public officials launched an all-out assault on the organization. At one time Welch had been fairly indifferent to the city's antipoverty program. The protests in Settegast, however, had caught the mayor by surprise, and H-HCEO's participation in the TSU demonstrations embarrassed him. Like officials in other cities, Welch was also fearful of race riots, which had been regularly convulsing the nation's large cities since 1965. As Welch saw it, although H-HCEO would probably never intentionally incite a riot, their actions might inadvertently contribute to igniting a racial explosion in Houston. When Ballew and Kelly failed to fire Pluria Marshall, Welch initiated a public smear campaign against individuals associated with the organization in order to rein in their more questionable activities. In mid-April, just after Marshall had been granted his indefinite leave of absence, Welch began turning over information to local Houston radio station KTRH 740 AM concerning the involvement of H-HCEO employees in the uprising at TSU. KTRH broadcasters ran a daily morning report for an entire week alleging that Moore, Lawson, and Marshall had violated OEO policy by being involved in the TSU protests and had used federal funds to help the demonstrators. As the week progressed the accusations got more intense. Citing two Houston police officers who worked for the Intelligence Division, the radio station reported that Pluria Marshall had admitted to a reporter that he used OEO funds to supply a bullhorn to the TSU protesters, and then

Marshall to Edwin Becnel, memorandum, 7 April 1967, Box 73, Folder CAP, Houston, Harris County, Texas, Apr-Jun 1967, OEO Inspection Division, Inspection Reports, 1964-67, Record Group 381, NARA (quotation); Edwin Becnel to Earl E. Allen, memorandum, 7 April 1967, Box 73, Folder CAP, Houston, Harris County, Texas, Apr-Jun 1967, OEO Inspection Division, Inspection Reports, 1964-67, Record Group 381, NARA.
Marshall threatened the reporter by saying he would be "whipped" if he mentioned anything about his confession on the air.\textsuperscript{17}

By the end of the second week of April 1967, Welch was turning over the full police records of certain H-HCEOEO employees to KTRH producers. Although the radio station’s broadcasters stopped short of stating the actual names associated with each police file, in many cases they provided just enough information so that nearly anyone who wanted to put the pieces together could figure out the individuals they were referencing. The radio station reported that one particular employee had been arrested for vagrancy and suspicion of being an army dissenter in Galveston in 1948, robbery by firearm in Philadelphia in 1955, and possession of narcotics in Illinois in 1957. The reporter also pointed out that this individual was known to wear Black Panther and SNCC buttons on the TSU campus and had been a leader in the Friends of SNCC organization. The radio station also aired the police record of Earl Allen, pointing out that he had been arrested in Dallas in connection with civil rights protests in the early 1960s and had been instrumental in the Settegast demonstrations at City Hall.\textsuperscript{18}

Seeing a battle between the community action agency and local elected officials developing quickly in Houston, OEO officials in Washington wasted no time sending a

\textsuperscript{17} Ray Reusche to Edgar May, memorandum, 26 May 1967, Box 73, Folder CAP, Houston, Harris County, Texas, Apr-Jun 1967, OEO Inspection Division, Inspection Reports, 1964-67, Record Group 381, NARA; KTRH Radio, "Allegations Made Pertaining to EOO Workers," 7 April 1967, Box 73, Folder CAP, Houston, Harris County, Texas, Apr-Jun 1967, OEO Inspection Division, Inspection Reports, 1964-67, Record Group 381, NARA; Peter Spruance to Edgar May, memorandum, 10 April 1967, Box 73, Folder CAP, Houston, Harris County, Texas, Apr-Jun 1967, OEO Inspection Division, Inspection Reports, 1964-67, Record Group 381, NARA; Minutes of Houston-Harris County Economic Opportunity Organization Executive Committee, 17 April 1967, Box 73, Folder CAP, Houston, Harris County, Texas, July-Sept 1967, OEO Inspection Division, Inspection Reports, 1964-67, Record Group 381, NARA.

\textsuperscript{18} KTRH Radio, "Allegations Made Pertaining to EOO Workers," 7 April 1967, Box 73, Folder CAP, Houston, Harris County, Texas, Apr-Jun 1967, OEO Inspection Division, Inspection Reports, 1964-67, Record Group 381, NARA; James M. Simons to Edgar May, memorandum, 10 April 1967, Box 73, Folder CAP, Houston, Harris County, Texas, Apr-Jun 1967, OEO Inspection Division, Inspection Reports, 1964-67, Record Group 381, NARA.
representative from the Office of Inspection to investigate the allegations being made by Mayor Welch and Police Chief Short. On April 7, 1967, OEO Inspector James Simons arrived in Houston and immediately began a thorough inquiry into the accusations against War on Poverty workers in the city. Mayor Welch initially welcomed the investigation, but his attitude toward Simons and OEO changed when Simons turned up no evidence of wrongdoing on the part of H-HCEO. Simons concluded that no federal funds had been used by any H-HCEO employee to help the demonstrators at TSU and that the role played by Bill Lawson was entirely “constructive,” meaning he helped prevent the situation from becoming any worse by keeping the protesters calm and level-headed. He also noted that Lawson had been instrumental in negotiating a truce between the university administration and the student demonstrators to allow for the class boycott to end in early April. As for the role played by Pluria Marshall, Simons found that if Marshall had provided a bullhorn for the protesters, he had definitely not used OEO money to buy it. He also concluded that the disciplinary action that Ballew and Kelly took against Marshall was appropriate for the situation. Simons concluded that no one involved had acted in a way that violated OEO policy and that no one “seemed upset over the involvement of OEO-funded groups except Mayor Welch and the Houston Police Department, who are thought to be opposed to most of the efforts of OEO in Houston.” Once Simons sent his report back to OEO in Washington, the situation seemed to settle down in Houston. Another federal OEO official commented in mid-April that the “situation in Houston is presently relatively calm” and that “all is quiet on the Texas Southern University campus.”

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19 James M. Simons to Edgar May, memorandum, 10 April 1967, Box 73, Folder CAP, Houston, Harris County, Texas, Apr-Jun 1967, OEO Inspection Division, Inspection Reports, 1964-67, Record Group 381,
Though it seemed that Simons's report settled the issue for H-HCEO, the actual TSU "riot" was still weeks away. Despite the appearance of "quiet" on the campus of TSU, in reality students were still fuming about the heavy-handed leadership of Pierce and the increased police presence on the campus. During the second week of May 1967 several TSU students were involved in a demonstration in the Sunnyside neighborhood protesting the way the city administered a garbage dump in the area. Protesters initiated the demonstration after a young African American boy in the neighborhood was able to get inside the dump and drowned in a water-filled pit. Houston police officers attempted to disperse the crowd on May 16 and arrested Reverend Bill Lawson, Earl Allen, and several other protesters on the charge of failure to move on at a police order. Lawson remembered that the police officers got quite rough with the protesters, further infuriating TSU students who had been demonstrating against police brutality for more than a month. When these students returned to the TSU campus later that night and reported on the actions of the Houston police at the Sunnyside dump, tensions that had been seething for several weeks exploded into anger and open hostility toward the increased police presence on campus. When police officers arrested a student who was addressing a crowd about police brutality at the Sunnyside dump protest, angry students began throwing bricks and rocks at passing police cars and white onlookers. Police Chief Short responded by assembling additional officers in full riot gear on the periphery of the campus, a move that further angered the already indignant student population.20

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NARA (first quotation); Peter Spruance to Edgar May, memorandum, 19 April 1967, Box 73, Folder CAP, Houston, Harris County, Texas, Apr-Jun 1967, OEO Inspection Division, Inspection Reports, 1964-67, Record Group 381, NARA (second quotation).

20 Watson, Race and the Houston Police Department, 83-84; Peter Spruance to Edgar May, memorandum, 17 May 1967, Box 73, Folder CAP, Houston, Harris County, Texas, Apr-Jun 1967, OEO Inspection Division, Inspection Reports, 1964-67, Record Group 381, NARA; Fred Baldwin to Walter Richter,
With the situation becoming more volatile by the minute, H-HCEO0 officials
decided to try to mend their relationship with city officials, particularly with Mayor
Welch. Perhaps alarmed at the ease with which Welch carried out a public attack on the
organization and possibly encouraged by OEO officials in Washington to hedge their
bets, the H-HCEO0 Board contacted the mayor’s office and offered the services of their
organization to help restore peace on the TSU campus. This was quite a turnabout for an
organization that just a few months prior was totally committed to the organization and
empowerment of poor communities to challenge the city’s power structure, but the
campaign conducted by the mayor and the police chief against H-HCEO0 had a
profound effect on the organization’s leadership. The strategy seemed to work; Welch
agreed to release Earl Allen and Bill Lawson from jail if H-HCEO0 officials agreed to
send them to the TSU campus to talk to the students. In the wake of this development,
one OEO official in Houston remarked that H-HCEO0 had begun to work actively and
cooperatively with representatives of the mayor’s office and with the police department,
and that the mayor himself had “high praise for their efforts in this difficult situation.” As
the OEO official proclaimed, “This endorsement under these circumstances . . .
represents a major turn around of opinion by the Mayor’s office about OEO in
Houston.”

By the time Lawson and Allen arrived on the TSU campus, many students had
already begun destroying property and had barricaded themselves inside one of the
student residence halls. A rumor had been circulating on campus that a white man had

memorandum, 17 May 1967, Box 73, Folder CAP, Houston, Harris County, Texas, Apr-Jun 1967, OEO
Inspection Division, Inspection Reports, 1964-67, Record Group 381, NARA.
21 Peter Spruance to Edgar May, memorandum, 17 May 1967, Box 73, Folder CAP, Houston, Harris
County, Texas, Apr-Jun 1967, OEO Inspection Division, Inspection Reports, 1964-67, Record Group 381,
NARA.
shot and killed a young African American boy in Northeast Houston. Although this rumor proved to be false, the story’s circulation at TSU simply added more fuel to the fire already started. Police officers allowed Lawson and Allen to enter the hall to speak with the students, but to no avail. Moments after Lawson and Allen left the building, gunfire erupted on the campus. It remains unclear whether it was a student or a police officer who fired the first shot, but when it ended, Houston police officers had fired more than 5,000 rounds into the dormitory and one officer, Ronald Kuba, lay dead in a pool of blood. Police Chief Short initially reported that Kuba had been killed by sniper fire coming from the dormitory, but a later investigation concluded that Kuba had been struck by a ricocheting bullet fired from another police officer’s gun. Police responded to Kuba’s death by storming the dormitory and, as historian Dwight Watson has written, “they went berserk, destroying everything in their path.” By night’s end Houston police officers had arrested more than 500 students and turned the TSU campus into an occupied territory.22

Though the H-HCEO leadership had attempted to improve their relationship with the city’s public officials, tensions remained as some city officials, particularly Police Chief Short, continued to attack the poverty program in Houston and blamed some of its employees for causing the “riot.” An additional OEO inspector dispatched to

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22 Watson, Race and the Houston Police Department, 84-85 (quotation); Fred Baldwin to Walter Richter, memorandum, 17 May 1967, Box 73, Folder CAP, Houston, Harris County, Texas, Apr-Jun 1967, OEO Inspection Division, Inspection Reports, 1964-67, Record Group 381, NARA; Peter Spruance to Edgar May, memorandum, 25 May 1967, Box 73, Folder CAP, Houston, Harris County, Texas, Apr-Jun 1967, OEO Inspection Division, Inspection Reports, 1964-67, Record Group 381, NARA; Ray Reusche to Edgar May, memorandum, 26 May 1967, Box 73, Folder CAP, Houston, Harris County, Texas, Apr-Jun 1967, OEO Inspection Division, Inspection Reports, 1964-67, Record Group 381, NARA; David Beckwith and Fred Harper, “NAACP Offers TSU Peace Plan,” Houston Chronicle, May 19, 1967; “FBI to Probe TSU Civil Rights Charge,” Houston Post, May 19, 1967. Disagreement remains over who was responsible for firing the first shot of the “TSU Riot.” Reverend Bill Lawson stated, “The police started shooting before we went in. . . . The police ran over our backs charging the dormitory.” See Watson, Race and the Houston Police Department, 84.
Houston in the wake of the TSU riot met with Short and reported that “it was very
evident that the Chief was incensed that it cost the city of Houston a considerable sum of
money to police demonstrations backed by OEO-Federal money.” The inspector went on
to state that Short “did not believe that the TSU demonstrations were anything but H-
HCEOO inspired, citing Pluria Marshall’s part in the incidents.” Though Marshall was
not on the campus during the riot in May and the H-HCEOO Board attempted to restore
peace on the campus the night of the riot, the police chief continued to believe H-
HCEOO employees were behind the turmoil. After the riot, Short sent Welch a
photograph of a message spray painted on the wall of a TSU building: “Everybody
Rejoice – We Killed a White, Racist, Punk-Ass, Blue-Eyed, Stringy-Haired, Pussy Eating
COP!” Attached to the photograph was a personal note from the police chief that read,
“Mayor, this is the ‘great society’ that deserves so much help.” Clearly Short did not
interpret H-HCEOO’s overtures toward the city’s public officials as altruistic, and he
continued his assault on the poverty program in the city.\(^23\)

Much like the events in Settegast, the TSU riot served to put H-HCEOO leaders
on the defensive and forced them to put the brakes on their community organizers.
Ballew and Kelly witnessed firsthand the power of the mayor and police chief and the
weapons at their disposal if they chose to attack the poverty program. After the TSU riot,
Kelly and the board forbade H-HCEOO staff members and community organizers from
participating in protests or demonstrations in the city. In an even more shocking
development, after the TSU riot the H-HCEOO personnel committee agreed to submit the

\(^{23}\) Ray Reusche to Edgar May, memorandum, 26 May 1967, Box 73, Folder CAP, Houston, Harris County,
Texas, Apr-Jun 1967, OEO Inspection Division, Inspection Reports, 1964-67, Record Group 381, NARA
(first and second quotations); Herman Short to Louie Welch, memorandum, May 1967, Box 33, Welch
Papers (third and fourth quotations).
names of all current and prospective employees of the organization to Police Chief Short for pre-screening. If any employee or future employee was found to have a questionable police record, that person could be denied employment with the poverty program in Houston. Though this only partially satisfied Short, Mayor Welch was pleased with the new arrangement. In fact, Welch told an OEO inspector in late May that "H-HCEOO could be an effective organization" in Houston now that its leaders were willing to coordinate their activities with city officials. H-HCEOO had traveled a long distance from the idealistic days when Ballew first took the helm and committed the organization to the Alinsky model of community organization and empowerment of the poor by hiring Earl Allen and devoting nearly all of the agency’s resources to his community organizing efforts. But Ballew and Allen were no match for Welch and Short. Alinsky had been right; power relations were at the very heart of the problems of the poor. When H-HCEOO leaders decided to forge a friendly relationship with Houston’s public officials, they circumvented their own power in the fight against poverty.24

Satisfying local city officials largely ended the conflict with Welch and Short but it created an ever widening rift between the H-HCEOO Board on the one hand and community organizers and the poor themselves on the other. While the situation was heating up on the TSU campus, Earl Allen and his community organization staff began voicing their opposition to the new conservative mood of the H-HCEOO Board. OEO Inspector James Simons met with Allen and a few other dissident community organizers during the second week in April 1967 to investigate this troubling conflict between the H-

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24 Minutes of Houston-Harris County Economic Opportunity Organization Executive Committee, 17 April 1967, Box 73, Folder CAP, Houston, Harris County, Texas, July-Sept 1967, OEO Inspection Division, Inspection Reports, 1964-67, Record Group 381, NARA; Ray Reusche to Edgar May, memorandum, 26 May 1967, Box 73, Folder CAP, Houston, Harris County, Texas, Apr-Jun 1967, OEO Inspection Division, Inspection Reports, 1964-67, Record Group 381, NARA (quotation).
HCEOO Board and its staff. Simons discovered that “mass disillusionment and bitterness” had overtaken many members of the community organization staff and poor residents of the target neighborhoods because both groups believed that H-HCEOO leadership was attempting to block their efforts at organizing the poor in Houston. Allen and other community organizers warned Simons that the present course of H-HCEOO would invariably produce a “violent expression” of frustration in the poor neighborhoods where the War on Poverty had raised the expectations of poor residents but failed to deliver on its promises. One H-HCEOO community organizer in Settegast told Simons that he was losing both the respect of the neighborhood residents and the credibility he once enjoyed as a representative of H-HCEOO. He exclaimed, “If I was hired to pacify angry folk with promises . . . I won’t do it . . . I’ll starve first.” With the firm belief that if H-HCEOO failed to change course soon there would be a violent uprising in Houston’s poor neighborhoods, Allen and other community organizers met on April 8 and 9 to plan a demonstration and a public airing of their grievances at H-HCEOO headquarters.25

On the morning of April 10, 1967, as the H-HCEOO Board of Directors was busy considering disciplinary action against Pluria Marshall for his participation in the ongoing TSU demonstrations, Earl Allen and approximately fifty members of his community organization staff arrived at H-HCEOO headquarters in downtown Houston and began a protest vigil that lasted all day. Allen issued a statement explaining that he and his staff were demonstrating against the H-HCEOO Board’s waning support for community organization in Houston’s poor neighborhoods and its lack of effective communication with the staff about what the priorities and goals of the community action

25 James M. Simons to Edgar May, memorandum, 12 April 1967, Box 73, Folder CAP, Houston, Harris County, Texas, Apr-Jun 1967, OEO Inspection Division, Inspection Reports, 1964-67, Record Group 381, NARA.
agency would be in Houston. Although Ballew was still chairman of H-HCEOO, he was rapidly losing support among members of the board due to the controversies in Settegast and on the TSU campus. To make matters worse, Ballew interpreted Allen’s picketing of H-HCEOO headquarters as a personal insult that disregarded his support of community organizing over the past year. In response to Allen’s demands, Ballew initially refused to negotiate with the demonstrators. H-HCEOO Executive Director Charles Kelly went a step further by suspending three community organizers involved in the protest indefinitely and docking the pay for all others present during the demonstration. When Allen promised continued protests outside H-HCEOO headquarters until the board addressed their demands, officials at the Southwest Regional OEO office in Austin pressured Ballew and other board members to call a special H-HCEOO executive committee meeting to hear the community organization staff’s concerns.26

One week later Allen and other members of the community organization staff presented their list of grievances and demands to the H-HCEOO executive committee. After pointing out how several board members were attempting to defame the reputation of certain community organization staff members while criticizing their activities in Settegast and other areas where poor residents were being organized, the authors of the

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26 James M. Simons to Edgar May, memorandum, 10 April 1967, Box 73, Folder CAP, Houston, Harris County, Texas, Apr-Jun 1967, OEO Inspection Division, Inspection Reports, 1964-67, Record Group 381, NARA; Peter Spruance to Edgar May, memorandum, 10 April 1967, Box 73, Folder CAP, Houston, Harris County, Texas, Apr-Jun 1967, OEO Inspection Division, Inspection Reports, 1964-67, Record Group 381, NARA; Peter Spruance to Edgar May, memorandum, 11 April 1967, Box 73, Folder CAP, Houston, Harris County, Texas, Apr-Jun 1967, OEO Inspection Division, Inspection Reports, 1964-67, Record Group 381, NARA; Peter Spruance to Edgar May, memorandum, 12 April 1967, Box 73, Folder CAP, Houston, Harris County, Texas, Apr-Jun 1967, OEO Inspection Division, Inspection Reports, 1964-67, Record Group 381, NARA; James M. Simons to Edgar May, memorandum, 12 April 1967, Box 73, Folder CAP, Houston, Harris County, Texas, Apr-Jun 1967, OEO Inspection Division, Inspection Reports, 1964-67, Record Group 381, NARA; Minutes of Houston-Harris County Economic Opportunity Organization Executive Committee, 17 April 1967, Box 73, Folder CAP, Houston, Harris County, Texas, July-Sept 1967, OEO Inspection Division, Inspection Reports, 1964-67, Record Group 381, NARA; "'Railroad' Shouted: EOO Elects and Adjourns," Houston Post, April 11, 1967; "Three Area EOO Officials Suspended," Houston Chronicle, April 16, 1967.
list arrived at the crux of their disillusionment with H-HCEO as an organization. The report stated that the “Board is afraid of conflict, and as a result of that fear has allowed criticism of the program to be turned into condemnation of the Staff. . . . The fear of conflict results in our Board’s reacting in a manner which is diametrically opposed to the concept of maximum feasible participation of the poor.” The board was missing the point, the protesters said, because the “inevitability of internal and external conflict is inherent in the concept of Community Action itself; therefore, it is naïve to believe that one can conduct an effective Community Action Program without experiencing confrontation between the poor and the established power structures.” H-HCEO Board members “oppose the actions of our group,” the protesters argued, “because they know that we are fighting to bring about the realization of a program that will afford to the poor the opportunity to enter into direct confrontation with those forces which have kept them in a condition of deprivation.”

Several H-HCEO Board members in recent months had also accused Allen and his community organization staff of attempting to use the poverty program in Houston to advance a Black Power agenda. The authors of the list of grievances and demands answered this charge directly:

If Black Power means an attempt at forming a power base in Negro communities in an effort to afford to those residents the opportunities to control their destinies, then we advocate Black Power.

If Brown power means an attempt at forming a power base in a Latin American community in an effort to afford to those residents the opportunity to control their

27 Earl E. Allen, “Statement of Concerns, Grievances, and Recommendations, Presented to the Executive Committee,” 17 April 1967, Box 73, Folder CAP, Houston, Harris County, Texas, Jan-Mar 1967, OEO Inspection Division, Inspection Reports, 1964-67, Record Group 381, NARA.
own destinies, then we advocate Brown Power.

If White Power means an attempt at forming a power base in White communities in an effort to afford to those residents the opportunities to control their own destinies, then we advocate White Power.

If Human Power means an attempt to bring together all ethnic groups in an effort to create a harmonious and cooperative society which benefits from the participation of all its members, then we advocate Human Power.”

The authors accused certain board members of using fears of Black Power and urban rioting in an attempt to discredit the community organization staff and diminish the effectiveness of its confrontational strategy.²⁸

The authors concluded their statement of grievances and demands with a list of recommendations for the H-HCEOO Board of Directors. All of the recommendations boiled down to the demand that the community organization staff be allowed to continue using the tactics developed by Earl Allen free from interference by the board. The authors argued that the board should confine its actions to policy decisions and leave the operation of the community action program to the staff. In order to restore the confidence of the community organization staff as well as the poor residents themselves, the authors of the report demanded that “a statement be issued by the board endorsing the use of direct confrontation as a strategy for social change” and that the board dedicate itself to giving “support to employees engaged in activities in keeping with effective community action even when those activities are contrary to interests represented on the Board.” The dissident staff members recognized that they would not be able to continue organizing

²⁸ Earl E. Allen, “Statement of Concerns, Grievances, and Recommendations, Presented to the Executive Committee,” 17 April 1967, Box 73, Folder CAP, Houston, Harris County, Texas, Jan-Mar 1967, OEO Inspection Division, Inspection Reports, 1964-67, Record Group 381, NARA.
and empowering Houston’s poor communities unless the H-HCEO Board of Directors stood firmly behind their efforts. If Allen’s staff continued to be hamstrung by the new conservative mood that had taken hold of the board, H-HCEO community organizers realized they would continue to lose support and credibility in the target neighborhoods and a violent uprising would be a real possibility.  

Allen failed to persuade the board. He no doubt expected that, but what he could not have predicted was the resulting conflict within the community organization staff. An OEO inspector from Washington noted in the week after Allen and his staff made their demands on the H-HCEO Board that “due to a weak, ineffective executive director [Charles Kelly], two factions have evolved in H-HCEO with diametrically opposed philosophies concerning community development.” On one side of this philosophical rift was Earl Allen and his community organization staff, who the inspector described as displaying a “high degree of militancy” and being totally committed to “the use of direct confrontation as a strategy for social change.” The opposing faction was led by Mrs. Keith Finlayson, an H-HCEO community organizer who resigned in January 1967 and alleged that newly hired Director of Community Organization Earl Allen was “accelerating the conversion of [community organization] staff personnel to the Black Muslim faith” and “turning the poverty program into a militant Black Power Organization.” Though it must have seemed unlikely that a Methodist minister like Earl Allen would oversee the conversion of his operation into a Black Muslim organization, a sufficient number of other H-HCEO employees and board members believed her, even after the board investigated her allegations and found them to have no merit. Despite her

29 Earl E. Allen, “Statement of Concerns, Grievances, and Recommendations, Presented to the Executive Committee,” 17 April 1967, Box 73, Folder CAP, Houston, Harris County, Texas, Jan-Mar 1967, OEO Inspection Division, Inspection Reports, 1964-67, Record Group 381, NARA.
patently false allegations, the H-HCEOO Board refused to accept her resignation and simply reassigned her as a community organizer outside of the Settegast area and away from Allen’s day-to-day operations. From that position Finlayson continued her assault on Allen’s staff, and according to H-HCEOO Executive Director Charles Kelly, she also began providing information to the Houston Police Department and the local news media about the inner conflicts within H-HCEOO. By April 1967, when Allen and his staff revolted against the H-HCEOO Board, Finlayson had a solid group of supporters both on the H-HCEOO staff and on the Board of Directors. This group rejected the idea that community organizing should be the centerpiece of H-HCEOO’s activities in Houston’s poor neighborhoods and instead advocated for the development and coordination of social services for the poor. Rather than provoking the city’s public officials, Finlayson and her supporters argued that the status quo should be preserved and city leaders should be consulted and brought into the poverty program if possible. As the OEO inspector noted in his report, this dichotomy within the H-HCEOO staff seemed to be a harbinger of things to come in the future of the organization.30

While the H-HCEOO staff revolt was beginning to tear apart the organization from within, several of Houston’s public officials continued their external assault on the poverty program in the city and exploited the staff divisions in order to shape the future of the organization. Despite Welch’s gradually improving relationship with the H-HCEOO Board, the mayor soon found himself in an ideal position from which to criticize the parts of the War on Poverty in Houston with which he disagreed. In March 1967 Lyndon Johnson had appointed Welch to the National Advisory Council of the Office of

30 Ray Reusche to Edgar May, memorandum, 26 May 1967, Box 73, Folder CAP, Houston, Harris County, Texas, Apr-Jun 1967, OEO Inspection Division, Inspection Reports, 1964-67, Record Group 381, NARA.
Economic Opportunity, and the mayor’s first statement as a member of this council was to argue that some of the poverty programs needed to be ended, particularly the emphasis on community organizing. Welch told the *Houston Post* that protests were certainly not the intent of War on Poverty planners and that the “business of hiring buses to bus people to the wrong place in order to protest is certainly a waste of taxpayers’ money.” The protest at city hall, according to the mayor, was “misdirected and misguided and I hope will not recur.”

In May 1967 Mayor Welch, unable to control the H-HCEOO community organization staff completely and concerned that Earl Allen’s faction might emerge victorious, submitted a formal complaint to the OEO office in Washington; he characterized the complaint as a “series of questions that this office feels it can no longer delay in raising.” Welch continued, “As the OEO in both Washington and Austin knows, there has been deep concern about the poverty program in the Houston area for some time but it has only been in the last few weeks that the problem has reached a point where this office must bring the sort of information and questions contained in the attached to the attention of those in authority on a national level.” The mayor’s concerns were predictably centered on the question of the proper role of a community action agency in the fight against poverty. Welch expressed his outrage that H-HCEOO community organizers had promoted conflict between poor residents and the city’s government when “remedies through mediation and negotiation have not been exhausted.” After praising the service delivery approach of HAY, the mayor denounced H-HCEOO’s criticism of that approach and asked if “revolution” was the goal of H-HCEOO. Welch also expressed

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his dissatisfaction with the involvement of H-HCEOO employees in protests in the city and in demonstrations on the TSU campus. The mayor stated, “Since it appears that the [H-HCEOO] program is based, at least in part, on that used by The Woodlawn Organization initiated by Saul Alinsky, is it the opinion of the OEO that confrontation and conflict are the only means by which the poor can be heard by ‘the power structure’ and mediation of problems is a method not open to the impoverished?” The mayor concluded his letter by reporting on the results of a survey conducted by his office that showed most poor residents in Houston were dissatisfied with H-HCEOO and the poverty program in general. OEO officials in Washington forwarded Welch’s letter to the Southwest Regional OEO office, and Southwest Regional OEO Director Walter Richter promptly responded to Welch’s concerns and attempted to explain OEO policy regarding the activities of the H-HCEOO community organization staff. While Richter encouraged Welch to accept some degree of conflict in Houston as the natural outgrowth of poor people taking control of their own lives, he nonetheless wanted to prevent the situation from threatening the survival of the entire War on Poverty being conducted in Houston. Accordingly, Richter tried to assure the mayor that OEO policy would never allow a community action agency to promote “revolution” and promised that the poverty program in Houston would strive to work closely with the city’s elected officials to carry out a meaningful and effective attack on poverty.\(^{32}\)

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\(^{32}\) Louie Welch to OEO, Washington, D.C., n.d., Box 4, Folder Reports on the Success of OEO Programs, OEO Southwest Region, Records of the Director, Central Files, 1967-69, Record Group 381, NARASW (quotations); Edgar May to Bertrand Harding, memorandum, 26 May 1967, Box 73, Folder CAP, Houston, Harris County, Texas, Apr-Jun 1967, OEO Inspection Division, Inspection Reports, 1964-67, Record Group 381, NARA; Edgar May to Walter Richter, memorandum, 26 May 1967, Box 73, Folder CAP, Houston, Harris County, Texas, Apr-Jun 1967, OEO Inspection Division, Inspection Reports, 1964-67, Record Group 381, NARA; Peter Spruance to Edgar May, memorandum, 29 May 1967, Box 73, Folder CAP, Houston, Harris County, Texas, Oct-Dec 1967, OEO Inspection Division, Inspection Reports, 1964-67, Record Group 381, NARA; Edgar May to Bertrand Harding, memorandum, 20 June 1967, Box 73,
Republican Congressman George Bush had a similar reaction to the activities of H-HCEO0’s community organization staff, and there is evidence to suggest that he and Mayor Welch had begun working together as early as February 1967 to launch a public smear campaign against H-HCEO0 in Houston and to drive a wedge between community organizers and poor residents in Settegast. It was during that month that the mayor’s office began supplying Congressman Bush with confidential information about individual H-HCEO0 community organizers. Bush especially took issue with H-HCEO0’s voter registration campaign in Houston’s poor neighborhoods; poor and black residents were not the type of voters Republicans wanted to add to the roles in their effort to make inroads into the Solid South. When the Texas Attorney General ruled that H-HCEO0 employees did not violate any voter registration laws with their actions, Bush called for a change in OEO policy that would forbid these kinds of voter registration activities. By March 1967 the freshman congressman was criticizing the poverty program in Houston so loudly that OEO officials in Washington sent an inspector to meet with Bush to discuss his concerns. During this meeting, Bush voiced his strong opposition to H-HCEO0 Chairman Ballew’s confrontational philosophy and his emphasis on community organizing. Bush also charged that the H-HCEO0 Board of Directors regularly hired community organizers who had police records, which was information he had received from Welch. As the OEO inspector wrote in his report, “It appears obvious that a number of Bush’s concerns had been stimulated by the Mayor, particularly since he cited the

Folder CAP, Houston, Harris County, Texas, Apr-Jun 1967, OEO Inspection Division, Inspection Reports, 1964-67, Record Group 381, NARA.

33 On February 21, 1967, mayoral aide Blair Justice sent a memorandum to Mayor Welch stating, “In regard to the E.O.O., I would recommend that you wait until the letter is received, as promised, from Isiah Moore, President of the Settegast Heights Civic Club. This would be concrete evidence of the position taken by the people in the area regarding E.O.O. activities. Meanwhile, if you want, copies of the intelligence reports can be sent to George Bush.” See Blair Justice to Louie Welch, memorandum, 21 February 1967, Box 33, Welch Papers.
Mayor as the source of information concerning employment of persons with police records and extremist backgrounds.” The OEO inspector concluded that Bush was not antagonistic to the poverty program in Houston but that he preferred the service delivery approach of HAY and was incredibly fearful that H-HCEO’s community organizing tactics would lead to a violent urban riot in Houston.34

An important matter that further complicated this volatile situation, and one that Welch, Bush, and Short also sought to exploit in order to gain more control over the poverty program in Houston, was the increasing pressure exerted by OEO officials in Washington and Austin for H-HCEO and HAY to merge into a single community action agency. All of the OEO inspectors who visited Houston in February 1967 agreed that the most desirable solution would be a merger of H-HCEO and HAY into one community action agency for the city of Houston. According to OEO officials, even though each community action agency operated in a different part of the city, just the mere presence of two separate organizations indicated a failure to coordinate the poverty program in Houston. More importantly, an effective community action agency needed to be able to perform both functions – community organization as well as the coordination of social services. By merging Houston’s two community action agencies, OEO officials hoped to create a single agency that could carry out both objectives and at the same time improve the deficiencies of each organization by using the strengths of the other.35

34 Blair Justice to Louie Welch, memorandum, 21 February 1967, Box 33, Welch Papers; James M. Simons to Edgar May, memorandum, 23 February 1967, Box 73, Folder CAP, Houston, Harris County, Texas, Jan-March 1967, OEO Inspection Division, Inspection Reports, 1964-67, Record Group 381, NARA; Peter Spruance to Edgar May, memorandum, 20 March 1967, Box 59, Folder Houston Texas CAA 1968, OEO CAP Records of the Director, Subject Files, 1965-1969, Record Group 381, NARA; E.R. Brown to Joseph Fagan, memorandum, 21 March 1967, Box 73, Folder CAP, Houston, Harris County, Texas, Jan-Mar 1967, OEO Inspection Division, Inspection Reports, 1964-67, Record Group 381, NARA.

35 Office of Economic Opportunity, Office of Inspection, “Houston CAP,” February 1967, Box 10B, Folder Inspection and Evaluation Reports, OEO, Southwest Region, Community Action Programs, District
Although the goal of a merged community action agency for Houston was clear, the method of achieving this goal proved to be more problematic. As one OEO inspector stated in her report, leaders of H-HCEOO and HAY shared a mutual distrust of each other. “HAY characterizes H-HCEOO as a rabble-rousing organization run by an ambitious Board Director and untrained staff, achieving little in the way of significant improvements for the poor and lacking the confidence of its constituency. H-HCEOO sees HAY as a paternalistic traditional social service agency, confining itself largely to providing some palliative services for the indigent with minimum interest in community organization and minimum impact on changing the lot of the poor.” H-HCEOO seemed especially resistant to the idea of a merger between equals because its Board of Directors saw their organization as the legitimate community action agency for Houston and refused to enter into relationships with other antipoverty organizations unless the other agency agreed to give the H-HCEOO Board of Directors authority over its operations.

For example, H-HCEOO refused to take part in the manpower and employment program administered in part by the Texas Employment Commission (TEC) because the TEC refused to place their operations under the authority of the H-HCEOO Board.

Additionally, under Ballew’s leadership the H-HCEOO Board had taken the focus off of the delivery and coordination of social services and had become devoted to the

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organization of the poor as a means of addressing the problems of poverty in Houston. This emphasis on community organizing was not simply a tactical decision but rather a deeply held philosophical belief espoused most vocally by William Ballew and Earl Allen that the only sure way to attack the root causes of poverty was to organize and empower the poor to make demands on local public officials and begin to reform the institutions that affected their lives. For Ballew and Allen, this meant discarding the notion that the delivery and coordination of social services was an effective way of permanently addressing the needs of the poor. Instead, antipoverty activists should be working in poor neighborhoods to identify “gut issues” and organizing poor residents to come up with their own solutions to these problems. According to Ballew and Allen, poverty workers must be prepared to work with and support neighborhood residents even to the point of participating in protests and demonstrations against the city’s public officials. With a firm belief in this philosophy, it seemed incredibly unlikely indeed that H-HCEO and HAY would ever be able to merge and carry out a united antipoverty effort in Houston.36

This philosophical difference between H-HCEO and HAY that had existed since the inception of the War on Poverty in Houston played a major role during the spring of 1967 when Southwest Regional OEO officials finally insisted that the two organizations merge to form a single community action agency for the city of Houston. Although OEO

officials had been politely suggesting that H-HCEOO and HAY merge to form one community action agency for the Houston area since the fall of 1966, H-HCEOO’s emphasis on community organizing and confrontational tactics did not mesh well with HAY’s almost total dedication to the delivery and coordination of social services for the poor. When asked about a possible merger in January 1967, H-HCEOO Chairman Ballew pointed out that “each organization is approaching the poverty problem from vastly different viewpoints,” and Earl Allen stated that H-HCEOO’s “community organizers are not community flunkies. Our staff is not out to run people back and forth to Ben Taub [General Hospital]. There are too many people looking for handouts already. Our idea is to get people to act for themselves, to involve people in the planning which affects their lives.” HAY President Ed Bracher replied that HAY’s approach “has shown itself to be effective” and argued that HAY had “a highly competent professional staff, which is not dominated by the opinions of lay people. . . . [H-HCEOO] seems to get groups together solely for the purpose of marching on City Hall over every issue.” It was clear to Southwest Regional OEO officials that a merger between two groups with such strikingly different philosophies about how to solve the problems of poverty was going to be a difficult if not impossible process.37

Federal OEO inspectors who visited Houston during February 1967 agreed that a merged community action agency was the ideal solution, but all of them also noted in their reports that the competing philosophies and preferred tactics of the two groups would make a merger extremely unlikely. One inspector reflected on the “major

philosophical differences” between the two organizations, while another pointed out that each organization was “operating separately and increasingly at cross-purposes” and argued that “initial steps to achieve greater coordination between the two agencies have in one sense only served to reinforce existing antagonisms.” Another OEO inspector wrote in her report that directors of H-HCEO and HAY are “mutually suspicious of each other, but she optimistically noted that “the strengths of each organization offset the weaknesses of the other.” All of the federal inspectors agreed, however, that despite the major philosophical differences between the two organizations, the city of Houston desperately needed a single community action agency to carry out the War on Poverty and implement the full effect of the concept of community action. As one inspector concluded, “could they forget their rivalry and, through a consolidation, work together, concentrating on the determination of objectives, program priorities and organizational goals and on the mobilization and coordination of resources in the community, Houston would have a strong and viable community action program.” Another inspector ended her inspection report by stating that “even at this time we can conclude from our observations in Houston that both the provision of social services and community organizing tend to become ends in themselves, to the detriment of the ultimate goal, unless programs contain elements of both community organization and social services.” With a merger, the inspector argued, Houston’s community action program could become a model to illustrate the need for both approaches and an understanding of the totality of the concept of community action.\(^\text{38}\)

\(^{38}\) Office of Economic Opportunity, Office of Inspection, “Houston CAP,” February 1967, Box 10B, Folder Inspection and Evaluation Reports, OEO, Southwest Region, Community Action Programs, District Supervisors, Records Relating to City Economic Opportunity Boards, 1965-1968, Houston, Record Group 381, NARASW (first quotation); Office of Economic Opportunity, Office of Inspection, “Houston-Harris
Southwest Regional OEO officials acted on these reports and began pushing more forcefully for a merger between H-HCEOO and HAY during the first few months of 1967. William Finister, an analyst for the Southwest Region, suggested that the regional office use each organization’s funding request as leverage to encourage each to agree to a merger plan. Finister noted that for the 1967 fiscal year, HAY had requested $2.2 million and H-HCEOO had requested $3 million, and he argued that “the easiest way to get them to merge would be to tell both CAA’s that Houston will only receive X dollars this year with separate funding, but that if they merge Houston will get X + bonus dollars.” Southwest OEO officials responded favorably to Finister’s suggestion, and in late February they notified representatives from H-HCEOO and HAY that the two organizations must merge to create a single community action agency by April 30, 1967, and that no further grants would be made except to a single agency in Houston.

Additionally, Southwest OEO officials warned that if H-HCEOO and HAY were unable to settle their differences and work together, a completely new community action agency might be created for the city of Houston.39

During this controversy over the proposed merger, Congressman Bush and Mayor Welch both attempted to enter the fray in order to gain more control over the poverty program in Houston. In mid-March 1967 OEO officials in Washington met separately with Bush and Welch to address their concerns about the power struggle shaping up within Houston's community action program. Congressman Bush, who had already told OEO officials that he strongly opposed H-HCEOO's focus on community organizing and expressed his displeasure about the organization's voter registration drive in Houston, worried that HAY's service delivery approach would be lost in a merger of the two community action agencies in the city. Mayor Welch made it clear that he wanted more control over the activities of the merged community action agency than he had had over H-HCEOO, and OEO officials quickly recognized that Welch would use the increasingly negative public image of H-HCEOO "as a lever against present H-HCEOO leadership in a power struggle now going on for control of the Houston CAP program." During the meetings with Bush and Welch it also became apparent that the two politicians would continue working together to rein in Earl Allen and the rest of H-HCEOO's community organization staff, and they would be able to exert even more influence over the poverty program in Houston since President Johnson had named Welch to the National Advisory Council of OEO.40

After the meetings, OEO officials concluded that the mayor and his allies, including Bush, would continue to battle H-HCEOO leaders for control of the community

NARA; Peter Spruance to C.B. Patrick, memorandum, 27 March 1967, Box 59, Folder Houston Texas CAA 1968, OEO CAP Records of the Director, Subject Files, 1965-1969, Record Group 381, NARA. 40 Peter Spruance to Edgar May, memorandum, 20 March 1967, Box 59, Folder Houston Texas CAA 1968, OEO CAP Records of the Director, Subject Files, 1965-1969, Record Group 381, NARA (quotation); E.R. Brown to Joseph Fagan, memorandum, 21 March 1967, Box 73, Folder CAP, Houston, Harris County, Texas, Jan-Mar 1967, OEO Inspection Division, Inspection Reports, 1964-67, Record Group 381, NARA.
action program in Houston and stated that the situation in the city would “remain warm for some time.” They retained their faith in H-HCEOO Chairman Ballew, however, and noted that as head of the largest community action agency in Houston, Ballew had shown himself to be “liberal, savvy, and in all respects well-connected.” OEO officials continued, “Bush and others may disagree with him, but I doubt that they will be able to push him around easily. Ballew himself senses the situation as one of an impending power struggle for the CAP program, where there is some need for increased self-policing by H-HCEOO. He sees Mayor Welch as the principal antagonist, and he is very interested in learning who is responsible for the Mayor’s appointment to the National Advisory Council of OEO.” Although Welch and Bush had begun working together to control the War on Poverty in Houston, OEO officials remained confident that under Ballew’s leadership, H-HCEOO would remain the dominant organization and would continue the work they had begun the previous year.41

OEO officials underestimated the power of Welch and Bush, however, even if they correctly gauged the tenacity and determination of Ballew. The mayor had sinisterly yet brilliantly used information from the Settegast protest and the TSU riot to discredit H-HCEOO’s community organizing tactics not only among Houston residents uninvolved in the poverty program but also among some H-HCEOO Board members and poor residents themselves. There is evidence that Welch instructed members of his staff to cultivate animosity against H-HCEOO’s community organizers in the Settegast area by illustrating how Earl Allen and his organizers had bypassed respectable, middle-class leadership in the neighborhoods and had turned young people against their elders. Welch

41 Peter Spruance to Edgar May, memorandum, 20 March 1967, Box 59, Folder Houston Texas CAA 1968, OEO CAP Records of the Director, Subject Files, 1965-1969, Record Group 381, NARA.
had also used information collected from Houston Police Chief Herman Short to launch a public smear campaign against individual community organizers employed by H-HCEOO and had supplied this confidential information to a local radio station to be broadcast all over the city. By March 1967 Welch was able to secure the support of Congressman Bush, who was already opposed in principle to a massive antipoverty program funded by the federal government, especially if it meant poor people would be organized to challenge local power structures. With his appointment to the National Advisory Council of OEO, Welch enjoyed a rapidly increasing amount of influence over the poverty program in his city. Regardless of how dedicated Ballew was to the Alinsky model of community organization and empowerment of the poor, neither he nor his organization had the strength to challenge the city’s public officials and expect to emerge victorious when those local officials were determined to undermine Ballew’s entire antipoverty philosophy and were willing to use nearly all of the powerful weapons at their disposal.  

Mayor Welch’s assault on the H-HCEOO staff had a profound effect on the Board of Directors and on Executive Director Charles Kelly. After the turmoil in Settegast, Kelly and the board decided to pull the community organizers out of the neighborhoods and reassign them to different parts of the city. It was clear that many board members who had once supported Ballew’s vision for dedicating H-HCEOO to organizing poor people to challenge local elected officials were now beginning to back off from that commitment. In the wake of the controversy in Settegast and the attacks by Mayor Welch and Police Chief Short, the H-HCEOO Board of Directors convened a special meeting to develop a new community development plan without the input of Ballew or Allen. This

42 Blair Justice to Louie Welch, memorandum, 21 February 1967, Box 33, Welch Papers.
new community development plan was a total repudiation of the Saul Alinsky method; it
called for placing an experienced social service worker in each neighborhood to direct
poor residents to the proper service agency rather than attempting to organize them. Earl
Allen’s community organization staff knew this shift would eventually mean an end to
their methods of organizing the poor to challenge the city’s public officials, and this
realization was partly responsible for the staff revolt that took place in April 1967.
Ironically, however, the demonstrations led by Allen at H-HCEOO headquarters served
to push the H-HCEOO Board into an even more defensive position as Allen lost even
more support among board members. With Southwest Regional OEO officials putting
constant pressure on the H-HCEOO Board of Directors to approve a merger plan to
create a single community action agency for Houston, many board members were fearful
that Allen’s protests would harm their efforts to bring about a successful merger with
HAY.43

From the very first suggestion that H-HCEOO and HAY should merge to form a
single community action agency for the city of Houston, H-HCEOO Chairman Ballew
opposed the idea on the grounds that H-HCEOO’s community organization efforts would
be drowned out by HAY’s emphasis on the delivery and coordination of social services
and its members’ aversion to using confrontational tactics to challenge the city’s public
officials. For much of the time Ballew also had the support of the majority of the Board
of Directors, many of whom had been willing to allow Ballew and Allen to experiment

43 Saralee Tiede, “U.S. Pushes Faster Poverty Unit Merger,” Houston Chronicle, March 30, 1967; Peter
Spruance to Edgar May, memorandum, 10 April 1967, Box 73, Folder CAP, Houston, Harris County,
Texas, Apr-Jun 1967, OEO Inspection Division, Inspection Reports, 1964-67, Record Group 381, NARA;
James M. Simons to Edgar May, memorandum, 12 April 1967, Box 73, Folder CAP, Houston, Harris
County, Texas, Apr-Jun 1967, OEO Inspection Division, Inspection Reports, 1964-67, Record Group 381,
NARA; Fred Baldwin to Francis Williams, 14 April 1967, Box 73, Folder CAP, Houston, Harris County,
Texas, Apr-Jun 1967, OEO Inspection Division, Inspection Reports, 1964-67, Record Group 381, NARA.
with the Alinsky method even if they did not share the chairman’s radical philosophy and his commitment to community organization. When Southwest Regional OEO officials began threatening to cut funding to both agencies in the spring of 1967 if no merger could be worked out and reeling under a heavy barrage of attacks from Mayor Welch and Police Chief Short, however, many H-HCEO O Board members became much more receptive to the idea of a merger with HAY. Not only did a majority of the H-HCEO O Board support a negotiated merger between the two organizations by April 1967, but a significant number of them were also willing to back off from their previous commitment to community organizing, as evidenced by the new community development plan many of them developed at the end of March. While a majority of H-HCEO O Board members began making overtures toward HAY officials for fear that failure to do so would mean extinction and possibly the end of community action in Houston, Ballew remained bitterly opposed to the idea of a merger.

It became clear in early April 1967 that no successful merger between H-HCEO O and HAY could occur with Ballew as chairman of H-HCEO O, and several board members decided that Ballew would have to be removed as an obstacle to a successful merger. Sensing this development and recognizing that the H-HCEO O Board was beginning to move the poverty program in a much more conservative direction, Ballew announced that he would not seek reelection as chairman. During a meeting on April 10, 1967, the H-HCEO O Board of Directors continued their conservative shift by electing Francis Williams, a prominent African American attorney in Houston and former head of the city’s NAACP chapter, as the new chairman. Upon accepting the position, Williams separated himself from the previous leadership by pointing out that he was certainly no
radical. "My views are well-known," Williams told reporters. "I'm NAACP, not SNCC, not CORE, not Stokely Carmichael. I'm for negotiation, time-honored, tried and true methods." The new chairman vowed that his first priority would be to solve the twin problems of a merger with HAY and the staff revolt that was taking place, and he argued that both issues would be handled quickly and efficiently. Williams envisioned after the merger a single community action agency for Houston that would find out from poor residents themselves what types of social services they needed and help locate and coordinate these services for the poor in Houston. At no point during his talk with reporters did Williams touch on the subject of community organizing or confrontational tactics, despite the fact that this issue had caused a major rift within the organization that was still unresolved. Outgoing chairman Ballew stated that Williams was inheriting "a can of worms," and even Williams called the job he accepted "a hot potato." Williams continued, "But I didn't feel I could shirk it. Somebody has to bell the cat. Somebody has to try, because the program is of great importance to this city." 44

Williams immediately began working toward a successful merger between H-HCEOO and HAY. Even before Williams officially began in his new position as H-HCEOO chairman, Southwest Regional OEO officials began contacting him in an attempt to speed up the merger process. At the urging of Fred Baldwin, a Southwest OEO representative assigned to Houston, Williams called a meeting in late April 1967 between the boards of H-HCEOO and HAY in order to come up with a plan to merge the two organizations and create a single community action agency. During this meeting held on

April 20, 1967, representatives from H-HCEOO and HAY finally agreed to a merger plan that would combine aspects of each organization to create the Harris County Community Action Association (HCCAA). The plan called for every member from each agency’s board and executive committee to be included on the new board of directors and that a fifteen-member steering committee, elected by the new board, oversee the merger process. In an effort to satisfy Mayor Welch, the plan also called for the mayor to appoint an additional twenty-five members to the Board of Directors of the new organization and one person to the steering committee.⁴⁵

The most important negotiation associated with the merger, and the issue that had prevented any successful attempt at bringing the two organizations together in the past, was the role each staff would play in the new merged community action agency. Unlike Ballew, Francis Williams and a majority of the H-HCEOO Board members were now willing to compromise on this issue, and the concessions they made on this point had significant implications for the future role of community organizers in the newly created HCCAA. The merger plan stated that the former HAY staff members would continue to focus on delivery and coordination of social services for poor residents in Houston. The plan stated that they would “serve primarily as a community forum for planning, recommending policies and programs and conducting public hearings.” Former H-HCEOO staff, according to the merger plan, would continue to focus on community

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organization, but with a strikingly different definition of community organization than the one Ballew and Allen had developed in the fall of 1966. Within HCCAA, community organization would be “defined as assisting groups to seek solutions, through orderly petitioning and public voice, to serious problems in poverty stricken neighborhoods that affect the rights of their residents as citizens, the conditions under which they live and work, and their needs for additional public and private support.” Community organizers would still have a role to play in the new community action agency for Houston, but their stated goals and duties had been considerably revised so their activities would not be so challenging to the city’s public officials. Although this compromise seemed to offer a way to pacify Welch and ensure the continuation of the War on Poverty in Houston, in reality it merely exacerbated the rift among the staff and heightened the tensions between poverty workers who held different beliefs about how to solve the problems of poverty. These tensions would continue to plague the new organization and hamper its ability to confront poverty in Houston in an effective and meaningful way, and after May 1967 Williams would thoroughly mishandle these two competing factions within the organization.  

By mid-May 1967 both H-HCEO and HAY had approved the merger plan, and on May 16 the Harris County Community Action Association came into existence as Houston’s single community action agency with Francis Williams as Chairman of the Board of Directors. Only a few months prior to the creation of HCCAA, the merger of H-HCEO and HAY seemed a remote possibility. The sharp philosophical differences between members of each organization reflected a significant disagreement about the

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meaning of community action and the role of community organizers in the fight against poverty in Houston. As chairman of H-HCEO0, William Ballew had committed his agency to the Saul Alinsky model of community organization and empowerment of the poor and had adopted confrontational tactics to challenge the city's public officials and attempt to reform its institutions. HAY officials, on the other hand, were firmly committed to the non-confrontational aspects of community action, which included the delivery and coordination of social welfare services. The only way these two organizations could come together to produce a single community action agency was for one of them to back off from its firm commitment to their proposed solution for solving the problems of poverty. This is precisely what occurred. In response to sustained attacks from the city’s public officials, H-HCEO0 officials gradually abandoned Ballew’s commitment to the Alinsky philosophy, and in the process they tamed their own community organization staff. Four events during the spring of 1967 – the Settegast revolt, the TSU riot, the staff uprising, and the forced merger of H-HCEO0 and HAY – worked to put H-HCEO0 leaders on the defensive and opened up a space for several local officials to reassert their authority over the poverty program in Houston. By redefining the concept and goals of community organizing, H-HCEO0 officials made their organization more acceptable to the HAY Board of Directors and to the city’s public officials. Francis Williams and other H-HCEO0 Board members who helped this process along probably ensured that the community action program would continue in Houston without additional attacks from Mayor Welch, Congressman Bush, or Police Chief Short, but in abandoning community organizing efforts, they also undercut the successes Earl Allen and his staff had achieved in the city and ensured they would not be repeated in the
future. As Ballew watched the organization he led for more than a year slip away, he noted that the new HCCAA Board could become simply “a debating society, and the executive committee can become a tool of local government.” By this time, however, the majority of former H-HCEO Board members had turned their backs on Ballew and committed themselves to a more conservative vision for the Community Action Program in Houston.47

Chapter 5

In August 1967, Fred Baldwin, Community Action Program administrator for the Office of Economic Opportunity’s southwest regional office, sent a lengthy memo to southwest OEO director Walter Richter updating him on the status of several community action agencies throughout the region. Baldwin provided very matter-of-fact details about community action agencies in Albuquerque, Dallas, and a few other locations, but he saved for last the “Houston situation,” a term many OEO officials began using by the summer of 1967 to refer to recent events in the city. The Harris County Community Action Association (HCCAA), an organization born out of the merger between the radical and confrontational Houston-Harris County Economic Opportunity Organization (H-HCEOO) and the conservative Houston Action for Youth (HAY), had been through a troubling summer filled with ideological disputes, internal divisions, and negative publicity. Baldwin did not even feel the need to recount the recent events in Houston or to provide an analysis of the situation. Rather, Baldwin quoted from Leo Tolstoy’s War and Peace in order to stress to Richter that the War on Poverty was larger than the “Houston situation” and to urge him to keep everything in its proper perspective. Baldwin quoted from Book VIII in which Tolstoy described the Battle of Borodino:

Napoleon, standing on the knoll, looked through a field glass, and in its small circlet saw smoke and men, sometimes his own and sometimes Russians, but when he looked again with the naked eye, he could not tell where what he had seen was. He descended the knoll and began walking
up and down before it. Occasionally he stopped, listened to the firing, and
gazed intently at the battlefield. But not only was it impossible to make
out what was happening from where he was standing down below, or from
the knoll above on which some of his generals had taken their stand, but
even from the fleches themselves. . . . From the battlefield adjutants he
had sent out, and orderlies from his marshals, kept galloping up to
Napoleon with reports of the progress of the action, but all these reports
were false, both because it was impossible in the heat of battle to say what
was happening at any given moment and because many of the adjutants
did not go to the actual place of conflict but reported what they had heard
from others; and also because while an adjutant was riding more than a
mile to Napoleon circumstances changed and the news he brought was
already becoming false.¹

The imagery of a fierce and chaotic battle that Baldwin conjured in his quotation
was certainly fitting to what had transpired in Houston since the merger. In order to
facilitate a successful merger with HAY, members of the H-HCEO Board of directors
had moved in a more conservative and less confrontational direction by abandoning the
Saul Alinsky method and ousting William Ballew, a dedicated Alinsky disciple, from the
organization. While this strategy was adequate for making H-HCEO more acceptable to
Houston’s public officials and led to a successful merger, a surprising number of radicals
remained on the HCCAA staff, including Earl Allen. Nevertheless, this process of

¹ Fred Baldwin to Walter Richter, memorandum, 25 August 1967, Box 1, Folder CAP Administrator
Memoranda (2), Office of Economic Opportunity, Southwest Region, Community Action Program
Correspondence, Memos, CAP Administrator-Family Planning, Record Group 381, National Archives and
Records Administration, Southwest Region, Fort Worth, Texas (hereafter cited as NARASW).
moving HCCAA in a direction that was more conservative, more amenable to the city’s public officials, less confrontational, and less committed to community organizing and the empowerment of the poor continued as Francis Williams led the antipoverty effort over the next two years as HCCAA Chairman and later as HCCAA Executive Director.

Between May 1967 and the end of 1969, Francis Williams and his allies on the HCCAA Board and on the staff were victorious in defeating the radicals who remained in the community action agency after the merger, and in so doing they rendered the organization more conservative and established a close working relationship with the city’s public officials, particularly Mayor Louie Welch. Yet Williams’s efforts produced several unintended consequences, the most important of which was that his attempts to pull back the reins on HCCAA’s more radical and confrontational activities alienated the two constituencies that had made the organization thrive – the poor who supplied the local support for the poverty program and the grassroots antipoverty activists who provided the bulk of the foot soldiers for the War on Poverty in the city. In the process, although Williams undoubtedly ensured the short-term survival of HCCAA, many of Houston’s poor residents and grassroots antipoverty activists became disillusioned with the entire War on Poverty. As a result, during these two years there were no major victories for Houston’s poor that came as a result of HCCAA’s activities. By 1969 HCCAA was a large and bureaucratic machine that dispensed an array of social services but lacked the support and confidence of the very people who had enabled the Houston antipoverty program to achieve a modest level of success in the past.

The first step Williams and other conservatives took to change their new organization was calling for the creation of an entirely new board of directors and
executive committee. The new 150-member board would consist of fifty poor residents from the target neighborhoods, fifty individuals appointed by Houston’s civic organizations, twenty-five appointed by the mayor, and twenty-five appointed by the county judge. The new twenty-four-member executive committee would be made up of eight individuals chosen by the poor, eight chosen by civic organizations, four chosen by the mayor, and four chosen by the county judge. Houston’s public officials thus enjoyed control of one-third of HCCAA’s board and executive committee. As the *Houston Chronicle* reported, having the mayor and county judge play important roles in the community action agency’s planning and implementation of programs would ensure that HCCAA’s activities would be “unlikely to raise hackles this year as it did last. . . . HCCAA looks like an organization built on the mistakes of its predecessors, neither as strict and structured as HAY, nor as apt to run amok as [H-HCEO].”

Williams and his allies also decided that Charles Kelly remained entirely too committed to Ballew’s radical vision to be allowed to continue serving as executive director of HCCAA, a position he had held with H-HCEO since 1966. Instead, Williams and other conservative board members wanted the job to go to Franklin Harbach, the chairman of the Neighborhood Centers Association (NCA), who was nearing retirement. Williams hoped that Harbach would be able to lead the newly created organization through its first year or two and set it on a course resembling the liberal settlement-house style of the NCA. A federal OEO inspector overseeing the merger

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described Harbach as a “1930s liberal who has been active in the settlement house movement,” and a Houston Chronicle reporter referred to him as a moderate liberal who preferred “negotiation to head-on assault.” Though Harbach declined the offer, citing his imminent retirement and his unwillingness to get involved in HCCAA’s internal divisions, Williams’s overtures toward someone like Harbach to head up the city’s community action agency was illustrative of the more conservative direction he wanted to move the organization.3

According to a federal OEO inspector assigned to Houston to oversee the merger, Mayor Louie Welch and County Judge Bill Elliott were eager to be brought back into the poverty program after being shut out by Ballew and other radicals on the board. Even before the conclusion of the successful merger between the two antipoverty organizations, several H-HCEO0 Board members began forging a closer link between Houston’s public officials and their agency. By the time the merger was complete, a federal OEO inspector could claim with confidence that there were significantly “closer working arrangements of H-HCEO0 with Houston authorities.” To make sure that his office would be consistently kept informed of the new community action’s activities, Mayor Welch arranged for Carl Moore, a HCCAA employee, to act as an inside informant who would report to the mayor’s aides on the actions of the HCCAA staff. Moore had been a HAY employee before the merger and was one of the individuals arrested on the Texas Southern University campus after the riot in mid-May. It is unclear

whether Moore was already an informant for the mayor and police chief before the riot, but after the riot the evidence is clear that Moore agreed to provide inside information about the poverty program to the mayor and his staff. In a special inspection report filed in August 1967, an OEO inspector identified Carl Moore as an informant and stated that “HAY strategy was to infiltrate the militants with informers and pass on all intelligence to the Mayor – through [mayoral aide Blair] Justice – to help the mayor put down any direct, concerted activity,” such as poverty workers involving themselves in protests. With Moore working as an inside informant on the HCCAA staff, Welch believed he would never be unaware of the activities of poverty workers in Houston again.4

Federal OEO inspectors were extremely skeptical about the renewed relationship between Houston’s community action agency and the city’s public officials, and several inspectors warned that Welch’s eagerness to be involved in the War on Poverty in the city most certainly stemmed from his desire to control HCCAA’s activities. As one OEO inspector stated, Welch’s past behavior relative to the community action program in Houston showed that he was “capable of putting his name to biased and unsubstantiated allegations about OEO-related persons,” and despite the closer working relationship, “we expect that output of this nature from the Mayor’s Office may continue indefinitely.” Welch had changed tactics, but it was clear that his ideas about the proper role of

4 Ray Reusche to Edgar May, memorandum, 26 May 1967, Box 73, Folder CAP, Houston, Harris County, Texas, Apr-Jun 1967, Office of Economic Opportunity, Inspection Division, Inspection Reports, 1964-67, Record Group 381, NARA (first quotation); James M. Simons to Edgar May, memorandum, 17 August 1967, Box 73, Folder CAP, Houston, Harris County, Texas, July-Sept 1967, Office of Economic Opportunity, Inspection Division, Inspection Reports, 1964-67, Record Group 381, NARA (second quotation). For further evidence of Carl Moore’s role as an informant, see Edgar May to Walter Richter, memorandum, 17 May 1967, Box 73, Folder CAP, Houston, Harris County, Texas, Apr-Jun 1967, Office of Economic Opportunity, Inspection Division, Inspection Reports, 1964-67, Record Group 381, NARA, and Peter Spruance to Edgar May, memorandum, 17 May 1967, Box 73, Folder CAP, Houston, Harris County, Texas, Apr-Jun 1967, Office of Economic Opportunity, Inspection Division, Inspection Reports, 1964-67, Record Group 381, NARA.
Houston's community action agency remained the same as what they had been when he launched a concerted attack on Ballew and the radicals.\(^5\)

In June 1967 HCCAA received an OEO grant for $5 million to carry out its agenda for the next year, and through its programs and projects HCCAA leaders showed just how much more moderate and non-confrontational the agency had become since the days when Ballew implemented his radical vision for the community action program. In several areas of operation – the oversight of the Legal Services program, the administration of the Head Start program, the continuation of the Settegast Clinic, the implementation of various programs and services in poor neighborhoods, and the management of the community organization department – Williams and the conservative HCCAA Board of directors showed that their methods for attacking poverty in Houston were not only moderate but ineffective for attacking root causes of poverty. To make matters even worse, poor Houston residents began losing their confidence in the War on Poverty because of the impotent tactics and strategies of HCCAA under the direction of Williams and the conservatives.\(^6\)

One of the clearest examples of HCCAA's conservative shift and its impact on the fight against poverty in Houston was the organization's handling of the Legal Services program. By the summer of 1967 the Houston Legal Foundation had failed to produce an impressive record of providing legal aid to the poor and, more importantly, had not lived up to expectations set by Ballew and other OEO officials who hoped

\(^5\) Peter Spruance to Edgar May, memorandum, 29 May 1967, Box 74, Folder Texas OEO Program (Compilation) 1967 May-July, Office of Economic Opportunity, Inspection Division, Inspection Reports, 1964-67, Record Group 381, NARA.

Houston’s program could produce transformative change in the lives of poor people and possibly reform the legal system that played an important role in keeping people in poverty. When he pushed for the creation of a large and robust Legal Services program in 1966, Ballew firmly believed that legal aid for the poor would be an excellent vehicle to empower the poor to challenge the city’s structural forces that kept them subjugated and mired in poverty. At its inception in Houston in 1966, an OEO official commented that the Houston Legal Foundation’s proposed program represented the country’s most far reaching and potentially socially transformative legal services program and frequently used the words “social revolution” and “agents of change” when referring to the program and its attorneys. When OEO officials stressed to HLF leaders the necessity of accepting civil rights cases in October 1966, Ballew most certainly was hopeful that the Legal Services program in Houston would attempt to challenge significant pillars of local power and reform institutions that affected the lives of poor people.

By July 1967, however, the Houston Legal Foundation had only three remaining fully operational neighborhood law offices, and even these offices were plagued with staff shortages and a general lack of awareness among poor residents about their existence. The types of cases that attorneys handled in these law offices did not possess the socially transformative potential for which Ballew had hoped when he advocated the program. Rather, more than 50 percent of the cases involved divorce, annulment, separation, child custody, paternity, and adoption. A handful of the remaining cases contained elements that may have had the potential for social reform, but the majority of them involved wage claims, bankruptcy, workmen’s compensation issues, and other personal matters. There was also growing criticism coming from residents of Houston’s

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7 See Chapter 2 for a description of Ballew’s vision for the Houston Legal Foundation.
African American and Mexican American neighborhoods that the foundation was not adequately aggressive about pursuing civil rights cases. While the HLF provided much needed legal services to poor individuals in a limited area of Houston, the overall program was a far cry from what Ballew and other radicals had envisioned when they helped launch the Legal Services program in the city.  

A more urgent problem facing the Houston Legal Foundation was a very unstable financial situation caused by the HCCAA Board’s neglect of the organization and its financial wellbeing. In September 1967 Judge Sam Johnson resigned from his position as the foundation’s executive director to become a judge on the 14th Court of Civil Appeals and left the HLF without a permanent executive director for the rest of the year. During the last few months of 1967 the foundation fell into financial trouble caused mostly by improper spending. The southwest regional OEO office performed an audit of the organization that showed the HLF had spent $14,284 for items not permitted under OEO guidelines, including employee salaries that exceeded federal limits and expensive office equipment. Southwest regional OEO officials strongly urged HLF administrators to address their financial troubles or risk having their federal funding completely cut off. Without an active executive director and with little encouragement or direction from HCCAA, however, the HLF sank further into financial turmoil by the end of the year.

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9 Gordon Gooch to Daniel E. Trevino, 6 February 1968, Box 10, Folder General Correspondence, Jan-July 1968, Office of Economic Opportunity, Southwest Region, Community Action Programs, District Supervisors, Records Relating to City Economic Opportunity Boards, 1965-1968, Houston, Record Group
The Houston Legal Foundation hired a new executive director in January 1968 and finally ironed out its financial troubles the following month, but the organization's difficulties did not end there. A new set of problems erupted when OEO inspectors discovered that the HLF did not have enough representatives of the poor on its board of directors to meet federal guidelines for the "maximum feasible participation" of the poor. A federal OEO inspection during the summer of 1968 revealed that the HLF had no poor residents or even representatives of the poor on its board of directors; the twenty-one-member board was instead made up of state and federal judges, local school officials, and lawyers. HLF administrators defended their exclusion of the poor by arguing that poor people were not qualified to determine policy for a legal aid organization. Federal OEO officials responded with another threat to cut off funding unless the organization's board of directors devised a plan to include poor residents in the decision making processes of the group.10

With this latest threat of withholding funds, several HLF board members decided to use the Houston press to fight this battle with OEO officials. After a board meeting in which a majority of the members voted down a plan to add poor residents to the board, several members openly expressed their opposition to appointing poor people to the board to a Houston Post reporter who was writing a three-part series on the conflict. While one member compared placing poor residents on the HLF board to a medical surgeon including heart patients on his surgical team, Harry Patterson, chairman of the

10 Walter Richter to Harry W. Patterson, 26 June 1968, Box 1, Folder Correspondence, June-October 1968, Office of Economic Opportunity, Southwest Region, Records of the Director, Correspondence, 1967-69, Record Group 381, NARASW; "Talks Planned To Avoid Loss of Law Funds," Houston Chronicle, July 12, 1968; "Legal Foundation Will Meet With OEO Official," Houston Post, July 16, 1968.
board, stated, "We feel this is a professional organization that should be operated on the highest ethical concepts – and that non-attorney control would dilute this concept."

Patterson also argued that the foundation was already in compliance because poor residents were currently represented by four members of the board, three of whom were African American and one of whom was Mexican American. Patterson did not mention, however, that three of these men were attorneys, one was the dean of the Texas Southern University law school, and none of them were either poor or elected by the poor.11

Harold Scarlett, the Houston Post reporter following this story, provided great insight into what was at the root of this conflict. In the second part of his series, Scarlett argued that "a much deeper issues underlies this surface struggle" than the supposed problem of including the poor on the organization’s board of directors. The real issue, according to at least one board member that Scarlett quoted, was "whether the Houston Legal Foundation is going to engage in law reform and social reform.” It was clear to many observers that the organization had pledged itself to solving legal problems for poor individuals but had shied away from attempting to reform the legal system to work more fairly for poor residents and from filing any suits that would have far reaching implications, such as those involving civil rights or school desegregation. Some poor residents had even begun to complain that the foundation was created by powerful members of Houston’s elaborate power structure to serve as “a pacifier [and] a remover of hangnails rather than a surgeon cutting out the deeply imbedded causes of poverty.”

Several board members retorted that the organization had an advisory board that poor residents could join if they wanted to have a voice in the operations of the foundation. Poor residents, however, complained that the advisory board was often ignored because

the board’s policy was “just to keep the lid on” any potentially volatile situation that might arise. HLF board members, as Scarlett pointed out, “do not feel social crusading is their proper function.” These board members believed that including laymen on the board would “reduce the effectiveness of the board and distort the primary function of HLF, which is to provide legal services instead of participating in social reforms.” HLF Board Chairman Patterson opposed the idea of placing poor residents on the board so strongly that he threatened to allow the legal services program in Houston to get canceled altogether rather than conform to the federal policy of “maximum feasible participation” of the poor.

By the summer of 1968 HCCAA leaders had been almost totally uninvolved in the administration of Houston’s Legal Services program for more than a year. Near the end of the summer, however, at the urging of the southwest regional OEO office, HCCAA officials finally offered to end their silence and help negotiate a reconciliation between the two parties. The plan that HCCAA officials drew up, and the one eventually adopted by the HLF board, was indicative of how far the conservative boards of both organizations had gotten from Ballew’s vision for a robust and socially transformative legal services program for Houston. Under the new arrangement, four representatives of the poor would be seated on the HLF board of directors with full voting power. These representatives would not be elected by the poor, but rather they would be appointed by the HLF advisory board, which in theory was composed of poor residents. The most

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12 Harry W. Patterson to Walter Richter, 21 June 1968, Box 1, Folder Correspondence, June-October 1968, Office of Economic Opportunity, Southwest Region, Records of the Director, Correspondence, 1967-69, Record Group 381, NARASW; Harold Scarlett, “Lawyers Draw the Line,” Houston Post, July 22, 1968 (quotations).
14 Carlos Conde, “Poor People Win 4 Seats as HLF Board Members,” Houston Chronicle, July 24, 1968.
surprising part of the plan, however, was the edict that the advisory board would no longer have any authority to make recommendations to HLF board members on matters of policy or procedure or to initiate grievance procedures against the board. This action by the HLF board was a clear attempt to limit the role that poor residents would play in the organization, especially considering the four poor residents on the board would be outnumbered by the twenty-one other members and would have no one to appeal to for support within the organization. Russell L. Hayes, vice-chairman of the HLF advisory board, interpreted this action by the board as spite. “All I have to say,” Hayes told the Houston Post, “is the action by the board . . . completely negates the power of the [advisory] board and cuts off the line of communication with the people.”15

By the time the HLF board of directors got around to outlining procedures for the placement of four poor residents on its board in September 1968, OEO officials had backed off from their commitment to the maximum feasible participation of the poor. On September 13 the regional OEO Legal Services administrator sent a letter to the new executive director of HLF informing him that his organization had fulfilled its agreement for including poor residents on the board, even though not a single poor person or representative of the poor had yet been appointed to the board. At no point during this ordeal did HCCAA officials try to intervene in a way that would have guaranteed poor participation of the poor residents on the board.

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15 William Shireman to Carver Daffin, 20 August 1968, Box 10, Folder General Correspondence, Aug-Dec 1968, Office of Economic Opportunity, Southwest Region, Community Action Programs, District Supervisors, Records Relating to City Economic Opportunity Boards, 1965-1968, Houston, Record Group 381, NARASW; Francis J. Duggan to William Shireman, 23 August 1968, Box 10, Folder General Correspondence, Aug-Dec 1968, Office of Economic Opportunity, Southwest Region, Community Action Programs, District Supervisors, Records Relating to City Economic Opportunity Boards, 1965-1968, Houston, Record Group 381, NARASW; Joe H. Foy to Walter Richter, 29 August 1968, Box 1, Folder Correspondence, June-October 1968, Office of Economic Opportunity, Southwest Region, Records of the Director, Correspondence, June-October 1968, Record Group 381, NARASW; Carlos Conde, “Poor People Win 4 Seats as HLF Board Members,” Houston Chronicle, July 24, 1968; Tommy West, “Legal Board To Add 4 Representatives of Poor,” Houston Post, August 21, 1968 (quotation).
residents a place on the policymaking board of the Houston Legal Foundation, and the failure of both organizations to respond to the demands of the poor further alienated them from Houston's poor residents. By the end of 1968 poor residents were once again complaining that they were being left out of the administration of the legal services program. When Russell Hayes, vice-chairman of the HLF advisory board, appeared at an HCCAA meeting in October 1968 to voice the concerns of poor residents, the HCCAA Board chairman declared his comments out of order and quickly ended the meeting. The poor were rapidly losing their voice in the poverty program in Houston, and the first major setback was suffered within the Houston Legal Foundation. William Ballew had hoped that the HLF would implement a widespread legal services program in Houston that would challenge the status quo and launch a concerted attack on the root causes of poverty. Without constant pressure exerted by HCCAA leadership on the HLF board of directors, however, the legal services program in the city was allowed to evolve into a simple deliverer of services and most certainly had failed to become the socially transformative foundation Ballew had envisioned.\(^{16}\)

In a development similar to the ordeal with the Houston Legal Foundation, it became apparent after the merger that HCCAA leaders were not willing to pursue reforms using the Head Start program. In particular, the HCCAA Board was reluctant to push for change in the one area where the Head Start program actually had the greatest potential for reform, which was the desegregation of Houston's public schools. Racial segregation in public schools was the most logical issue reformers using the Head Start

\(^{16}\) Minutes of Harris County Community Action Association Board of Directors, 7 October 1968, Box 10, Folder Board Minutes, Office of Economic Opportunity, Southwest Region, Community Action Programs, District Supervisors, Records Relating to City Economic Opportunity Boards, 1965-1968, Houston, Record Group 381, NARASW; "Foundation To Get U.S. Funds Without Poor," *Houston Post*, September 26, 1968.
preschool program targeted because they could demand compliance with federal
desegregation orders before making funding available. In 1965 and 1966 the Houston
Independent School District (HISD) had administered an almost completely segregated
Head Start program in the city, but with each passing year OEO officials and local
reformers pushed more forcefully for desegregation. By the spring of 1967, OEO officials
decided to deliver on their promise to cut off all Head Start funding to organizations that
refused to desegregate their programs. Because HISD board members refused to
desegregate their facilities in preparation for the 1967 summer program, OEO officials
warned HCCAA Board members that unless HISD complied with federal desegregation
orders, a different organization would receive the $1.5 million grant to administer Head
Start during the summer of 1967.17

HCCAA Board members, mired in internal controversy caused by the merger
negotiations and under continued assault from the city's public officials, were in no
position to push for the desegregation of Houston's schools to comply with Head Start
requirements. Rather than using their position as the governing body for the poverty
program to demand that HISD take steps to meet federal desegregation requirements so
as to avoid losing the Head Start program, HCCAA Board members simply agreed to
fund a different agency to administer the program. In May, board members chose Aid to
Culturally Deprived Children (ACDC), a Catholic organization run by a local priest and a
handful of educators, to sponsor Head Start for the summer of 1967. Not possessing
adequate resources to administer a citywide preschool program, ACDC's Head Start

17 Office of Economic Opportunity, "Grant Profile for HCCAA Summer Head Start," 23 May 1967,
Microfilm Reel #35 (Head Start, South Dakota to Vermont, State Summaries), Records from Federal
Government Agencies, Records of the Office of Economic Opportunity, 1964-1968, LBJL; Saralee Tiede,
"A World of Wonder is Opening Up for Deprived Children: But Operation Head Start Has Fallen Short of
suffered from low enrollment, an inactive parent program, and segregated facilities based on residential patterns in Houston and the unavailability of adequate transportation. ACDC Director Father Emile Farge blamed HCCAA for the low enrollment and lack of parent participation by pointing out that HCCAA Board members had failed to initiate a widespread recruitment effort as they had done in the past for HISD. “Recruiting for Head Start was supposed to start in March with 50 paid workers,” proclaimed a reporter for the *Houston Chronicle* in agreement with Farge. “But the staff of what is now the Community Action Assn. was more concerned with merging their two anti-poverty agencies than with recruiting children.”

HCCAA Board members appeared equally indifferent about the problems of segregation that extended beyond the boundaries of the city into other parts of Harris County. During a routine inspection of Head Start centers in mid-summer 1967, federal OEO officials found that the summer Head Start programs in Aldine, Cypress-Fairbanks, Alief, and the one administered by the Northeast Houston Independent School District all operated in segregated facilities. Southwest regional OEO officials worked closely with Head Start sponsors in these areas to solve these problems and push for desegregation, but they received no assistance from HCCAA Board members or staff in their efforts. The conservatives who took control of HCCAA made it clear in the summer of 1967 that they were not interested in using the Head Start program to advance educational reform in Houston.\(^{19}\)

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In the fall of 1967 HCCAA Board members—giving up any hope of educational reform in Houston—abandoned the Head Start program completely and opted instead to administer a year-round preschool program through their own day care centers located in the target neighborhoods. The new preschool program was significantly smaller than Head Start, serving only about one-fourth of the number of preschoolers previously enrolled in Head Start. While Head Start was a program that had the potential to further an educational reform agenda because it required the use of desegregated facilities, HCCAA's new preschool program was simply a service that could be delivered to poor residents in a limited area. As one HCCAA official explained it, the most important part of this new program was that it would allow parents to receive childcare while they worked. Though day care for children of working parents was an important service, especially because it often allowed single-parent families to have an income, the Head Start program was designed with much grander expectations and was often used by activists to push for significant changes in the country's educational system. By the fall of 1967, however, it was clear that HCCAA Board members were no longer interested in

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social change or educational reform, and their abandonment of the Head Start program was further evidence of this shift.\textsuperscript{20}

During the summer of 1968, as federal OEO officials once again convinced HISD to administer a summer Head Start program for fear of not having a program in Houston at all and with the hope bringing about school desegregation in Houston, HCCAA Board members remained aloof from the entire process other than to provide the standard paperwork needed for HISD to receive federal funding. Before OEO approved funding, Alfredo Garcia, Civil Rights Coordinator for the southwest regional OEO office, warned that Houston was an area where the Head Start program might once again run into segregation problems. OEO officials tried to impress upon HISD representatives that their program must strictly adhere to federal guidelines regarding desegregation of facilities, and HISD representatives made vague statements to the effect that guidelines would be followed. OEO agreed to fund HISD’s summer Head Start program in 1968; but soon after the program began, it was clear that very little attempt had been made to ensure the program was administered in a desegregated environment. In June Garcia charged that HISD officials tried to conceal the segregated nature of their program from federal inspectors by not reporting the ethnic breakdown of the students and staff. Garcia ordered a thorough investigation of the HISD Head Start program that revealed not only racially segregated facilities but also that HISD had intentionally excluded hiring Mexican American staff members even though Mexican American students made up 20 percent of the enrollees.\textsuperscript{21}


\textsuperscript{21} Alfredo Garcia to Fred Baldwin, memorandum, 17 November 1967, Box 1, Folder Director’s Office, Memoranda, Office of Economic Opportunity, Community Action Program Correspondence, Memos, CAP
There is no evidence that OEO officials took any significant action to force HISD to comply with desegregation requirements, and presumably this was partly due to the fact that HCCAA Board members refused to provide any support in pushing for educational reform in Houston. In the fall of 1968 the HCCAA Board of directors simply took control of all of Houston’s summer Head Start programs and placed them in their day care centers rather than attempt to reform HISD segregation practices. Similar to the ordeal with the Houston Legal Foundation, Houston’s Head Start program evolved into yet another service delivered to poor residents. Important as that service may have been, it did not produce any opportunities for educational reform as Ballew had envisioned. Without HCCAA administrators putting pressure on their delegate agencies to comply with federal guidelines, there was little hope that Houston’s Head Start would attack educational inequality or affect its impact on the city’s poor.

In addition to abandoning the goals of social, legal, and educational reform, the new conservative HCCAA Board of directors also allowed one of William Ballew and Earl Allen’s greatest accomplishments – the Settegast Clinic – to fall into financial trouble due to the new board’s neglect. In the fall of 1966 Allen had organized Settegast residents and launched a protest campaign aimed at the Harris County Hospital District
demanding the creation and maintenance of a permanent health clinic in the neighborhood. When the hospital district agreed to these demands, Ballew and Allen believed they had proven the worth of confrontational community organizing tactics as an effective component of the fight against poverty. While the hospital district agreed to create a permanent branch of the charity hospital in Settegast, however, there was a misunderstanding about which organization would fund the clinic once it was established. Ballew and Allen believed the responsibility fell squarely on the shoulders of the hospital district board members, and Ballew undoubtedly would have used the community action agency to continue putting pressure on the hospital district to deliver on its promises of accessible healthcare to the residents of Settegast. Because of HCCAA’s changed priorities after the merger, however, board members took very little action to ensure the hospital district would continue to fund the clinic after the initial ninety-day contract expired in the summer of 1967.22

In June 1967, as the Settegast Clinic was rapidly running out of cash and with no prospects for additional funding on the horizon, the HCCAA Board of directors passed a resolution asking the Harris County Hospital District to fund the clinic on a permanent basis. A resolution, of course, does not have the same sense of urgency that a public demonstration has, and the hospital district responded by agreeing to fund the clinic for an additional ninety days until another agency could be located to provide permanent funding. A group of African American doctors began meeting during this time and decided to appeal directly to OEO to fund the clinic, but this solution could only be temporary because it was not OEO policy to fund these types of programs directly.

Several HCCAA Board members interpreted this appeal to OEO as a circumvention of their authority over poverty funds for the entire city and threatened to cut off funding to the clinic altogether. Although OEO agreed to fund the Settegast Clinic on a temporary basis and the Harris County Hospital District eventually accepted responsibility for the clinic on a permanent basis as part of its neighborhood clinic program, the HCCAA Board showed little interest in preserving this impressive accomplishment achieved under Ballew’s tenure.23

The HCCAA Board of directors initiated a handful of new projects and programs in 1967 that are also illustrative of the conservative turn they took after the merger and the clear move away from confrontation. In June 1967 the new HCCAA Board, in cooperation with the National Council on Aging, launched Project FIND, which was designed to use volunteers to seek out the aging poor and help them locate social services available to them. In September HCCAA Chairman Francis Williams announced the initiation of a parent and child program created “to strengthen parental skills in taking care of youngsters and also to help families on the poverty level overcome some of the social and economic problems they face.” As part of this program, HCCAA established several Parent and Child Centers in target neighborhoods to work closely with parents to equip them with parenting skills. The HCCAA Board also helped create the Foster

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Grandparents program in cooperation with Protestant Charities of Houston that “recruits, trains, and employs persons over age 60, with low incomes, to serve neglected and deprived children who lack close personal relationships with adults.” The program’s directors placed approximately sixty older persons in local Houston hospitals to provide care for children whose parents were either absent or unable to be at the hospital for lengthy periods of time. Francis Williams and other conservative members of the board also placed a heavy emphasis on establishing social service programs that resembled the work HAY had been doing before the merger, including Foster Care and Counseling for Troubled Youth, Family Life Improvement and Home Management, and a Generic Counseling Service.24

Though many of these programs were heartwarming and undoubtedly made a few poor people's lives more bearable, they were all clearly products of the conservative philosophy that had overtaken the HCCAA Board of directors in 1967. In designing these service delivery programs, board members never attempted to attack the root causes of poverty; they just tried to address the symptoms of poverty. Project FIND was simply a program for locating traditional social welfare services for the elderly poor, and programs such as the Parent and Child Centers and the other counseling service projects harkened back to the conservative tactic of attempting to change the behavior of poor people rather than addressing the structural forces that kept them locked in a cycle of poverty. These programs initiated by the HCCAA Board of directors in 1967, which consumed the majority of the organization's resources, showed just how far the implementers of the War on Poverty in Houston had gotten away from the Saul Alinsky method.

By far the largest and most costly service program that the new HCCAA Board launched in 1967 was the Concentrated Employment Program (CEP), which was designed in conjunction with the Texas Employment Commission to help locate jobs for unemployed and underemployed persons in Houston. Like HCCAA's other social service delivery programs, however, the CEP program had very little potential for reform. To make matters worse, CEP administrators, armed with a $5 million grant from OEO, squandered their resources, alienated the poor people that the program was designed to help, and failed to provide any tangible results for Houston's unemployed population. The main thrust of the program was job training, but HCCAA Chairman Francis Williams misled Houston's poor residents into believing that CEP would be able to

Houston, Record Group 381, NARASW; “Community Action in Houston and Harris County as of November 1, 1967,” Box 73, Folder CAP, Houston, Harris County, Texas, Oct-Dec 1967, Office of Economic Opportunity, Inspection Division, Inspection Reports, 1964-67, Record Group 381, NARA.
accomplish more than simply training residents for jobs by implying that CEP would attack employment discrimination and might even create new jobs. In the process he raised expectations for the program beyond what it was capable of delivering. After announcing the CEP program, Williams criticized the city of Houston's meager efforts to provide equal employment opportunities and insinuated that CEP would be able to address some of these problems. He stated, "What has been done has been so negligible that the man in the street doesn't know that they are doing anything." Williams failed to mention, however, that a job training program such as CEP was not designed to push for reform in hiring practices that would result in more jobs being available for the city's poor.

Due to bureaucratic wrangling over various contracts, the CEP program was slow to get started in Houston. In order to provide comprehensive job training for Houston's poor, HCCAA needed to enter into contracts with several delegate agencies, such as the Houston Independent School District and the Texas Employment Commission, in order to administer various components of CEP. The most problematic impediment to the initiation of the program was whether or not the HCCAA Board could enter into contracts with delegate agencies that did not require their own boards to include a significant number of poor residents or representatives of the poor. Under Ballew's direction, in 1966 the HCCAA Board had notified all delegate agencies that HCCAA expected poor residents to compose one-third of each of their boards by July 1968. The new conservative members of the board, however, dispensed of this requirement despite the

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opposition of a few remaining progressives on the board. To add insult to injury, conservative HCCAA Board members also passed a resolution to eliminate the Manpower Advisory Committee, a group of poor residents elected from the target neighborhoods to advise the HCCAA Board on how the manpower programs affected poor Houston residents. The new board members made it clear that they alone would administer the CEP program without interference from the poor, and several members spoke in favor of creating an advisory committee composed of representatives from Houston’s business leaders rather than the city’s poor communities.26

CEP administrators continued Francis Williams’s tactic of falsely raising the hopes of Houston’s poor by implying that there was an abundance of jobs in the city, and this inevitably caused CEP enrollees to become disillusioned once they graduated from the program and still could not secure employment. By the summer of 1968, it was clear to most observers that the most the CEP program could accomplish was to equip enrollees with skills for jobs that did not exist. CEP administrators simply had no power to create jobs in Houston or to force the city’s employers to cease their discriminatory hiring practices. The CEP program came under a tremendous amount of criticism in late 1968, and the HCCAA Board was never able to deliver on the promises its members made about what this job training program could realistically accomplish.27

26 Minutes of Harris County Community Action Association Executive Committee, 18 September 1967, Box 73, Folder CAP, Houston, Harris County, Texas, July-Sept 1967, Office of Economic Opportunity, Inspection Division, Inspection Reports, 1964-67, Record Group 381, NARA.

27 Minutes of Harris County Community Action Association, Cooperative Area Manpower Planning System Committee, 13 June 1968, Box 10, Folder Board Minutes, Office of Economic Opportunity, Southwest Region, Community Action Programs, District Supervisors, Records Relating to City Economic Opportunity Boards, 1965-1968, Houston, Record Group 381, NARASW; Walter Richter to George Bush, 27 August 1968, Box 10, Folder General Correspondence, Aug-Dec 1968, Office of Economic Opportunity, Southwest Region, Community Action Programs, District Supervisors, Records Relating to City Economic Opportunity Boards, 1965-1968, Houston, Record Group 381, NARASW; Carlos Conde,
The new HCCAA Board’s conservative shift away from the radical philosophy and confrontational tactics developed by Ballew and Allen was clearly illustrated in the programs and projects in which its members engaged after the merger. Nowhere was it more evident that the new community action agency had abandoned the Saul Alinsky method, though, than in the new board’s management of the community organization department and the remaining radicals on the staff. After Francis Williams and the conservatives successfully took control of the HCCAA Board and oversaw the merger, their most pressing problem was the fact that many radicals, including Earl Allen, were still on the organization’s employment rolls. Both during and after the merger, the new board was completely averse to confrontation or controversy of any kind. In order to render the organization more conservative and more amenable to the city’s public officials, Williams and other board members knew they would have to put controls on Allen and eventually defeat the radicals who remained in the organization.28

As the first step in this process of controlling and eventually purging the radicals from HCCAA, Francis Williams assigned Hartsell Gray to supervise Earl Allen and his community organization staff. Gray had been an Episcopal minister in a congregation that United States Congressman George Bush attended in Houston and had played an important role in Bush’s successful campaign for election to Congress in 1966. With Bush’s help, Gray was appointed to the H-HCEOO Board of directors in 1965, and the two remained close friends after Bush moved to Washington in 1966, with Gray assuming the role of Bush’s “inside man” who provided the freshman congressman with

28 James M. Simons to Edgar May, memorandum, 24 May 1967, Box 73, Folder CAP, Houston, Harris County, Texas, Apr-June 1967, Office of Economic Opportunity, Inspection Division, Inspection Reports, 1964-67, Record Group 381, NARA.
information about the poverty program in Houston. Gray had been a conservative member of the H-HCEO Board of directors and had served on the Personnel Committee when William Ballew and Executive Director Charles Kelly recommended hiring Earl Allen as director of community organization in the fall of 1966. Gray vehemently opposed hiring Allen because he disagreed with Allen’s confrontational tactics, but the overwhelming majority of the H-HCEO Board at the time was supportive of Ballew’s radical vision and approved of Allen’s hiring. Gray remained a foe of Allen and his radical community organization staff, however, and he was among the most outspoken board members who attacked Allen’s methods in Settegast in the spring of 1967. During the merger negotiations in May 1967, Gray was a strong supporter of taming their organization in order to merge the two antipoverty organizations successfully.29

As part of the effort to rein in some of the activities of Allen’s community organization staff and make the merger a success, Gray had been a significant contributor to the drawing up of a new Community Development Work Plan designed to professionalize Allen’s staff and refocus them toward less confrontational activities. The new plan, which was carried over into the merged community action agency, called for the community organization staff to undergo retraining and changed their duties to include locating services for poor residents rather than organizing them to confront local elected officials or make demands on the city’s institutions. During the merger negotiations Gray seized the opportunity to control the activities of Allen and his staff,

and both men saw the passage of the new community organization plan as the first step in
taming the staff and eventually purging the radicals from the new community action
agency. Gray and the other conservatives on the HCCAA Board were so confident that
the new Community Development Work Plan would empower the board to control the
activities of the community organization staff that they reinstated Pluria Marshall, who
had been involved in protests and demonstrations on the campus of Texas Southern
University in May 1967.30

As soon as the merger was complete, the new HCCAA executive committee met
in June 1967 to decide how to reorganize the two staffs from H-HCEOO and HAY and to
determine which staff members to retain in the new community action agency. In a
surprising change of course, Gray strongly urged the committee to allow Earl Allen to
continue in his current position, now called Director of Community Development,
because he was the only staff member who had personal contact with militant African
American leaders in Houston. There was, however, one important stipulation; Gray
insisted that the new executive committee appoint him as the Deputy Director of
Resource Development and, most importantly, that they designate Gray as Allen’s
immediate supervisor. Gray was determined to control Allen and the other radicals on the
staff, and he assured the committee that Allen’s confrontational tactics would diminish

30 Gus Taylor to Earl Allen, memorandum, 18 April 1967, Box 73, Folder CAP, Houston, Harris County,
Texas, Apr-June 1967, Office of Economic Opportunity, Inspection Division, Inspection Reports, 1964-67,
Record Group 381, NARA; Gus Taylor to Charles Kelly, memorandum, 25 April 1967, Box 73, Folder
CAP, Houston, Harris County, Texas, Apr-June 1967, Office of Economic Opportunity, Inspection
Division, Inspection Reports, 1964-67, Record Group 381, NARA; Ben Haney to Jack Tinkle,
memorandum, 17 August 1967, Box 10B, Folder Inspection and Evaluation Reports, Office of Economic
Opportunity, Southwest Region, Community Action Programs, District Supervisors, Records Relating to
City Economic Opportunity Boards, 1965-1968, Houston, Record Group 381, NARASW; “Community
Action in Houston and Harris County as of November 1, 1967,” 1 November 1967, Box 73, Folder CAP,
Houston, Harris County, Texas, Oct-Dec 1967, Office of Economic Opportunity, Inspection Division,
Inspection Reports, 1964-67, Record Group 381, NARA; Ken Fairchild to Louie Welch, memorandum, 30
June 1967, Box 33, Welch Papers; Saralee Tiede, “New Poverty Agency Appears More Effective Than
once Allen was put under Gray’s close supervision. A majority of the HCCAA executive committee agreed, and in June 1967 Hartsell Gray – a man who had opposed hiring Allen, attacked his methods incessantly, helped rewrite the plan for organizing poor neighborhoods to make the tactics less confrontational, and was bent on controlling the radicals on the staff – became Allen’s supervisor and responsible for overseeing the implementation of the new community development plan.31

Federal OEO inspectors who evaluated Houston’s new merged community action agency in the summer of 1967 were skeptical about the new arrangement. In a report sent to OEO officials in Washington, these inspectors expressed concern that the authors of HCCAA’s new Community Development Work Plan had failed to define clearly the long-range goals of Allen’s staff and that board members were unaware of the mission of the community development department. Most alarming to the federal inspectors, however, were their interactions with Hartsell Gray. One OEO inspector noted that Gray “is more sensitive to the voices of the locally elected officials than to any other community element,” and because of this he “has attempted to cloak the efforts of the CAA under the mantle of ‘moderate, liberal’ leadership of Harris County . . . [and] has seen his task as a staff member to keep the dissident staff members quiet thereby neutralizing Earl Allen or forcing his resignation.”32

32 Ben Haney to Jack Tinkle, memorandum, 17 August 1967, Box 10B, Folder Inspection and Evaluation Reports, Office of Economic Opportunity, Southwest Region, Community Action Programs, District Supervisors, Records Relating to City Economic Opportunity Boards, 1965-1968, Houston, Record Group 381, NARASW.
Inspectors were uncertain about Gray’s motivations for wanting to shape the future direction for the community action agency in Houston. Gray proclaimed himself to be a believer in the ‘democratic process,’ but few could determine what he meant by that term. Gray publicly supported increased participation by poor residents in the poverty program through elections but at the same time stated that ultimate control of the War on Poverty in Houston rested with local public officials. It was also evident to the federal OEO inspectors that Gray was willing to use sinister methods to “neutralize” Allen and his staff, and one OEO official described Gray as “the most Byzantine character in a Byzantine city.” For example, federal inspectors discovered that in addition to Houston Police Chief Herman Short, Gray had also been providing much of the negative information regarding the activities of HCCAA employees to Bush and Welch, particularly with regard to the “TSU Riot” and the turmoil in Settegast. The inspectors agreed that the poverty program in Houston would be better off without Gray, but none of them believed it would be possible for the HCCAA Board to terminate his employment without Gray creating a major controversy for the organization through his connections to Bush and Welch.  

Members of the federal OEO inspection team noted that in addition to impediments created by Gray, Earl Allen and his staff were also being attacked by other forces in the city. Inspectors concluded that Earl Allen and his staff were “capable, militant, and close to the mood of the ‘folk,’” but their worthwhile efforts were being thwarted by pillars of the Houston establishment, including the “liberal political organization” and the “traditional business” interests in the city. “A fear of controversy,”

33 Philip Hardberger to Sargent Shriver, memorandum, 25 August 1967, Box 74, Folder Texas OEO Program (Compilation) 1967 Aug-Oct, Office of Economic Opportunity, Inspection Division, Inspection Reports, 1964-67, Record Group 381, NARA.
continued the inspector, “seems as evident among ‘liberal’ [HCCAA] board members as among the conservatives. The legitimacy of CAP personnel being a part of community efforts to petition the power structure for redress of real grievances is in doubt. The word ‘demonstration’ has taken on an awesome, fear-inspiring meaning within OEO organizations, in spite of the vital part demonstrations have played in the social development of our country and their central meaning to our democratic tradition.” The federal OEO inspector continued, “[Earl] Allen believes that no meaningful community action can occur in a city like Houston without some confrontation between the impoverished citizens of the slums and the power structure. . . . As Allen . . . told me, ‘In Houston there is no such thing as a peaceful demonstration.’ All demonstrations are, a priori, non-peaceful and unlawful.” The inspector concluded that Mayor Welch had taken full advantage of the HCCAA Board’s defensiveness and the widespread fear of rioting by “planting stories that the CAP staff is ‘Black Power infiltrated’ and other such pot-shots.”

These developments that occurred in the first few months after the merger deepened the divisions within HCCAA, particularly between the board and Allen’s staff, as Gray took it upon himself to purge the radicals from the organization. Despite changes on the board and modifications to the community development plan, Earl Allen and much of his staff remained firmly committed to the Saul Alinsky method and to the necessity for open conflict and confrontation with Houston’s public officials. HCCAA leadership, however, had been growing more conservative since the merger, and most approved of Gray’s attempts to control Allen and the other radicals who remained in the organization.

34 James M. Simons to Edgar May, memorandum, 24 May 1967, Box 73, Folder CAP, Houston, Harris County, Texas, Apr-June 1967, Office of Economic Opportunity, Inspection Division, Inspection Reports, 1964-67, Record Group 381, NARA.
As soon as Gray took over as Deputy Director of Resource Development in June 1967, he immediately began circumventing Allen’s authority over his community development staff, redirecting community organizers toward less controversial activities, and purging from the HCCAA staff the remaining radicals who refused to be controlled by Gray and the conservatives on the new board of directors.35

Serious difficulties began immediately after Gray assumed his new position as Allen’s supervisor. As Allen was busy reorganizing his staff after a somewhat chaotic melding of staff members from H-HCEO0 and HAY, Gray made his first move to undercut Allen’s authority over his own staff. Stating that he did not trust Allen to administer any portion of the new community development plan, Gray arbitrarily reassigned forty-six of Allen’s community organizers away from the neighborhoods where Allen had placed them and ordered them to work in several HCCAA neighborhood centers under the supervision of James Williams, a former HAY staff member. A few days later Gray removed twenty-three of Allen’s community development specialists from the field and ordered them to undergo training in the central HCCAA office for several weeks. Gray readily admitted to a federal inspector that he intentionally diverted Allen’s staff in order to get them out of the target neighborhoods, where many

35 James M. Simons to Edgar May, memorandum, 24 May 1967, Box 73, Folder CAP, Houston, Harris County, Texas, Apr-June 1967, Office of Economic Opportunity, Inspection Division, Inspection Reports, 1964-67, Record Group 381, NARA; Ray Reusche to Edgar May, memorandum, 26 May 1967, Box 73, Folder CAP, Houston, Harris County, Texas, Apr-June 1967, Office of Economic Opportunity, Inspection Division, Inspection Reports, 1964-67, Record Group 381, NARA; Ben Haney to Jack Tinkle, memorandum, 17 August 1967, Box 10B, Folder Inspection and Evaluation Reports, Office of Economic Opportunity, Southwest Region, Community Action Programs, District Supervisors, Records Relating to City Economic Opportunity Boards, 1965-1968, Houston, Record Group 381, NARASW.
conservative board members believed they were stirring up too much trouble and threatening the reputation of the poverty program.\textsuperscript{36}

Following the reassignment of the community development staff without consulting Allen, Gray began reprioritizing the duties of Allen’s staff to focus on various “crash programs,” such as recruiting for summer Head Start and the Neighborhood Youth Corps, advertising for the Job Fair planned in conjunction with Mayor Welch’s office, and gathering resources for a summer youth recreation program. Several of these “crash programs” were very poorly planned, and when this lack of planning drew criticism from the HCCAA Board and from poor Houston residents, Gray used the negative publicity to attack Allen and his community development staff even more viciously. Gray had developed a habit of simultaneously demeaning Allen in board meetings and implying that Allen had lost his own authority over the staff while also giving the impression that Allen was deliberately attempting to radicalize staff members and carry out a Black Power agenda. Gray made statements to the board such as, “I tell Allen what I want, and he does it,” while at the same time accusing Allen of allowing Black Power advocates and “SNCC types” to infiltrate the community development staff. According to a federal inspector, Mayor Welch and Congressman Bush, who by this time were on edge about the prospect of continued demonstrations, undoubtedly prompted Gray to attack Allen in this way. Welch was so concerned about Allen’s activities in Houston’s poor neighborhoods that he ordered undercover police surveillance of Allen and certain members of his staff. By mid-summer 1967 Gray had decided that the only way to satisfy

\textsuperscript{36} Ben Haney to Jack Tinkle, memorandum, 17 August 1967, Box 10B, Folder Inspection and Evaluation Reports, Office of Economic Opportunity, Southwest Region, Community Action Programs, District Supervisors, Records Relating to City Economic Opportunity Boards, 1965-1968, Houston, Record Group 381, NARASW.
Welch and Bush and to rid the HCCAA community development staff of SNCC operatives was to force Earl Allen to resign as Community Development Director and to professionalize the staff by purging the militants and radicals from the organization.37

The “TSU 5” indictments handed down in the summer of 1967 provided Gray and his conservative allies with the ammunition they needed to begin ridding HCCAA of radical members on Allen’s staff. In early June a Houston grand jury issued indictments against five Texas Southern University students, charging them with murdering Houston police officer Raymond Kuba and attempting to murder two other officers who were injured during the TSU Riot during the previous month. It is unclear whether the grand jury had access to police information showing that Kuba was killed by a ricocheting bullet fired by another police officer, but that revelation would have mattered very little since the grand jury charged the students not with firing the actual shots but with “setting in motion the violence that took the rookie officer’s life and wounded the other two.” As District Attorney Carol Vance explained, “One engaged in any riot whereby an illegal act is committed, shall be deemed guilty of the offense of riot according to the character and degree of such offense, whether the said illegal act was perpetrated by him or by those with whom he is participating. All persons are principals who are guilty of acting together in the commission of an offense.” In an even more shocking affront to reality, grand jury foreman W. A. Ruhmann stated that the jury also found “that our law enforcement officials acted with due restraint. . . . With numerous rumors of police

37 Ben Haney to Jack Tinkle, memorandum, 17 August 1967, Box 10B, Folder Inspection and Evaluation Reports, Office of Economic Opportunity, Southwest Region, Community Action Programs, District Supervisors, Records Relating to City Economic Opportunity Boards, 1965-1968, Houston, Record Group 381, NARASW (quotations); Peter Spruance to Edgar May, memorandum, 29 May 1967, Box 74, Folder Texas OEO Program (Compilation) 1967 May-July, Office of Economic Opportunity, Inspection Division, Inspection Reports, 1964-67, Record Group 381, NARA; Blair Justice to Louie Welch, memorandum, 5 June 1967, Box 33, Welch Papers; Blair Justice to Louie Welch, memorandum, 27 June 1967, Box 33, Welch Papers.
brutality, we find that the law enforcement officers acted in the best interests of the community. We find that this trouble was caused or encouraged by a few agitators and troublemakers.” After the grand jury issued the indictments, District Judge Fred Hooey denied bond to the group of students now referred to as the TSU 5. It took two weeks for attorneys provided by the NAACP to convince a judge to set bond for the five defendants, but in mid-June the TSU 5 were allowed to post bail and leave the Houston city jail. The trial was set to begin in July, but after a protest of the scheduled trial in the Third Ward near the TSU campus turned violent as several demonstrators broke store windows and set small fires, a district judge granted a continuance and postponed the trial of the TSU 5 until the fall of 1967.38

HCCAA and the TSU 5 first crossed paths in early July 1967 when the HCCAA Board of directors launched Project Go, a temporary summer recreation program designed to “cool down the long hot summer” in Houston. With a $600,000 grant from OEO, HCCAA officials hired more than 400 young people to staff Project Go and employed them as recreation workers and neighborhood developers. A HCCAA Board member described the summer program as an attempt to provide constructive activities for Houston’s youth and keep them from causing any trouble in the city. He stated, “We know from experience that summer trouble often starts because there are young people on the street with nothing to do. We propose to hire the troublemakers as the neighborhood developers, and keep them busy collecting data, helping the poor find jobs

38 Bob Tutt, “Murder is Charged in Riot at TSU,” Houston Chronicle, June 2, 1967 (quotations); “Hearing for TSU Students June 12,” Houston Post, June 7, 1967; “Delay to be Granted in Case of 5 TSU Students,” newspaper clipping, Box 59, Folder Houston Texas CAA 1968, Office of Economic Opportunity, CAP Records of the Director, Subject Files, 1965-1969, Record Group 381, NARA; Peter Spruance to Edgar May, memorandum, 25 July 1967, Box 73, Folder CAP, Houston, Harris County, Texas, July-Sept 1967, Office of Economic Opportunity, Inspection Division, Inspection Reports, 1964-67, Record Group 381, NARA.
and pointing out services to people who need them. This will help cool down the long hot summer." In early July, as HCCAA employees moved from the planning stages to the implementation of Project Go, program administrators decided to hire two rather prominent "troublemakers" in Houston who were then part of the TSU 5. That month they hired Trazawell Franklin and Floyd Nichols, both under indictment for the murder of Officer Kuba, to work in the summer recreation program.39

The hiring of Franklin and Nichols did not cause any immediate problems for HCCAA as Project Go got off to a smooth start in mid-July. A small army of newly hired HCCAA staff members fanned out over the Houston area and provided recreational activities for children between the ages of one and twelve at parks and recreation centers located in the children's own neighborhoods. Mayor Welch's office even helped organize a citywide job fair to work in conjunction with Project Go to provide employment for teenagers who were too old for the summer recreation program. Several HCCAA Board members publicly applauded their own efforts to hire potential rioters and other troublemakers and turn them into productive citizens.40

The problem started during the first week in August, however, when Hartsell Gray discovered that Franklin and Nichols had been hired as part of Project Go without his knowledge. Though the stated purpose of the program was to hire militant agitators and allow them to participate in the constructive work of the poverty program, Gray interpreted the employment of Franklin and Nichols as simply another step in Allen's

39 Saralee Tiede, "Federal Funds Sought to Help 'Cool Down' Hot Summer Here," Houston Chronicle, June 2, 1967 (quotation); Edgar May to Walter Richter, memorandum, 3 August 1967, Box 59, Folder Houston Texas CAA 1968, Office of Economic Opportunity, CAP Records of the Director, Subject Files, 1965-1969, Record Group 381, NARA.

plan to fill his staff with Black Power advocates and troublemakers. Gray immediately notified Congressmen George Bush that HCCAA had hired these two men, and Bush in turn told Mayor Welch and Police Chief Short. By the time OEO officials were made aware of the situation in late July, Gray had already made the news public in an effort to discredit Allen and his staff even further.\footnote{41}

Southwest Regional OEO Director Walter Richter rushed to Houston the next day to meet with Mayor Welch and to try to prevent the situation from inflicting an additional blemish on the poverty program in the city. At Welch’s insistence, Richter strongly encouraged HCCAA Chairman Francis Williams to terminate Franklin’s and Nichols’s employment with the community action agency and to relieve them of their duties immediately. Since Williams was determined to give the poverty program a better image in Houston and was under increasing pressure from Gray and his allies to get rid of the militants in the organization, he complied with Richter’s request and on the fourth of August fired Franklin and Nichols. In an effort to blunt the inevitable reaction from the militant black community in Houston, however, Williams also arranged for a local labor union to employ Franklin and Nichols for the rest of the summer. According to Williams, Franklin and Nichols accepted the decision without opposition and stated that they understood the reason for their termination and that they would happily assume their new positions with the labor union the following week.\footnote{42}

\footnote{41 Edgar May to Walter Richter, memorandum, 3 August 1967, Box 59, Folder Houston Texas CAA 1968, Office of Economic Opportunity, CAP Records of the Director, Subject Files, 1965-1969, Record Group 381, NARA; Tom McRae to Edgar May, memorandum, 3 August 1967, Box 74, Folder Texas OEO Program (Compilation) 1967 Aug-Oct, Office of Economic Opportunity, Inspection Division, Inspection Reports, 1964-67, Record Group 381, NARA.}

\footnote{42 “Report on Houston, Texas,” August 1967, Box 73, Folder CAP, Houston, Harris County, Texas, July-Sept 1967, Office of Economic Opportunity, Inspection Division, Inspection Reports, 1964-67, Record Group 381, NARA; Edgar May to Walter Richter, memorandum, 3 August 1967, Box 59, Folder Houston Texas CAA 1968, Office of Economic Opportunity, CAP Records of the Director, Subject Files, 1965-}
A few days after Williams fired Franklin and Nichols, Mayor Welch publicly applauded the decision in an interview with the *Houston Post*. Welch stated that he was shocked to learn that the HCCAA Board would hire two men facing murder charges but was confident that Williams would “not tolerate this sort of thing” because his philosophy was “apparently different from those first promoted within” the community action agency. “Williams appears dedicated to making the organization what it is intended to be,” continued Welch, “[which is] one that fights poverty and not a civil rights organization.”

Many members of Houston’s black community, however, were already fuming about the “TSU 5” indictments and believed the charges were illegitimate and most likely the products of a racist mayor and police chief. They greeted the news of Franklin’s and Nichols’s termination with outrage and bitterness. The firings even prompted an angry letter from Roy Wilkins, Executive Director of the NAACP, in which he chastised Sargent Shriver for allowing this miscarriage of justice to occur within the poverty program. Wilkins pointed out that OEO guidelines prevented local community action agencies from hiring any person convicted of being involved in a riot, but those

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guidelines said nothing about a person charged and not convicted. He stated, "The
dismissal of these . . . students, based upon charges which have been preferred but not yet
determined, is an excellent example of prejudgment. Moreover, the abuse of discretion
evidenced by their discharge is precisely the type of behavior which the Negro
community has come to expect, to resent and to protest by methods which are becoming
increasingly more violent. . . . The termination of these students' employment with the
OEO program, based upon charges which have not been submitted to trial contradicts the
principle, embodied in our Constitution, that all persons shall be presumed innocent until
proven guilty." Despite these pleadings, Shriver and southwest regional OEO officials
never wavered in their support of the decision to terminate the employment of Franklin
and Nichols. 44

Hartsell Gray used the momentum created by the firings to begin advocating for
the complete elimination of the Community Development Program and the dismissal of
Earl Allen and his entire staff. Gray was convinced that SNCC members had control of
Project Go and that Franklin and Nichols were simply the first of many needed
terminations on the HCCAA staff. He told a federal inspector that the only way he knew
how to wrest control of the poverty program away from SNCC militants was to rid the
organization of Earl Allen and his Community Development staff. Gray stated, "All of
the problems in this community have been caused by HCCAA staff members," and in a

44 "Report on Houston, Texas," August 1967, Box 73, Folder CAP, Houston, Harris County, Texas, July-
Sept 1967, Office of Economic Opportunity, Inspection Division, Inspection Reports, 1964-67, Record
Group 381, NARA; Roy Wilkins to Sargent Shriver, 25 August 1967, Box 17, Folder Administrative,
Texas, 1967, Office of Economic Opportunity, CAP Records of the Director, State Files, 1965-1968,
Record Group 381, NARA (quotations); Theodore H. Berry to J. S. Spencer, memorandum, 10 August
1967, Box 59, Folder Houston Texas CAA 1968, Office of Economic Opportunity, CAP Records of the
Director, Subject Files, 1965-1969, Record Group 381, NARA; Sargent Shriver to Roy Wilkins, 5
September 1967, Box 17, Folder Administrative, Texas, 1967, Office of Economic Opportunity, CAP
Records of the Director, State Files, 1965-1968, Record Group 381, NARA.
highly suspect accusation he claimed that Allen told his staff members that “the Negro
must be taught to hate the Whites before some action can take place.” However
improbable Gray’s statements may have been, the fact remained that because of the
Project Go incident, by August 1967 he had enough support on the HCCAA Board of
directors and executive committee to deliver on his threat to expel Allen and his staff
from the organization.45

By this time Earl Allen could read the handwriting on the wall, and near the end
of the first week in August he tendered his resignation to the HCCAA Board of directors.
Citing the firing of Franklin and Nichols, Allen stated that he could no longer administer
the Community Development program for HCCAA because Hartsell Gray was bent on
eliminating his entire operation in Houston. During a lengthy interview with Saralee
Tiede of the *Houston Chronicle*, Allen said that his resignation from HCCAA should be
interpreted as “the admission of a militant Negro professional that he cannot work in the
politically charged atmosphere of the antipoverty program” and reiterated his
commitment to the use of confrontational tactics to empower Houston’s poor. He
continued, “Numbers are usually the only strength poor people have. It’s a very
honorable technique in the whole scheme of things for creating a bargaining atmosphere
and it should not be denied the folk who have no alternative.” The HCCAA Board of
directors and Allen’s superiors in the organization had become so conservative and so
afraid of open conflict, he argued, that he could no longer carry out his plan for
community development. “My powers to hire and fire staff were curtailed,” Allen

45 Ben Haney to Jack Tinkle, memorandum, 17 August 1967, Box 10B, Folder Inspection and Evaluation
Reports, Office of Economic Opportunity, Southwest Region, Community Action Programs, District
Supervisors, Records Relating to City Economic Opportunity Boards, 1965-1968, Houston, Record Group
381, NARASW.
exclaimed, “while criticism often resulted in staff being transferred over my objection. The result of criticism was always an order to cool it. As a result the staff was frustrated and demoralized. We were always getting ready, never really getting in to do something.”

Allen argued that the problems he faced in the poverty program were systemic problems with the entire antipoverty effort. He stated, “There is a basic contradiction in the war on poverty. The agencies charged with affecting [sic] change are themselves threatened by change.” Allen’s solution, therefore, was to create a privately funded independent antipoverty organization capable of changing the status quo and free of ties to the existing order in Houston. He promised that his new organization would be dedicated to empowering poor people and minorities in the city, and he said its motto would be “Don’t burn, baby, let’s build, because we have the tools.”

Before launching their own antipoverty organization, Allen and his supporters wanted to create a forum where HCCAA staff members could register their displeasure with the agency and the way it conducted the War on Poverty in the city. On August 8, 1967, Allen and approximately 100 community development staff members staged a protest at HCCAA headquarters demanding Allen’s reinstatement with increased authority over the community development program and the rehiring of Project Go employees Trazawell Franklin, Floyd Nichols, and Kelton Sams. Sams had worked as a liaison between the Project Go staff and Allen’s community development department and had been one of Allen’s closest and most trusted allies in the organization. After Sams

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appeared on a radio panel discussion on the previous day and spoke about the poverty program in Houston without permission from the HCCAA Board, Hartsell Gray persuaded Francis Williams to fire Sams rather than give him a simple warning. After walking a picket line for several hours, many of the protesters began blocking the entrances to the HCCAA building and refusing to allow anyone to enter or exit. When Francis Williams returned from lunch that afternoon, he had to force his way through the pickets in order to reach the door. Once inside, Williams called the Houston police and asked them to remove the protesters. Police officers arrived within minutes to disperse the crowd. The protesters agreed to leave peacefully, but Allen and Sams vowed they would return the next day until changes were made to the poverty program.47

Williams and Gray were furious about HCCAA employees being involved in protests against the organization, and the next day they fired twenty-three employees they had witnessed picketing with Allen and Sams. Williams stated that the reason for the firings was that these employees failed to report to their assigned posts on the day of the protest, but it was clear that Williams and Gray wanted to send a message to any other HCCAA employee who was considering challenging their authority over the poverty program. The firings also represented the latest development in Gray’s attempt to purge the organization of radicals and militants loyal to Earl Allen, and by the end of the

summer Gray’s crusade to clean up the HCCAA staff was well on its way to completion.\textsuperscript{48}

One of the fears consuming Williams, Gray, and other members of the HCCAA Board was that a riot could break out in Houston and poverty workers could possibly be implicated in it. Other than the police riot on the campus of Texas Southern University in May 1967, Houston had been mostly spared the racial violence that plagued other major cities in the mid-1960s. At the same time, no one in Houston interpreted the absence of an outbreak of violence for an absence of racial tension. After riots had caused widespread destruction in Watts, Newark, Detroit, and many other American cities, Houstonians understandably were on edge about the possibility of a major riot in their city. This fear that gripped much of Houston undoubtedly had a profound effect on the administration of the War on Poverty in the city and created an atmosphere conducive to the purging of the radicals and black militants from the organization.

In August 1967, the fear of an urban riot occurring in Houston also played a role in an episode involving HCCAA that bordered on farce. This drama involved an HCCAA supplies officer and an order for several surplus rifle scopes from the United States Air Force, and the event pushed the conservative leaders of HCCAA into an even more defensive position and prompted Williams and others to dissociate themselves from the alleged radicals even further. The saga began in July when George T. Miller, a sixty-four-year-old white Houstonian and HCCAA Property Control Manager, placed an order for seven surplus telescopic rifle scopes from Kelly Air Force Base in San Antonio, Texas,

without getting approval from any of his superiors in the organization. Although Miller would later claim that he wanted to purchase the scopes in order to build microscopes from the lenses to use in an HCCAA job training program, there is some evidence that this explanation was fabricated after the story broke in August. Regardless of Miller’s motive, on August 3 agents with the Houston office of the Federal Bureau of Investigation decided to investigate the matter quietly before the local press discovered the story. The FBI did, however, notify the OEO Office of Inspection that they were conducting an investigation, and OEO officials called the Houston Police Department’s Intelligence Division to make them aware of what was going on. Two days later FBI officials determined that neither Miller nor HCCAA had violated any federal law and ended the investigation.49

The FBI’s decision not to pursue the investigation any further infuriated members of the Houston Police Department, especially Police Chief Herman Short, who decided to take matters into his own hands. During a routine news conference on August 11, Short revealed to reporters that Miller had attempted to order the telescopic rifle scopes and insinuated that poverty workers wanted to use them for violent purposes. Stating that he was filled with “such a feeling of disgust and outrage,” Short showed members of the press the order form submitted by HCCAA and pointed out that the wording “specifically asked for scopes equipped with standard range settings that could be attached to high-powered rifles.” When reporters approached George Miller about the order, Miller claimed he could not remember submitting any order for rifle scopes and stated that the

order may have been submitted without his signature. A day later, however, Miller held his own news conference and stated that he indeed ordered the surplus rifle scopes and that they were to be converted into microscopes for a job training program. The *Houston Chronicle* quoted a master gunsmith, however, who argued that "there is no conceivable way a telescopic sight can be converted into a microscope." Predictably, a controversy soon arose over exactly what use an antipoverty agency would have with military grade rifle sights.  

Upon receiving the details of this developing story from his home district, Houston Congressmen George Bush demanded a full congressional investigation into the rifle scope order. On August 14 Bush addressed the House of Representatives and stated that the entire rifle scope incident "indicates a gross stupidity on the part of OEO" and that poverty workers in Houston were "totally lacking in judgment." Bush continued, "In this critical summer period of civil unrest, a citizen of Houston might well believe that the scopes were ordered for use in a disturbance. After reading of the sniping incidents in Detroit, Newark, and other cities, it is understandable that a Houston citizen might view an order for scopes as a threat to the peace of his community." It was understandable for Houston citizens to make this assumption, according to Bush, but even he implied that it was unlikely that HCCAA would order rifle sights to use in a riot. As he stated to Congress, there were several possible explanations for the order. Although the mystery of the rifle scope episode was never solved to many observers' satisfaction, the most

probable explanation for the rifle scope order boiled down to political graft. Bush suggested to Congress that Miller or one of his employees wanted to obtain the scopes to give to their friends to use on their deer hunting rifles. This would explain the request that the scopes have the capability of attaching to high powered rifles.\(^{51}\)

Despite the fact that Bush recognized the improbability that HCCAA employees wanted to use the rifle sights in case a riot broke out in Houston, he nonetheless went a step further in order to link the poverty program and the potential for riots even more closely. For example, Bush reminded the Congressmen that very recently HCCAA had come under fire for hiring potential rioters. “The ordering of the scopes,” Bush continued, “was revealed only a week after the facts were released that the Houston OEO had hired two young men under indictment for murder in connection with the death of a police officer in the recent disturbances at Texas Southern University.” Because of these two incidents, Bush demanded a full congressional investigation of the poverty program in Houston and urged investigators to ascertain why HCCAA employees would have required rifle scopes to fight poverty in the city.\(^{52}\)

After Bush’s call for an investigation, federal investigators from the Air Force, the OEO Office of Inspection, and the FBI rushed to Houston to conduct a complete inventory of all HCCAA’s possessions. More importantly, Bush succeeded in persuading the House Education and Labor Committee to initiate a full investigation of all of

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HCCAA’s activities in Houston, a development that brought national attention to these local controversies. This investigation would prove to be short lived and its report was inconclusive, but in the fall of 1967 the Senate Committee on Government Operations, under the direction of Arkansas Senator John L. McClellan, pursued a more comprehensive inquiry into the connection between Houston’s community action agency and the potential for urban riots in the city. Bush had wanted to make a connection in people’s minds between the poverty program and urban riots, and by using the rifle scope fiasco in Houston he was able to accomplish that goal. Although federal investigators eventually agreed with Miller’s explanation that the lenses from the scopes were to be used to build microscopes for a job training program and approved the delivery of the lenses without the scopes, the entire event added yet another blemish to an organization already under attack for its alleged ties to Black Power militants and potential rioters. After the rifle scope incident, HCCAA leaders, particularly Francis Williams and Hartsell Gray, became even more cautious and conservative in their outlook and distanced their organization even further from supposed militants and radicals as Welch and Short once again ramped up their attack on the poverty program in Houston.53

The increasingly cautious and conservative approach of HCCAA’s administrators and their purging of radicals and militants from the organization led to even deeper divisions within the community action agency and caused a rapid decline in support from Houston’s poor neighborhoods. A striking indication that HCCAA had lost the support of many of Houston’s poor residents was the incredibly low voter turnout during elections to place poor residents on the HCCAA Board of directors. In the midst of Earl Allen’s protests against the organization in mid-August 1967, HCCAA Board members, under pressure from OEO officials in Washington, tried to meet federal guidelines for including the poor on their board by holding elections in several poor neighborhoods in the city. HCCAA employees set up thirty-eight polling places located in nine target areas and opened them all day in order to ensure a high voter turnout. Their hopes were dashed, however, when less than 1 percent of eligible voters in the poor neighborhoods showed up at the polls. In one district, not a single person voted, and the result was that no representative was sent to the board from that area.\footnote{Francis Williams to Fred Baldwin, 14 July 1967, Box 1, Folder Director’s Office Memoranda, Office of Economic Opportunity, Southwest Region, CAP Correspondence, Memos, CAP Administrator-Family Planning, Record Group 381, NARASW; Fred Holt to Earl Rhine, memorandum, 1 August 1967, Box 1, Folder Director’s Office Memoranda, Office of Economic Opportunity, Southwest Region, CAP Correspondence, Memos, CAP Administrator-Family Planning, Record Group 381, NARASW; “Districts to Elect HCCAA Board,” \textit{Houston Chronicle}, August 13, 1967; “Turnout Slim in Election of Poverty Board,” \textit{Houston Chronicle}, August 15, 1967.}

Even more damaging to the reputation of HCCAA than low voter turnout, however, was a rapidly increasing number of poor residents who began speaking out against the organization and expressing their disappointment with the poverty program. During a meeting in July 1967, as Hartsell Gray was attempting to rein in the activities of Allen and his community organization staff, several residents from one of the neighborhoods where Gray had removed HCCAA community organizers arrived to lodge
their complaints with the board. One resident expressed outrage that since Allen’s staff members had been removed, neighborhood centers were being closed down and a complete communication breakdown was threatening to occur between poverty workers and poor residents. Another resident complained that the few HCCAA employees who remained in her neighborhood refused to speak with poor residents and instead simply made notes about the activities of community organizers in the area. A third resident informed the board that the director of the neighborhood center in her area frequently refused to allow residents to use the HCCAA facility for meetings and other events. All of the residents who attended the meeting agreed that their neighborhoods desperately needed community organizers to return and continue the work they began under Allen’s direction.\

These complaints went largely unaddressed, and poor residents began complaining to reporters from the local newspapers in order to make their voices heard. A team of *Houston Chronicle* reporters visited four of HCCAA’s ten target areas around the city in early September 1967 to ascertain how much the War on Poverty had helped Houston’s poor. Their final report described their mission as “uncomfortable and soul-depressing” as they witnessed firsthand the seemingly incurable “want, deprivation and misery of body and spirit.” Many of the poor residents made very critical comments about the federal War on Poverty and how the local community action agency administered it. “For all but a few,” the report stated, “the federal War on Poverty is no more than a slogan. It is as distant in effect as the Civil War is in time.” One resident they interviewed proclaimed, “Some poor people are being helped by the poverty program.\

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55 Minutes of Harris County Community Action Association Executive Committee, 6 July 1967, Box 73, Folder CAP, Houston, Harris County, Texas, July-Sept 1967, Office of Economic Opportunity, Inspection Division, Inspection Reports, 1964-67, Record Group 381, NARA.
But the very poor are not.” By 1968 several poor Houstonians had resorted to writing letters to President Johnson to inform him that the people of Houston were quickly losing faith in the War on Poverty because of the way in which the HCCAA Board administered the program.56

By far the loudest complaints about the way HCCAA employees and the board administered the poverty program in Houston came from Mexican Americans in Area 9, a poor area near the ship channel on the east side of the city. In February 1968 Hector del Castillo, president of a Mexican American community group in the area, sent a letter to Southwest Regional OEO Director Walter Richter expressing his shock and outrage that the HCCAA Board of directors had recently diverted more than $300,000 from Area 9 and used it for programs in a section of the city with no Mexican American residents. Later in the month A. D. Asios, the chairman of the Area 9 Committee on the HCCAA Board of directors, expressed his alarm to Richter that for six months the HCCAA Board had completely neglected Area 9. Asios proclaimed that he was very angry that the area was then being offered “a token program which is totally inadequate, unequal in its application and completely discriminatory.” Richter responded to both men by trying to shift the blame from HCCAA to the delegate agencies that were responsible for implementing the programs in Area 9. Richter admitted that there had been problems

extending programs into the area but promised that Francis Williams would adequately address their concerns.⁵⁷

Apparently the response from Richter and the action taken by Williams did not satisfy Mexican Americans in Area 9, and in August 1968 they approached Texas State Representative Lauro Cruz from Houston with their grievances about the poverty program. Cruz was able to convince officials at the southwest regional OEO office that an inspection should be performed to investigate the allegations being made about HCCA A's neglect of the Mexican American community in Houston. The inspection team found that the HCCA A Board was indeed guilty of neglecting Houston's Mexican American community in programming, using discriminatory hiring practices, and denying Mexican Americans a voice in the planning and implementation of the poverty program in the city. Although OEO officials outlined several steps that the HCCA A Board could take to remedy these problems, by the end of 1968 very little had been accomplished; Mexican American residents of Area 9 continued to complain about the poverty program.⁵⁸

⁵⁷ Hector del Castillo to Walter Richter, 2 February 1968, Box 10, Folder General Correspondence, Jan-July 1968, Office of Economic Opportunity, Southwest Region, Community Action Programs, District Supervisors, Records Relating to City Economic Opportunity Boards, 1965-1968, Houston, Record Group 381, NARASW; A. D. Asios to Walter Richter, 23 February 1968, Box 1, Folder Correspondence, Feb 1968-April 1968, Office of Economic Opportunity, Southwest Region, Records of the Director, Correspondence, 1967-69, Record Group 381, NARASW (quotation); Walter Richter to Hector del Castillo, 2 February 1968, Box 10, Folder General Correspondence, Jan-July 1968, Office of Economic Opportunity, Southwest Region, Community Action Programs, District Supervisors, Records Relating to City Economic Opportunity Boards, 1965-1968, Houston, Record Group 381, NARASW; Walter Richter to A. D. Asios, 5 February 1968, Box 1, Folder Correspondence, Feb 1968-April 1968, Office of Economic Opportunity, Southwest Region, Records of the Director, Correspondence, 1967-69, Record Group 381, NARASW.

⁵⁸ Walter Richter to Lauro Cruz, 20 August 1968, Box 1, Folder Correspondence, June-October 1968, Office of Economic Opportunity, Southwest Region, Records of the Director, Correspondence, 1967-69, Record Group 381, NARASW; Lauro Cruz to Walter Richter, telegram, 20 August 1968, Box 4, Folder Telegrams, Office of Economic Opportunity, Southwest Region, Records of the Director, Central Files, 1967-69, Record Group 381, NARASW; Francis Williams to Morgan Groves, 16 September 1968, Box 10, Folder General Correspondence, Aug-Dec 1968, Office of Economic Opportunity, Southwest Region, Community Action Programs, District Supervisors, Records Relating to City Economic Opportunity
While HCCAA administrators became more conservative in their implementation of the War on Poverty in Houston, Reverend Wallace B. Poteat, Ecumenical Fellowship Latin American Channel (EF-LAC) project activists, and their VISTA volunteers attempted to continue with their more radical and confrontational approach to community action. In the city’s Third Ward, VISTAs organized residents to go to Houston City Council meetings to put pressure on the councilmen to build a public library in their neighborhood. A VISTA volunteer in the Fifth Ward organized a neighborhood council to pressure the city council to build more parks and other outdoor recreational areas in their neighborhood. Another volunteer in the Fifth Ward organized the tenants who lived in homes owned by the same landlord and pressured the owner to repaint all of their houses. After achieving this victory, this newly formed tenant union successfully persuaded city officials to pave the roads and install streetlights in their neighborhood. In an impoverished neighborhood near the ship channel a VISTA volunteer began holding meetings to educate residents about how to set up their own credit union, and in another area on the east side a VISTA organized parents into a committee to monitor school board decisions that affected schools in their neighborhood and to arrange extracurricular

activities for their children. In another neighborhood a VISTA volunteer organized the Golden Age Club of senior citizens to provide activities and lobby the city council in the interests of retired persons.\(^59\)

After living in Houston’s poor neighborhoods and witnessing firsthand the daily lives of those living in poverty, nearly all of the VISTA volunteers recognized the need for welfare reform. This was true all over the country; as poverty workers came into close contact with families that depended on welfare payments primarily through Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), it quickly became apparent that changes in the welfare system were needed. Many poverty workers across the country discovered that a number of loosely knit grassroots organizations had already been formed, mainly by mothers, to advocate for higher welfare payments and better treatment from caseworkers. With assistance provided by community organizers, many of whom were VISTA volunteers, the National Welfare Rights Organization was born in 1967 out of these local pressure groups. As historian Premilla Nadasen has argued, “the welfare rights movement was perhaps one of the most important political and social struggles of the 1960s.”\(^60\)

VISTA volunteers in Houston quickly recognized the need for welfare reform, but few could locate existing welfare rights organizations in the city like those found in other

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parts of the country. In a report filed with the HCHR Board of Directors in July 1967, VISTA volunteer Frank Barrett argued that based on his experiences in many of Houston’s poor neighborhoods, "one of the great problems of this wealthy city is the plight of the welfare recipient in Houston and the distinct aura of the 1930s which surrounds the administration of public assistance." Barrett proposed that VISTA volunteers begin organizing the poor into cohesive groups that would be able to pressure the Harris County Welfare Department and the Commissioners Court to increase the amount of welfare payments and demand fair treatment for all Houston citizens receiving welfare support. Barrett described the impossibility of poor and relatively powerless individuals effectively dealing with the welfare establishment in Houston and argued that only through organization could welfare recipients be empowered to make demands on the city’s welfare bureaucracy. Going a step further, Barrett advocated using lawyers from the Houston Legal Foundation to demand real reform of the welfare system by filing lawsuits against pillars of the welfare establishment whose administrators abused the system or treated recipients unfairly. The VISTA volunteer, argued Barrett, would thus serve as a catalyst for reform and could assist attorneys by using the local media to expose flaws and inequalities in the city’s welfare system. Most importantly, Barrett argued that an effort to push for welfare rights in Houston would empower poor residents to demand justice from a system that had thus far denied it from them. Barrett’s report had a profound effect on EF-LAC project directors and other VISTA volunteers working in Houston, and by the end of the year VISTAs in all areas of Houston had begun organizing welfare rights organizations.61

61 Frank Barrett, “A Report-Proposal to the Board of Directors of the HCHR,” 25 July 1967, Box 1, HCHR VISTA Collection (quotation); Bob Newman to Bill Hale, memorandum, “Programs this Volunteer is
Several inevitable clashes between VISTA volunteers working to empower poor Houston residents and the city's public officials and other conservative defenders of the status quo began to occur more regularly in 1967. As VISTA volunteers continued to focus on community organizing, many of them came into direct conflict with reactionary forces in Houston. Arsonists started fires in the VISTA-run East End Teen Center near the ship channel twice between November 1966 and January 1967, the second of which almost burned the center to the ground. Reverend Poteat commented in the wake of the second fire that the neighborhood "is a breeding ground for crime and antagonistic racial feelings." During an EF-LAC Trustees meeting after an investigation concluded that both fires had been the result of arson, Reverend Poteat proclaimed that the arsonists must have really believed the Ku Klux Klan when they charged EF-LAC organizers with "orgies" in the teen center. L. S. Sedita, a landlord in the Third Ward who owned the building in which the VISTA volunteers had established a teen recreation center, evicted the VISTA tenants after receiving multiple complaints from his other tenants about profanity, drinking, and fighting at the center. Poteat and the VISTAs were able to get 500 neighborhood residents to sign a petition demanding they be allowed to stay in the building, but Sedita refused to budge. Ironically, the teens who frequented the center had just voted to name the building the "Sedita Recreation Center." After the VISTA volunteers got some publicity surrounding these issues, landlords began arbitrarily raising the rents on their apartments and community centers. Critics of the VISTA volunteers in Houston also accused the EF-LAC project of being a haven for draft dodgers, a charge Reverend Poteat vehemently denied by pointing to the fact that many of Houston's

VISTA volunteers were veterans of the United States Armed Forces and the fact that VISTA service did not exempt a volunteer from military service.\(^\text{62}\)

In addition to property destruction and public accusations, one VISTA volunteer, in a report on the conditions in Houston, recounted a number of hostile actions against their programs: “The day of the last fire some of the local segregationists tried to break a chair over my head in a restaurant. The Chairman of the Board of the project was shot at by a local Klaner. The Ku Klux Klan used to call the director of the project at home at 3 a.m.” The Houston Police Department, which Reverend Poteat always argued was infiltrated by members of the Ku Klux Klan and the John Birch Society, was openly antagonistic to VISTA volunteers in poor neighborhoods. In January 1967, the same month that arsonists set fire to the East End Teen Center for the second time, officers from the Houston Police Department’s Criminal Intelligence Division began a confidential investigation of a VISTA volunteer in Houston because they believed he had “Civil Rights political affiliations.”\(^\text{63}\) While the East End Teen Center was burning to the ground in the middle of the night in January 1967, police officers arrested VISTA volunteer Marc Jacobs and charged him with loitering simply because he was standing on

\(^{62}\) “Fire Engine on Way To Arson Blaze Kills Man,” news clipping, Box 1, VISTA Scrapbook, VISTA Collection (first quotation); Minutes of EF-LAC Trustees, 5 January 1967, Box 2, Folder 5, VISTA Collection; Minutes of EF-LAC Trustees, 15 February 1967, Box 2, Folder 5, VISTA Collection (second quotation); “500 Ask Reversal of VISTA Eviction Order,” *Houston Post* 12 June 1967; Minutes of EF-LAC Board of Directors, 20 September 1967, Box 2, Folder 5, VISTA Collection; Wallace B. Poteat to Mrs. Birdell Truitt, 16 October 1967, Box 1, Folder 4, VISTA Collection.

\(^{63}\) Lieutenant M. L. Singleton, memorandum, 29 January 1967, Box 73, Folder CAP, Houston, Harris County, Texas, Jan-Mar 1967, OEO, Inspection Division, Inspection Reports, 1964-67, Record Group 381, NARA. Members of the Houston Police Department’s Criminal Intelligence Division had received their training and authority during the red scare that occurred in Houston beginning in 1954. That year the Texas state legislature passed the Suppression of the Community Party Act, which created a new statewide police officer training program that taught “subversive ideologies, economics, propaganda, espionage, sabotage, and counterintelligence.” “The ultimate result of [the training program],” argued historian Don Carleton, “would be the investigatory excesses and civil rights abuses by . . . local police in such cities as Houston in the 1960s and 1970s.” See Don Carleton, *Red Scare: Right-Wing Hysteria, Fifties Fanaticism, and their Legacy in Texas* (Austin: Texas Monthly Press, 1985), 264-265.
the front lawn of his rented home across the street from the fire and at one time attempted
to help extinguish the fire. As the officers were taking him to the police station, they
accused him of being an atheist and a beatnik and made numerous “offensive statements
about VISTA.” Houston Legal Foundation attorneys eventually convinced the courts that
police officers misinterpreted Jacobs’s attempts to help contain the fire as obstructing
their work, but police harassment continued. While Frank Barrett, a VISTA volunteer in
the ship channel area, provided emergency transportation to the hospital for
neighborhood residents, he received six separate citations by the Houston Police
Department within a twenty-four-hour period for having a local residence but an out-of-
state driver’s license. The charges were clearly spurious and Barrett was never prosecuted
in court, but this kind of harassment from Houston police officers severely hindered the
work of the VISTA volunteers in the city. Police officers also repeatedly harassed two
female VISTA volunteers in the Third Ward for being the only white girls in the
neighborhood. In the midst of increasing concern over rioting in urban ghettos that began
in 1965, Reverend Poteat warned that “unless communication at the grass-roots level
between the white community and the black community is opened up, understood, and
supported by the white community, Houston may be in for serious trouble.”

An additional problem that the VISTA volunteers faced beginning in 1967 was an
increasing number of conflicts with HCCAA, the city’s official community action
agency. Before May 1967, VISTA volunteers in Houston had received enormous support

64 “Greetings from Houston,” Box 1, VISTA Scrapbook, VISTA Collection (first quotation); Minutes of
EF-LAC Trustees, 15 February 1967, Box 2, Folder 5, VISTA Collection; LACK Project VOICE, 1 April
1967, Box 1, VISTA Scrapbook, VISTA Collection (second quotation); James M. Simons to Edgar May,
memorandum, 6 March 1967, Box 73, Folder CAP, Houston, Harris County, Texas, Jan-Mar 1967, OEO
Inspection Division, Inspection Reports, 1964-67, Record Group 381, NARA; “Lack Project Voice,” 1
May 1967, Box 2, Folder 2, VISTA Collection.
from H-HCEO, particularly because William Ballew, Charles Kelly, and Earl Allen were sympathetic with the tactics employed by the VISTAs. Beginning during the summer of 1967, as Francis Williams and Hartsell Gray attempted to shift the activities of the recently merged HCCAA in a more conservative direction and away from community organizing and empowerment of the poor, the work of many VISTA volunteers inevitably clashed with that effort. In fact, VISTA volunteers in Houston became some of the most vocal critics of HCCAA’s conservative swing. During an inspection of HCCAA in late August 1967, a federal OEO inspector noted that the VISTAs in particular were the most critical of Williams. “The VISTAs like and sympathize with the major militant leaders,” stated the inspector, “feel they are the natural leaders of the ghettos, and are alarmed at the cleanup that Williams is doing.” An open feud between HCCAA and the EF-LAC project began early in 1968 when several Mexican American organizations in the ship channel area, together with VISTA volunteers, protested the way the community action association planned to spend a $300,000 grant from the federal government in the area. Mexican American civic leaders proclaimed that HCCAA would only agree to fund “a token program, inadequate in comparison to needs, unequal in application and totally discriminatory.” EF-LAC organizers argued that the tactic of HCCAA was to develop antipoverty measures in their offices and implement them in neighborhoods regardless of whether residents wanted them or not. In an interview with the *Houston Chronicle*, Francis Williams, HCCAA executive director, exclaimed that if the residents of poor neighborhoods in the ship channel area did not want the federal funds spent on programs in their area, then HCCAA would be happy to spend the money elsewhere.\(^{65}\)

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\(^{65}\) Saralee Tiede, “Two Houston Poverty Groups Asked to Merge by Government,” *Houston Chronicle*,
Federal OEO inspectors placed the blame for this dwindling support among poor residents and grassroots antipoverty activists squarely on the shoulders of the conflicting factions within HCCAA that had existed since before H-HCEO and HAY had merged to form a single community action agency for the city. According to the inspection team, the internal divisions within HCCAA were incredibly harmful to the entire antipoverty effort in the city because petty squabbles were filtering out into the staff in the target neighborhoods. As long as the staff remained divided, there was little hope that poor people would become confident in the work being done in their neighborhoods. One inspector believed that Hartsell Gray was mostly to blame for these internal divisions because of his arbitrary firings and reassignment of HCCAA personnel. The inspector remarked that because of Gray's actions, "the poor are very suspicious of HCCAA." With no unity and very little sense of direction among themselves, HCCAA leaders could hardly expect to inspire confidence or trust among Houston's poor residents.66

HCCAA administrators not only suffered from diminishing support from the very people they were supposed to be helping, but they also faced declining support from

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66 Earl Rhine to Francis Williams, 15 March 1968, Box 10, Folder General Correspondence, Jan-July 1968, Office of Economic Opportunity, Southwest Region, Community Action Programs, Records Relating to City Economic Opportunity Boards, 1965-1968, Houston, Record Group 381, NARASW (quotation); Hamah King to Fred Baldwin, memorandum, 3 May 1968, Box 10, Folder General Correspondence, Jan-July 1968, Office of Economic Opportunity, Southwest Region, Community Action Programs, District Supervisors, Records Relating to City Economic Opportunity Boards, 1965-1968, Houston, Record Group 381, NARASW; Morgan Groves to Hamah King, memorandum, 13 August 1968, Box 10, Folder General Correspondence, Aug-Dec 1968, Office of Economic Opportunity, Southwest Region, Community Action Programs, District Supervisors, Records Relating to City Economic Opportunity Boards, 1965-1968, Houston, Record Group 381, NARASW.
OEO officials in Washington who were beginning to back off of their commitment to the concept of community action and from conservative members of Congress who started increasing their attacks on the entire poverty program. As historian Allen J. Matusow has shown, national OEO officials were in retreat by 1967, and it was inevitable that local community action agencies would follow. “In 1967,” argued Matusow, “the question was not whether CAP would continue to promote change but whether it would even be permitted to exist.” There were certainly enough conservative votes in Congress to abolish OEO and end the War on Poverty, and according to Matusow it fell to an unlikely savior of the poverty program to ensure its continuance. Democratic Representative Edith Green of Oregon, who since the early days of the juvenile delinquency program had opposed the very concept of community action, submitted a last minute change to the OEO reauthorization bill in October 1967 that ultimately persuaded enough conservatives to support the bill and saved the War on Poverty from being unceremoniously terminated just three years after its inception.67

Although the Community Action Program did not end in 1967, the shape and direction of it changed dramatically after Congress passed the OEO reauthorization bill in October. The Green Amendment essentially allowed local governments to take control of local community action agencies, effectively giving mayors the power to dominate agencies that had become too meddlesome to the status quo. The irony of the situation lay in the fact that by the fall of 1967 most local community action agencies had backed off any previous commitment to radical community action and had become little more than dispensers of social services. The Green Amendment simply codified what had already

taken place in nearly every town and city in the country and ruled out the possibility of any community action agency successfully appealing to federal OEO guidelines in its quest to challenge local power structures. After the Green Amendment passed, federal regulations were on the side of local governments.\textsuperscript{68}

The passage of the Green Amendment had long-term consequences for the War on Poverty in Houston, but its immediate effect was to encourage HCCAA administrators to make their organization even more amenable to city government officials. The HCCAA Board of directors had scheduled a second round of elections to place more poor residents on the board for February 1968, but after the passage of the Green Amendment southwest regional OEO officials advised the board to postpone the elections until the effects of the amendment on local community action agencies became clearer. Once the elections had been postponed, it became apparent that in order for HCCAA to continue its role in implementing the War on Poverty and receive funding from OEO, Mayor Welch would have to give the organization official designation as Houston’s community action agency. The Green Amendment thus gave Welch the power to require whatever changes he desired in HCCAA’s structure and to withhold official sanction if HCCAA leaders refused to comply.\textsuperscript{69}

The southwest regional OEO office dispatched OEO Field Analyst Hamah King to Houston in early April 1968 to assist HCCAA leaders meet the new guidelines and

\textsuperscript{68} Matusow, \textit{Unraveling of America}, 269.

\textsuperscript{69} Francis Williams to Walter Richter, 3 January 1968, Box 1, Folder Correspondence, November 1967-February 1968, Office of Economic Opportunity, Southwest Region, Records of the Director, Correspondence, 1967-69, Record Group 381, NARASW; Walter Richter to Francis Williams, 5 January 1968, Box 10, Folder General Correspondence, Jan-July 1968, Office of Economic Opportunity, Southwest Region, Community Action Programs, District Supervisors, Records Relating to City Economic Opportunity Boards, 1965-1968, Houston, Record Group 381, NARASW; Walter Richter to Francis Williams, 5 January 1968, Box 1, Folder Correspondence, November 1967-February 1968, Office of Economic Opportunity, Southwest Region, Records of the Director, Correspondence, 1967-69, Record Group 381, NARASW.
help make any needed organizational changes to satisfy Welch. Since Francis Williams and Hartsell Gray had been successful in purging the radicals from the HCCAA rolls, Welch’s only major requirement was that the organization centralize control of the poverty program into a much smaller board of directors. Rather than a 150-member board of directors, Welch desired a 21-member board composed of 7 representatives of public officials, 5 from private organizations, and 9 representatives of the poor. Members of the HCCAA Board quickly agreed to these terms, and on June 30, 1968, Welch officially designated the organization as the legitimate community action agency for the city of Houston.70

By the end of 1968 HCCAA, faced with diminished support from national OEO officials and having lost credibility in Houston’s poor neighborhoods, had become nothing more than a deliverer of social services with a centralized and bureaucratic governing board. In July, Francis Williams moved into the position of Executive Director and the HCCAA Board elected Joe Foy, a prominent Houston businessman and vice-president of the Houston Natural Gas Corporation, as their chairman. Foy promised that he would lead the organization “out of the wilderness” and into the business of delivering much needed services to poor residents of Houston. A Houston Chronicle reporter noted optimistically that Foy and the board would now enjoy greater control over the

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70 Walter Richter to Louie Welch, 10 April 1968, Box 1, Folder Correspondence, April 1968-May 1968, Office of Economic Opportunity, Southwest Region, Records of the Director, Correspondence, 1967-69, Record Group 381, NARASW; Fred Baldwin to Bill Elliott, 1 May 1968, Box 10, Folder General Correspondence, Jan-July 1968, Office of Economic Opportunity, Southwest Region, Community Action Programs, District Supervisors, Records Relating to City Economic Opportunity Boards, 1965-1968, Houston, Record Group 381, NARASW; Hamah King to Fred Baldwin, memorandum, 3 May 1968, Box 10, Folder General Correspondence, Jan-July 1968, Office of Economic Opportunity, Southwest Region, Community Action Programs, District Supervisors, Records Relating to City Economic Opportunity Boards, 1965-1968, Houston, Record Group 381, NARASW; Carl Walker to Walter Richter, 30 June 1968, Box 10, Folder General Correspondence, Jan-July 1968, Office of Economic Opportunity, Southwest Region, Community Action Programs, District Supervisors, Records Relating to City Economic Opportunity Boards, 1965-1968, Houston, Record Group 381, NARASW.
organization than previous boards and that HCCAA had recently replaced much of their staff with trained professional social workers.\textsuperscript{71}

HCCAA's new programs and activities during 1968 are illustrative of the organization's commitment to the delivery of social services and complemented the services the organization began offering the previous year. In April HCCAA administrators initiated a program called the Special Community Action Program (SCAP) that reassigned the majority of the community organizers who remained on the HCCAA staff and placed them in neighborhood centers where they were instructed to help poor residents locate needed social services. In July HCCAA employees launched a $750,000 youth summer camp for poor children and teenagers that provided activities such as swimming, recreation, and arts and crafts. That summer HCCAA also held a job fair in downtown Houston to bring employers and potential employees together and instituted a Neighborhood Health Services program to provide temporary federally-funded medical services in poor neighborhoods. In September HCCAA got approval from OEO to administer Project MoneyWise, which was a consumer education program aimed at Houston's elderly population. As historian Allen J. Matusow argued, "Instincts for self-preservation having prevailed over formal commitments to change, once militant CAAs rapidly evolved into tame dispensers of services." The experiences of HCCAA after the passage of the Green Amendment confirm that this was true for the once militant community action agency in Houston and show that HCCAA now "served – not threatened – local authority."\textsuperscript{72}

\textsuperscript{72} MIS Report, "Quarterly Narrative Report for HCCAA, for period ending 3/31/68," 1 April 1968, Box 10B, Folder MIS Report, Office of Economic Opportunity, Southwest Region, Community Action Programs, District Supervisors, Records Relating to City Economic Opportunity Boards, 1965-1968,
Francis Williams's and Hartsell Gray's success in purging the radicals from their organization and making it more palatable to the city's public officials undoubtedly helped ensure HCCAA's continued existence, but in a short time they also made HCCAA so conservative and racked with internal divisions that the organization lost the support of Houston's poor people. By 1969 HCCAA was large, bureaucratic, centralized, overly sensitive to the wishes of public officials, and alienated from the very people it was created to help. Little hope remained that such a cautious HCCAA could bring about social change capable of attacking the root causes of poverty. As Tolstoy had described the Battle of Borodino, the War on Poverty in Houston had been filled with starts and stops, illusory victories, discouraging defeats, and misinformation, and the experience frustrated any attempt to ascertain progress in the fight against the evils of poverty. The city's community action agency, once dominated by idealistic antipoverty activists determined to try a new approach to solving the problems of poverty through a radical interpretation of the community action concept, had become little more than a

bureaucratic charity organization based on the same service delivery philosophy that had failed to lift people out of poverty for decades. As often occurs in history, the conservative defenders of the status quo had won, and the real losers in this battle were not the radicals who once controlled the poverty program in the city, but the people living in poverty who had their hopes and expectations raised only to have them dashed when it was no longer politically expedient to fight on their behalf.

By 1969 HCCAA had ceased to be a positive force for social change in Houston. Yet the War on Poverty continued, albeit in modified form. The election of Richard Nixon signaled massive changes in the federal antipoverty program. Although local circumstances continued to shape its implementation in Houston, it was in the final years of the War on Poverty that diminished federal support for an active community action agency in the city doomed the federal antipoverty program to failure and culminated in the end of the War on Poverty by the mid-1970s.
Chapter 6
De-Escalation of the War on Poverty in Houston, 1969-1976

During the first four years of the War on Poverty in Houston, a diverse group of grassroots activists – ranging from community organizers dedicated to the principles of Saul Alinsky, to religious activists who combined Old Testament prophetic social justice advocacy and the Christian social gospel with radical politics in their sponsorship of VISTA volunteers, to more moderate advocates of social service delivery – struggled against the city’s public officials, conservative defenders of the status quo, and sometimes each other in their quest to make the federal War on Poverty meaningful in the lives of Houston’s poor people. As the experiences of these activists have shown, grassroots implementers of the War on Poverty were indispensable for carrying out the poverty war on the ground and in many ways shaped the contours of the programs. Yet they did not engage in the battles of the War on Poverty alone, nor did they create their own war on poverty in Houston out of nothing. Rather, grassroots antipoverty activists in Houston used federal programs and relied on the resources and authority of the federal government to wage their battle against poverty in the city. In many cases grassroots activists were also able to expand these federal programs into vehicles for social change in their crusade for racial and economic justice, but the federal government was equally important in determining what the War on Poverty could accomplish. It was this fluid relationship between the federal government and grassroots activists that determined the fate of the War on Poverty in Houston.
In short, the federal government, in addition to grassroots activists, was important for the implementation of the War on Poverty in Houston. A focus on the grassroots activists who implemented the poverty programs in Houston has revealed several important points about how the War on Poverty operated on the ground, but at the same time we must not lose sight of the significance of the federal government to this story. Throughout this dissertation I have shown that the actions of War on Poverty administrators at the national, state, and regional levels affected the implementation of its programs at the grassroots level, even while grassroots antipoverty activists at times transformed these programs in their efforts to empower Houston's poor residents. Nowhere was the importance of the federal government illustrated more vividly, however, than in the 1969-1976 period when diminished federal support for the struggle against poverty doomed it to failure on the ground in Houston. The conviction and determination of grassroots activists were crucial for the implementation of the War on Poverty in the city, but it was virtually impossible for these activists to continue their efforts in the absence of federal support, funding, and authority. Just as grassroots activists in Houston had been propelled by the federal mandate to fight a War on Poverty, they also had the wind abruptly taken out of their sails when the federal government retreated from its commitment to fighting poverty. The result, of course, was disastrous for the War on Poverty in Houston.

Many historians of the War on Poverty have portrayed the Green Amendment, passed by Congress in the fall of 1967 as part of the OEO reauthorization bill, as the end of the story of community action and even of the entire War on Poverty.\(^1\) It is easy to

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understand why this interpretation has persisted. The Green Amendment codified into law a phenomenon that had been occurring at least since 1966; namely, the practice of city mayors and other local public officials taking control of community action agencies. Once public officials regained a firm grip on these agencies, there was little chance that these agencies would be able to carry out their original mission, which almost always required challenging the status quo to reform local institutions and the local establishment. The Green Amendment, therefore, guaranteed the legal right of mayors to take control of local community action agencies, even if it neither required them to do so nor stipulated the manner in which they could do it.

As with nearly every other aspect of the War on Poverty, local circumstances dictated how the Green Amendment would affect local community action agencies and the entire antipoverty program on the ground. In Houston, although it resulted in significant changes to the Harris County Community Action Association (HCCAA), the passage of the Green Amendment did not prompt Mayor Welch or any other public official to assume immediate control over the organization. Rather, the Green Amendment launched a process that continued into the early 1970s in which the mayor assisted in HCCAA’s gradual but steady decline into irrelevance in the city. Meanwhile, VISTA volunteers in Houston, who were unaffected by the Green Amendment because their sponsoring agencies were autonomous and not bound to HCCAA, continued to organize poor residents and use confrontational tactics until 1972. In Houston, therefore,
the Green Amendment represented not the end of the poverty program but rather the
beginning of the final act of the War on Poverty in the city.²

To a much greater degree than the Green Amendment, national political
developments beginning in 1969 weighed heavily on the course of the War on Poverty in
Houston. Upon assuming the presidency that year, Richard Nixon, the candidate many
Americans believed would crack down on 1960s-style political activism, lacked a clearly
defined domestic agenda for his administration. During the campaign Nixon had
occasionally blamed the Democrats for skyrocketing crime rates and runaway inflation
and left voters assuming he would eliminate much of the Great Society, but he rarely
spoke out on domestic issues with much conviction. Despite Nixon’s apparent lack of
interest in domestic affairs, however, the new president did have, in historian Irwin
Unger’s words, “a constellation of prejudices with policy implications.” Above all, Nixon
“considered the Great Society primarily a payoff to blacks and Hispanics and deplored
the supposed kowtowing to black militants and white left-liberals of his predecessor. . . .
Poverty was not a shame; it was a misfortune that could be overcome by people who
applied themselves.” Nixon himself had come from a poor family, and he believed in the
American myth of the self-made man. His own personal background, combined with his
beliefs about the causes of poverty and the effects of federal programs to eradicate it from
society, determined how the new president would change the War on Poverty over the
next several years.³

² See Chapter Five of this dissertation for the immediate effects of the Green Amendment on the War on
Poverty in Houston in 1967 and 1968.
³ Irwin Unger, The Best of Intentions: The Triumphs and Failures of the Great Society Under Kennedy,
Despite his opposition to the philosophy of much of the War on Poverty, in his first term Nixon did not begin eliminating poverty programs as his more conservative allies had wished. Rather than bringing the War on Poverty to a halt, the new president put a major emphasis on decentralizing power in an effort to do away with government bureaucracy. Calling his loosely formed domestic agenda the New Federalism, Nixon wanted to take the power that Lyndon Johnson and the liberals had amassed for the federal government and return it to state and local governments. Nixon and the Republicans sharply disagreed with Johnson and many liberal Democrats about where political power should be lodged. Johnson and many War on Poverty planners believed that state and local agencies were at best inept and at worst protectors of a social and racial caste system, particularly in the South. Their solution, as part of the War on Poverty, was to create a federal agency like the Office of Economic Opportunity to carry out a strong domestic reform agenda and in the process to bypass state and local power structures in an effort to empower society’s disadvantaged. Nixon’s New Federalism, on the other hand, offered the opposite argument by suggesting that the federal government had failed to solve society’s problems and calling for the restoration of power to governors, mayors, and other pillars of the nation’s local establishments. In a sense, Nixon’s domestic policy assumptions created an atmosphere that allowed for an extension of the same spirit that had produced the Green Amendment in 1967.4

On August 8, 1969, Nixon delivered a speech to the nation outlining his vaguely defined domestic policy. The president said that for the previous eight years the liberals had turned the federal government into “a bureaucratic monstrosity, cumbersome, unresponsive, ineffective,” and he committed his administration to the task of shrinking

4 Unger, *Best of Intentions*, 302-303.
its power. As for the War on Poverty, Nixon promised to restructure the Job Corps and to reshape rather than abolish the Office of Economic Opportunity. OEO had "a vital place in our efforts to develop new programs and apply new knowledge," Nixon said, but it would be severely reduced in size and transformed into a "laboratory agency" to experiment with new ways of solving the problems of the poor. Once antipoverty methods proved successful, they would be transferred out of OEO and into appropriate agencies for implementation. Rather than being the administrative body responsible for directing the War on Poverty all over the nation, OEO would now serve as a small experimental agency and be removed from the day-to-day operations of the federal poverty program.\(^5\)

The application of Nixon’s New Federalism to the War on Poverty was simple and direct. Nixon retained the antipoverty programs that had proven their effectiveness, but he turned the administration of them over to state and local governments and agencies. Soon after his speech on his domestic agenda in August 1969, Nixon closed fifty-nine Job Corps centers and sharply cut funding to those that remained. The president also appointed conservative allies to top OEO positions, most significantly Illinois representative Donald Rumsfeld as the new head of OEO. Nixon made a significant change to the position, however, by placing the OEO director in the executive cabinet, thereby making it easier for the president to watch closely over OEO’s activities. Rumsfeld, in turn, appointed several conservatives to administer OEO’s Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation (OPRE), and they predictably concluded that many

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War on Poverty programs were ineffective, unpopular among public officials, and in need of either elimination or drastic change. Thus Nixon’s strategy to refrain from openly attacking popular OEO programs but simultaneously to fill top OEO positions with conservative critics of the War on Poverty had the effect of reducing the size of OEO without making the new president appear as an opponent of its programs.\(^6\)

Nixon and Rumsfeld’s actions to curb the activities of several programs had profound implications for the War on Poverty at the grassroots level. In 1970 Nixon instructed Rumsfeld to strip the Legal Services program of its law reform potential and place local personnel under the direction of public officials, and Rumsfeld even went so far as to threaten to replace the popular national director of the program if he failed to carry out the president’s wishes. Predictably, Nixon and Rumsfeld got their way. In 1971 and 1972 Nixon transferred the wildly popular Head Start program to the department of Health, Education, and Welfare (HEW) and slowed its growth. In 1973 Nixon got Congress to pass the Comprehensive Employment and Training Act, which moved the Job Corps to the Department of Labor and other manpower programs to local government agencies. After Nixon’s landslide reelection in 1972, the president moved to attack OEO and the entire War on Poverty more openly. He severely cut funding to the agency; for example, in 1969 funding for OEO was $1.9 billion, yet by 1973 Nixon had reduced that amount to $328 million. In January 1975, after Nixon’s resignation, President Gerald

\(^6\) Unger, *Best of Intentions*, 303, 331; Matusow, *Unraveling*, 270; T. Zane Reeves, *The Politics of the Peace Corps & VISTA* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1988), 47, 67; Bertrand M. Harding to All OEO Employees, memorandum, 21 April 1969, Box 3, Folder 8, Office of Economic Opportunity, Southwest Region, VISTA, Central Files, Mexican-American Affairs-Regional Services Branch, Record Group 381, National Archives and Records Administration, Southwest Region, Fort Worth, Texas (hereafter cited as NARASW); Godfrey Sperling, Jr., “We Are All Poor When We Fail to Heed . . .”, *Christian Science Monitor*, April 25, 1969, newspaper clipping, Box 3, Folder 8, Office of Economic Opportunity, Southwest Region, VISTA, Central Files, Mexican-American Affairs-Regional Services Branch, Record Group 381, NARASW.
Ford closed OEO completely but allowed a remnant of the Community Action Program to survive under the newly created Community Services Administration. By this point, however, CAP was a simple deliverer of services and totally uninterested in reform.  

These national developments within OEO greatly affected operations at the agency’s southwest regional office in Austin, which was responsible for supervising the War on Poverty in Houston. By April 1969 Rumsfeld was busy charting a new course for OEO that reflected Nixon’s desire to decentralize War on Poverty programs and reduce the size of government bureaucracy. In his speech at the press conference where Nixon announced his appointment, Rumsfeld promised to find out what worked and what did not and to eliminate ineffective programs. “The President has talked of the voices we have lost amid the shouting,” Rumsfeld proclaimed, invoking Nixon’s appeal to the Silent Majority during the campaign, “the voices of quiet anguish, the voices that speak without words, the voices of the heart.” The new OEO director pledged to make the War on Poverty successful by rendering its programs more appealing to the group of American citizens who were responsible for Nixon’s victory the previous year – the Great Silent Majority of mostly white and middle-class citizens who had grown weary of 1960s social activism, racial conflict, annual urban riots, protests, demonstrations, and radical community organizers who stirred up the poor. Rumsfeld’s most significant change to OEO came when he began transforming it from the administrative body for the War on Poverty into an experimental agency. According to Rumsfeld, OEO would become a laboratory for testing various approaches to solving poverty, as Nixon had promised in his August speech. Once a program proved its effectiveness, it would be moved out of OEO and into the proper federal agency to administer it, such as HEW or

7 Unger, *Best of Intentions*, 331-332; Matusow, *Unraveling*, 270.
the Department of Labor. Nixon had made it clear that he wanted “a good Nixon Republican” to direct the federal War on Poverty, and it seemed that in Rumsfeld he got exactly what he wished for.8

By the end of the summer in 1969, Rumsfeld had embarked on a plan for the complete reorganization of the OEO bureaucracy. He appointed a task force to travel to all regional OEO offices and report back to Washington about each office’s activities, and the report generated by these visits called for a major reorganization of OEO at all levels. According to the report, there was an urgent need for OEO officials to delegate certain programs to other federal or local agencies, overcome management deficiencies plaguing the agency, and most importantly, “reorient the agency to the new thrust of this [presidential] administration.” Above all, Nixon and Rumsfeld wanted to rid OEO of bureaucrats. The reorganization plan accordingly called for the merger or elimination of several OEO offices and positions, the integration of many of the office’s activities, and the restructuring of regional offices to ensure closer financial control by the new director. In a memo sent to all OEO employees in August, Rumsfeld stressed the need to implement these organizational changes rapidly.9

8 Bertrand M. Harding to All OEO Employees, memorandum, 21 April 1969, Box 3, Folder 8, Office of Economic Opportunity, Southwest Region, VISTA, Central Files, Mexican-American Affairs-Regional Services Branch, Record Group 381, NARASW (first quotation); Godfrey Sperling, Jr., “We Are All Poor When We Fail to Heed . . . ,” Christian Science Monitor, April 25, 1969, newspaper clipping, Box 3, Folder 8, Office of Economic Opportunity, Southwest Region, VISTA, Central Files, Mexican-American Affairs-Regional Services Branch, Record Group 381, NARASW; John Osborne, “The President and the Poor,” The New Republic, May 24, 1969, newspaper clipping, Box 3, Folder 8, Office of Economic Opportunity, Southwest Region, VISTA, Central Files, Mexican-American Affairs-Regional Services Branch, Record Group 381, NARASW (second quotation).
9 Bertrand M. Harding to Regional Directors, memorandum, 9 May 1969, Box 1, Folder 20, Office of Economic Opportunity, Southwest Region, VISTA, Correspondence, 1969-Copies of Letters Sent, 1969, Central Files (Address-Blank Form), Record Group 381, NARASW; Donald Rumsfeld to All OEO Personnel, memorandum, 11 August 1969, Box 3, Folder 8, Office of Economic Opportunity, Southwest Region, VISTA, Central Files, Mexican-American Affairs-Regional Services Branch, Record Group 381, NARASW (quotation); Office of Economic Opportunity, “Background on OEO Reorganization,” 12
Once Rumsfeld’s efforts to reorganize the OEO bureaucracy were underway, the new director turned his attention to the fate of the Community Action Program (CAP). During a speech in October 1969, the new OEO director outlined a redefined mission for CAP that would reflect the Nixon Administration’s commitment to the Silent Majority. In a clear attempt to make CAP more palatable for the Republican Party’s enlarged constituency of mostly white middle-class Americans, Rumsfeld stressed the need to broaden the appeal of community action. “We have operated too long on the assumption that the poor have natural enemies with whom it is useless to talk,” Rumsfeld stated, and this “prophecy has been self-fulfilling. We have created enemies, many of whom might have been natural friends if we had sought them out.” The poor, according to Rumsfeld, had been “treated as a separate nation at war with the rest, as if only they were the ones calling for improved services, as if only they were pointing to the decaying blight of our cities, as if only they felt institutions were unresponsive to their needs, as if only they wanted social change. . . . It is not just the poor who will benefit from change.” Rumsfeld promised that under his direction, CAP would unite the poor and nonpoor to create an alliance to solve the problems of poverty.10

In his effort to broaden the base of support for community action, Rumsfeld told his staff that they would have to work together to clarify the goals and sharpen the objectives of CAP. The expectations placed on CAP in the past had been unreasonable and unrealistic, Rumsfeld told them, and in the future local community action agencies must rely on a whole system of public and private institutions and agencies to solve the

August 1969, Box 3, Folder 8, Office of Economic Opportunity, Southwest Region, VISTA, Central Files, Mexican-American Affairs-Regional Services Branch, Record Group 381, NARASW.
10 B Mac to Ed Dela Rosa, memorandum, 22 October 1969, Box 2, Folder 2, Office of Economic Opportunity, Southwest Region, VISTA, Central Files, Budget-Mexican-American Affairs, Record Group 381, NARASW.
problems of the poor. Community action agencies were ill equipped to complete the tasks of planning, coordinating, and providing solutions to the nation's poverty on their own, but an attack on poverty was still possible if most of the effort could be expended by state and local governments, city and county welfare agencies, and the private sector.11

In order to promote this partnership between local community action agencies and established institutions, Rumsfeld made it clear that while community action agencies should be advocates for the poor, they should never alienate the nonpoor. Above all, this meant that local antipoverty activists associated with CAP would be forced to drop the use of confrontational tactics in the fight against poverty. "If CAA efforts are dominated by the kind of confrontation tactics which divide communities and further isolate the poor from other groups instead of bringing them into closer relations with the community," Rumsfeld warned, "Community Action will soon be without the broad support it must have. And the really good efforts of CAAs would go down the drain. The results would be tragic for this country - the poor and the nonpoor alike." Confrontational tactics on behalf of the poor, of course, would threaten this middle-class support and produce a backlash against the poverty program, which in reality had already begun before Nixon's election in 1968. In fact, there was very little need for the type of changes Rumsfeld called for in this speech because the majority of local community action agencies had been effectively tamed by conservative attacks and no longer engaged in confrontational tactics. Nevertheless, Rumsfeld's statements made it clear that the Community Action Program would no longer have official sanction to offend the middle class, and in the

11 B Mac to Ed Dela Rosa, memorandum, 22 October 1969, Box 2, Folder 2, Office of Economic Opportunity, Southwest Region, VISTA, Central Files, Budget-Mexican-American Affairs, Record Group 381, NARASW; Office of Economic Opportunity, "Background on OEO Reorganization," 12 August 1969, Box 3, Folder 8, Office of Economic Opportunity, Southwest Region, VISTA, Central Files, Mexican-American Affairs-Regional Services Branch, Record Group 381, NARASW.
OEO reorganization plan he made sure conservative staffers would have more direct control over the types of activities in which members of local CAAs engaged.\footnote{B Mac to Ed Dela Rosa, memorandum, 22 October 1969, Box 2, Folder 2, Office of Economic Opportunity, Southwest Region, VISTA, Central Files, Budget-Mexican-American Affairs, Record Group 381, NARASW (quotation); Office of Economic Opportunity, “Background on OEO Reorganization,” 12 August 1969, Box 3, Folder 8, Office of Economic Opportunity, Southwest Region, VISTA, Central Files, Mexican-American Affairs-Regional Services Branch, Record Group 381, NARASW.}

All of these changes in the War on Poverty at the national and regional levels beginning in 1969 had a tremendous effect on the local antipoverty effort in Houston, particularly on the Harris County Community Action Association (HCCAA). Local elected officials and conservative interests had effectively neutralized any radicalism that had existed in the organization by the end of the previous year, but HCCAA nevertheless continued to play the most important role in the administration of the War on Poverty in the city. Although HCCAA already suffered from an overbearing local power structure, hostility from many of Houston’s poor, and diminished support from OEO officials in Austin and Washington, beginning in 1969 the city’s community action agency began a steady decline into irrelevance. By the time Nixon took office, HCCAA was simply a benign deliverer of social services, but even those services were scaled back during the first few years of his administration. The organization was also beset with administrative difficulties, including a tumultuous board restructuring and a lengthy absence of an executive director that ultimately proved to be the final nail in the coffin of community action in Houston. The changes in Washington, coming at a time when HCCAA desperately needed guidance and a renewed sense of mission, virtually ensured that the agency would become a nonentity in Houston’s War on Poverty.
HCCAA's board restructuring that began during the summer of 1969 illustrated how alienated the agency had become from the people it was designed to serve. Mayor Louie Welch had been successful during the previous year in forcing the HCCAA Board of directors to centralize control over the War on Poverty in the city by reducing the size of the board and increasing the representation of public officials. HCCAA went without an executive director for several months during the fall of 1969 and spring of 1970, and Welch worked to gain even more control over the organization during this time of uncertainty. In July the board's representatives of Houston's public officials voted as a bloc to remove members of the city's NAACP chapter from HCCAA's board and prevent any organization representing the Mexican American population from being appointed. According to an OEO inspector sent from Austin, this particular meeting was an attempt by the city's public officials and HCCAA leadership to hold an unannounced election meeting to avoid the votes of the other members of the board and force their will on the board by determining its composition. Southwest regional OEO officials responded by declaring HCCAA’s meeting null and void and ordered its board to schedule another meeting with a quorum present to elect representatives.¹³

Southwest regional OEO representatives noted that Welch was “extremely unhappy with our action” to require HCCAA to comply with federal OEO guidelines, but in the end Houston’s community action agency was forced to hold another meeting to elect representatives in a democratic way or else face a loss of funding. The problems,

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¹³ Hamah R. King to Frank Partida, 27 February 1970, Box 6, Folder 1, Office of Economic Opportunity, Southwest Region, Records of the Deputy Director, Central Files, 1969-70, Record Group 381, NARASW; Hamah R. King to Harry Davis, 14 July 1969, Box 6, Folder 1, Office of Economic Opportunity, Southwest Region, Records of the Deputy Director, Central Files, 1969-70, Record Group 381, NARASW; Walter H. Richter to Harry Davis, 1 August 1969, Box 6, Folder 1, Office of Economic Opportunity, Southwest Region, Records of the Deputy Director, Central Files, 1969-70, Record Group 381, NARASW.
however, did not end there, particularly with regard to HCCAA’s relationship with the city’s Mexican American population. As the 1960s led into the 1970s in Houston, the city’s Mexican American population became increasingly organized around civil rights issues and more vocal in their displeasure with the city’s public officials. In a special report on the impact of the War on Poverty on Mexican Americans in Texas, federal OEO inspectors noted that HCCAA failed to reach a large number of Mexican Americans in Houston because the agency created target neighborhoods where poor whites and African Americans were in the majority. Mexican American activists in Houston had begun demanding a strict apportionment of federal dollars spent on poor Mexican Americans in the city proportionate to their percentage in the population, but HCCAA Board members refused to alter their budget and argued that the Mexican American population already benefited from War on Poverty programs to a greater degree than their numbers warranted. In May 1970, after the HCCAA Board had consistently refused to address these problems, members of the Mexican American Youth Organization (MAYO), a militant Chicano group, appeared at a HCCAA meeting and threatened several board members because they had failed to name a Mexican American to one of the vacant top-level positions within the agency. Having already alienated a large segment of Houston’s poor population the previous year, HCCAA Board members continued to draw the ire of the city’s poor residents who believed the agency was not serving their needs. Without pressure from Austin and Washington, HCCAA continued its decline into an agency that had little effect on Houston’s poor and often provoked the anger of many of the city’s poor residents.14

14 Walter H. Richter to Donald Rumsfeld, memorandum, 12 August 1969, Box 1, Folder 2, Office of Economic Opportunity, Southwest Region, Records of the Director, Central Files, 1967-69, Record Group
Mayor Welch and other city officials could read the handwriting on the wall. While OEO officials at the national level were rapidly changing the face of the War on Poverty and becoming increasingly condemnatory of activist community action agencies, HCCAA was embroiled in its own controversies and suffered from mismanagement and a lack of direction. Houston’s public officials correctly surmised that HCCAA would no longer be of much consequence in the city. This was quite a change from the relationship Welch and implementers of the local War on Poverty once had. At one time Houston’s community action agency was an activist antipoverty organization that could use the threat of organized protest to win concessions from city officials. There is no doubt that Welch was extremely apprehensive about the prospect of mass demonstrations occurring in his city, and as a result he had been responsive to public demands to address the problems of poverty in Houston in the past. During the winter of 1966-1967, community organizers were able to win a series of small yet significant victories for the city’s poor by confronting Welch and other public officials and coercing them into taking action on behalf of poor Houston residents. Even as late as February 1969 Welch and his staff sought to extend city services to four well organized low-income areas in the northern part of the city before, as a confidential internal memo stated, the mayor was “forced or unpleasantly pressured” into taking the action. This is precisely the reason community organizing had been moderately effective in Houston and why grassroots activists had

381, NARASW (quotation); Arthur D. Jones to Blair Justice, memorandum, 3 March 1970, Box 33, Louie Welch Papers, Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library, Houston, Texas (hereafter cited as Welch Papers); Cynthia Carrington to Joe P. Maldonado, memorandum, 20 April 1970, Box 1, Folder 7, Office of Economic Opportunity, Records of the Office of Operations, Records of the Field Coordination Division, Subject File, 1968-1972, Record Group 381, National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, Maryland (hereafter cited as NARA); Blair Justice to Louie Welch, memorandum, 5 May 1970, Box 33, Welch Papers.
been able to achieve a few victories. Welch responded to large numbers of citizens exerting pressure from the community.\footnote{"Mayor's Aide Says Report Misunderstood," *Houston Chronicle*, February 11, 1969, newspaper clipping, Box 33, Welch Papers. See Chapter Three of this dissertation for how Houston's community action agency forced confrontations with Welch and other public officials and won a few small but significant victories in the fight against poverty in the city.}

By 1969, however, Welch had learned his lesson about approving federal funding to fight poverty in Houston without retaining control over how the money would be spent and, more importantly, what types of programs would be funded and who would administer them. The mayor and other public officials' actions to reduce HCCAA to a simple deliverer of services and to force the organization's leaders to abandon community organization over the previous two years had, by design, allowed Welch to pursue alternative avenues to fight poverty in Houston that would show he cared about the plight of the poor in his city but at the same time not require him to give up any of his power or allow his constituents to be threatened. Beginning in 1969 Welch took advantage of President Nixon's efforts to decentralize power in the War on Poverty and began to advocate using federal block grant programs to fight urban blight in Houston that could be administered by branches of the city government rather than pesky poor people or rabble-rousing antipoverty activists. In the process, Welch stole any authority HCCAA still had as the administrative body for the War on Poverty in Houston; taking cues from the new presidential administration, he secured his own power over how federal antipoverty funds would be spent in his city.

The most glaring example of how Welch accomplished this goal of circumventing HCCAA's little remaining power and taking almost complete control of the War on Poverty in Houston was his transformation into a vocal advocate for Houston's
participation in the Model Cities program. Like many other moderately conservative politicians in the emerging Sunbelt South, Welch had always been attracted to federal funding for improvements to the city of Houston as long as there were no strings attached, and during the War on Poverty he welcomed federal funds that bypassed HCCAA and did not invite interference from the poor. Model Cities became a tool for some Sunbelt mayors to regain control of local wars on poverty that had become irritants to local public officials, and Houston’s experience with the federal program shows just how directly the changes at the national level determined the course of the War on Poverty at the grassroots.\textsuperscript{16}

Lyndon Johnson and his advisers conceived of Model Cities (then called Demonstration Cities) in 1966, but the program was extremely slow to get off the ground. The idea for a massive federal program to attack blight in the nation’s decaying urban centers initially came from United Auto Workers President Walter Reuther and Detroit Mayor Jerome Cavanagh when the two men submitted a report to Johnson in May 1965 calling for a plan to rebuild the nation’s inner cities and make up for the failings of Urban Renewal. Like much of the War on Poverty, the solution for the country’s decaying urban centers would involve coordination of all the public and private resources available to help rebuild the cities, while at the same time would also allow inner-city residents to have a voice in its implementation. In the original plan, Houston was to be chosen as one of six “Demonstration Cities” that would prove the effectiveness of this new approach to solving urban problems. Although Johnson and his staff were initially cold to the idea of

a revamped Urban Renewal program, the Watts riot that occurred in Los Angeles that summer gave fresh urgency to the problems of the cities. It was in the wake of Watts that Johnson assembled a task force to study Reuther and Cavanagh's proposal. The president and his advisers responded favorably to the task force's report in December, but the president, as he had done with the proposal for the Community Action Program a few months prior, expanded Model Cities from an experiment in rebuilding the nation's cities into a full-fledged government program that would fund sixty-six cities of all sizes selected from hundreds of applications. The White House spent the first half of 1966 drumming up grassroots support for Model Cities and defending it against attacks by Congressmen claiming it would reward rioters. Finally in November Johnson signed the Demonstration Cities and Metropolitan Development Act of 1966 before officially changing the name of the program to Model Cities and placing it in the recently created Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). The federal program would not be as large in its first year as Johnson hoped, however, because the Senate designated 1967 as a planning year, and as a result it was not until 1968 that many local politicians from cities like Houston began paying attention to the new federal program for the nation's cities.17

Although Welch was not overly eager to obtain a Model Cities grant during the planning year, in mid-1967 he did permit a few members of his staff to draw up an application for Houston. In July HUD officials released a list of cities, including four in Texas, that had been approved for a Model Cities planning grant, but Houston was not

among them. The city’s rejected application revealed a problem peculiar to the city of Houston that would haunt Welch’s later efforts to obtain a Model Cities grant. Houston, unlike any other major city in the United States, had no zoning laws. According to Houston historian David McComb, early efforts to promote city planning and to enact land zoning ordinances began during the 1910s and 1920s, only to be defeated by real estate agents and the Houston Property Owners’ League, whose spokesmen argued that “such planning was discriminatory, arbitrary, and damaging to small property owners and real estate interests.”

Another attempt to pass a zoning ordinance occurred during the 1930s and resulted in a series of land zoning hearings at City Hall. Antizoning advocates argued that “zoning would throttle city growth and would interfere with the constitutional right to hold property.” As the debate dragged on into the late 1940s, several Houstonians opposed to zoning ordinances had even harsher words for the proposal. Zoning laws, according to opponents, would “create a dangerous club in the hands of any dictatorial administration.” One prominent leader of the antizoning faction in Houston proclaimed that “a zoning ordinance is an exercise of the police power of government. . . . Houston was built by men of vision, not by slide-rule experts armed with an omniscient egotism and a pocket full of silly statistics.” Another antizoning activist exclaimed that zoning “just goes back to the idea of Joe Stalin, that one man can figure out everything – the whole plan.”

Hugh Roy Cullen, a reactionary but nonetheless influential voice in city politics, stated that Houston was “doing too well to try this un-American, German plan.”

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18 Robert Wood to Barefoot Sanders, memorandum, 27 July 1967, Box 8, Folder 1, White House Central Files, Local Government (Ex LG), Lyndon Baines Johnson Library, Austin, Texas (hereafter cited at LBJL); Fred Bohen to Joe Califano, memorandum, 9 September 1967, Box 8, Folder 1, White House Central Files, Local Government (Ex LG), LBJL; David G. McComb, Houston: The Bayou City (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1969), 139-144 (quotation).
Houston residents predictably went to the polls and defeated this latest zoning plan by a two-to-one margin. Zoning came up as an issue once more in the early 1960s, but was again defeated, not to return as a major issue in Houston city politics until the Model Cities application once again made zoning laws a hot political topic in the late 1960s.¹⁹

According to McComb, one significant consequence of Houston’s lack of zoning ordinances has been the inability of the city to benefit from any federal urban renewal projects. The federal government has insisted on some degree of city planning in order to determine eligibility for federal funding to attack urban blight, but this type of planning was exactly what Houstonians deliberately and consistently avoided. When HUD began awarding Model Cities planning grants during the summer of 1967, federal officials inevitably left Houston off their list because an absence of zoning ordinances meant little or no control over how the money would be spent in the city. HUD officials were explicit in their reason for rejecting Houston’s application; without control over land use, city officials could not guarantee Model Cities funds would be used to carry out the mission of the program. HUD Secretary Robert Weaver made it clear to Welch that HUD officials sincerely wanted Houston to be a part of the Model Cities program despite the city’s reluctance to pass zoning laws. If a zoning ordinance was out of the question, Weaver suggested that the mayor advocate an alternative measure that would grant the city government some power over land use in the city. Welch had not yet been persuaded to become an advocate for the new federal program, however, and Weaver’s overtures had little effect. By the end of 1967, federal officials had approved the Model Cities

applications of sixty-three cities, with Houston being the only major American city that could not even qualify for a planning grant.20

Beginning in January 1968, Mayor Welch began to warm up to the idea of making a bigger push to get Model Cities funding. The timing of his shift from indifference to open advocacy was quite telling of his intentions. During the last few months of 1967, Welch, along with other city officials and local politicians, had successfully tamed HCCAA and watched approvingly as the once confrontational community action agency became embroiled with internal battles over the purging of the group’s radical community organizers. With HCCAA effectively neutralized, Welch began searching for ways to bring federal antipoverty funds to Houston without having to go through the city’s community action agency, and in the Model Cities program he discovered that he could secure a block grant from the federal government without having to abide by the wishes of HCCAA. A direct grant program like Model Cities would allow Welch to enjoy much more control over how the money would be spent in the city than he had over community action funds in Houston.

As the city’s rejected application stated the previous year, the first step in persuading HUD officials to approve Houston’s Model Cities application was to convince city council members to pass an ordinance that would allow for land control in

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20 McComb, Houston, 220; Beverly Massey to Fred Baldwin, Joe Carpenter, and Ben Haney, memorandum, 26 July 1967, Box 1, Folder 2, Office of Economic Opportunity, Southwest Region, CAP Correspondence, Memos, CAP Administrator-Family Planning, Record Group 381, NARASW; Robert Wood to Barefoot Sanders, memorandum, 27 July 1967, Box 8, Folder 1, White House Central Files, Local Government (Ex LG), LBJL; Fred Bohen to Joe Califano, memorandum, 9 September 1967, Box 8, Folder 1, White House Central Files, Local Government (Ex LG), LBJL; Fred D. Baldwin to All CAP Staff, memorandum, 16 November 1967, Box 1, Folder 1, Office of Economic Opportunity, Southwest Region, CAP Correspondence, Memos, CAP Administrator-Family Planning, Record Group 381, NARASW; Texas Office of Economic Opportunity, “Weekly News Memo #47,” 22 November 1967, Box 20, Folder 4, Records from Federal Government Agencies, Records from the Office of Economic Opportunity, 1964-1968, LBJL.
the city. Upon returning to Houston from Washington, where he had met with HUD Secretary Robert Weaver to ascertain the exact requirements, Welch told the city council that the city only needed to pass a moderate housing code rather than a full-fledged zoning ordinance in order to qualify for Model Cities funding. A few months prior, a group called the Citizens' Advisory Committee on Low Rent Housing had submitted a proposal to the council for a city housing code in their effort to make Houston eligible to receive federal assistance building low-rent housing projects in the city. Under the proposed housing code, the mayor would appoint a "building official" who would "inspect substandard houses in a systematic manner and also answer tenants' complaints." This building official could also order improvements to substandard housing to bring it up to a series of minimum standards, which included requirements that each house be equipped with running water and connected to an approved sewer system, have a bathroom inside the house, be water, rodent, and insect proof, be able to be heated to seventy degrees, and have a safe garbage container. During the first few months of 1968, Welch urged members of the city council to pass this housing code not necessarily to gain federal funds to construct low-rent housing, but to prepare Houston to receive Model Cities funding.21

City Council members were skeptical about the proposed housing code and made several complaints about the implications of its passage. Several of the charges that some council members leveled against the proposed housing code were strikingly reminiscent of the arguments against passing zoning laws in Houston in the past. "Some claim the code," stated a Houston Post reporter in January 1968, "is too tough and concentrates dangerous powers in the hands of a ‘building official’ who would work directly for the

mayor under the Board of Appeals, which also would be chosen by the mayor.”

Shockingly, several councilmen were concerned about the requirement that every house have an indoor bathroom and running water because it would be too strict for many homeowners. According to an engineer employed by the city, the indoor bathroom requirement “will affect several thousand of the 12,000 dwellings that have either septic tanks or outdoor privies.” One city councilman expressed sympathy for landlords and homeowners who lacked the means to make improvements to their homes. “No one has answered me satisfactorily,” he charged, “on what happens when [the building official] orders a fellow who can’t afford it to make $5,000 in improvements on his house.”

Despite these reservations, Welch remained confident that the city council would eventually pass the proposed housing code, and he called for a series of informal meetings between councilmen and representatives of the Citizens’ Committee on Low Rent Housing in order to iron out a compromise.\(^{22}\)

While the city council debated the housing code, Welch and other public officials continued moving forward in their preparation of a Model Cities application that could be approved. In the process, Welch made it clear that HCCAA was not welcome in the discussions. In an effort to push the community action agency even further to the sidelines of the antipoverty fight in Houston, Welch and other city officials drew up a new Model Cities grant application in March 1968 that designated the Community Welfare Planning Association (CWPA), rather than HCCAA, as the required social planning board for the implementation of the federal program in Houston. The CWPA was the central coordinating board for the traditional welfare agencies in Houston and had been integral to the creation of the city’s first community action agency in 1965.

which was hopelessly conservative and almost totally controlled by public officials. The CWPA had been mostly shut out of the poverty program in Houston since William Ballew took over the city’s community action agency in 1966 and adopted radical and confrontational tactics, but the Model Cities program offered the CWPA a way back in. Several CWPA staff members made sure they were involved in writing up the Model Cities application for the city and assured Welch they would provide the necessary support to get it approved. Welch accepted the offer and was sure to hold up his end of the bargain when it came time to designate a social planning board for the implementation of the Model Cities program in Houston.23

In selecting a demonstration area of the city where the first-year Model Cities planning grant would be used, Welch also sought to keep HCCAA from being involved in the program. He and other city officials chose a small area in the old inner city that had been served by Houston Action for Youth (HAY) before the merger between HAY and H-HCEO to create HCCAA in May 1967. The new HCCAA had retained the more conservative ex-HAY officials who already administered programs in that particular area, and there were very few community organizers who worked in this particular part of the city. In focusing on this area for the Model Cities demonstration, Welch sent another clear message that HCCAA, especially its community organizers, would be left out of this federal program.24

Unfortunately for Welch, by the fall of 1968 the Houston City Council had not yet approved the proposed housing code required for the Model Cities application. As one

23 Minutes of Community Welfare Planning Association Executive Committee, 27 March 1968, Box 1, Records of the Community Welfare Planning Association of Greater Houston, Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library, Houston, Texas (hereafter cited as CWPA Collection).
24 Minutes of Community Welfare Planning Association Executive Committee, 27 March 1968, Box 1, CWPA Collection.
HUD official told President Johnson, without some way of ensuring proper land use in Houston, the city’s Model Cities application was “clearly in no shape to be approved.” Welch was determined to find a way for his city to take advantage of this massive federal program, so in October 1968 he sent Blair Justice, one of the mayor’s staffers, to Washington to meet with HUD officials and White House personnel in order to convince Model Cities administrators that the program would be effective in Houston. During this visit, Welch and Justice decided to change tactics. Rather than trying to coax the city council into passing the housing code, the mayor and his staff would convince HUD officials that Houston’s existing deed restriction system provided sufficient control over land use in the city to make its Model Cities application approvable.  

In reality, this argument was quite a stretch. Deed restrictions in Houston usually applied to the city’s affluent neighborhoods whose residents wanted to keep the atmosphere residential, to ward off undesirable business developments like gas stations, and often to bar home sales to nonwhites. For example, according to Houston historian David McComb, the deed restrictions in the affluent River Oaks neighborhood “restricted the land to allow only one resident or family per lot, no hospitals, no duplexes, no apartments, only Caucasian ownership, no livestock, no dumping, and no signs.” The HUD requirement of a city land control ordinance, however, was designed to ensure that a city governmental body existed and possessed the authority to carry out the Model Cities program in an effective way. As the Demonstration Cities and Metropolitan Development Act of 1966 stated, HUD must verify that “local administrative procedures are available for carrying out the program on a consolidated and coordinated basis . . .

25 Unknown Author to Lyndon Johnson, memorandum, 14 October 1968, Box 8, Folder 1, White House Central Files, Local Government (Ex LG), LBJL (quotation); Larry Temple to Blair Justice, 19 October 1968, Box 16, Folder 1, White House Central Files, Local Government (GEN LG), LBJL.
[and] the program is consistent with comprehensive planning in the entire urban or metropolitan area.” Zoning ordinances were tailor made for guaranteeing that these requirements would be met, but Houston’s refusal to legislate zoning laws illustrated the city’s deliberate avoidance of the type of comprehensive citywide planning that the Model Cities program required. Deed restrictions were clearly not intended to aid in planning an entire urban area; if anything, deed restrictions were another way to shun the very planning that Model Cities tried to encourage by offering affluent Houston residents a way of controlling their own neighborhoods without forcing them to approve of citywide zoning ordinances. Nevertheless, at Welch’s request Justice met with HUD officials in Washington and tried to persuade them that Houston’s deed restrictions were an adequate means of land control in the city. Justice also contacted Larry Temple, Special Counsel to President Johnson, who promised to look into the matter.\textsuperscript{26}

Blair Justice’s visit to Washington helped bring the Houston situation to the attention of key Washington officials, but problems with its Model Cities application remained. Larry Temple kept his promise to look into Houston’s application, but what he discovered was not what Welch and Justice had hoped for. After contacting HUD officials to inquire about Houston’s application status, Temple received a response from Robert Wood, Under Secretary of HUD. Wood informed Temple that the problems with Houston’s application were insurmountable without a zoning ordinance for the city. Without some form of land control, Wood stated, “there is a grave doubt that Houston could make the required impact on its environmental and housing problems.” The city’s

\textsuperscript{26} Unknown Author to Lyndon Johnson, memorandum, 14 October 1968, Box 8, Folder 1, White House Central Files, Local Government (Ex LG), LBJL; Larry Temple to Blair Justice, 19 October 1968, Box 16, Folder 1, White House Central Files, Local Government (GEN LG), LBJL; McComb, Houston, 221 (first quotation); \textit{Demonstration Cities and Metropolitan Development Act of 1966}, Public Law 89-754, 89\textsuperscript{th} Cong., 2d sess. (November 4, 1966) (second quotation).
deed restriction system, according to Wood, was a totally inadequate method of land control because its requirements were enforced not by the city government, but by individual residents. Wood also alluded to the fact that the city had been unable to benefit from Urban Renewal funding in the past for precisely the same reasons. “In short,” Wood concluded, “the inability of Houston to use one of the major government-funded tools (urban renewal) provided for sharing the problems that face it, makes it a high risk for model cities funding. . . . To make an exception for Houston from the requirements of . . . Model Cities would undermine the future effectiveness” of the program.27

Welch’s efforts to persuade Washington officials to approve Houston’s Model Cities application, however, did not end with the conclusions drawn by HUD administrators. On December 4, 1968, Welch had a telephone conversation with President Johnson on the subject of his city’s application. Although the specific content of this conversation is unknown, it is clear that Welch was able to convince the outgoing president to instruct HUD to approve Houston’s application for a Model Cities planning grant. Just ten days prior to Welch and Johnson’s conversation, HUD officials had reiterated their judgment that Houston’s application was unacceptable. After Welch’s appeal to the president, despite the fact that nothing on the application had changed, HUD officials suddenly reversed their ruling and awarded Houston a Model Cities planning grant of nearly $270,000. After more than a year of telling Houston officials that without an effective means of controlling land use in the city the application could not be approved, HUD officials suddenly agreed with Welch and Justice that the deed restriction system was sufficient. Although this was no guarantee that the city would receive a full

27 Robert Wood to Larry Temple, memorandum, 3 December 1968, Box 8, Folder 1, White House Central Files, Local Government (Ex LG), LBJL.
Model Cities grant in the years to come, it was nevertheless an impressive political accomplishment for Welch and the city of Houston.\(^{28}\)

Welch was happy to bask in his victory among Houstonians, and he used the occasion to drive HCCAA even further out of the fight against poverty and urban blight in the city. After HUD officials announced the approval of Houston’s Model Cities planning grant, Welch, in a blatant disregard for everything the Community Action Program had tried to achieve in Houston, proclaimed that “for the first time, the way is clear for a coordinated attack on all of the problems of the poor.” According to Welch and Justice, the planning grant would bring improvements “in all areas of urban living — health, employment, education, crime and delinquency, housing and welfare and the total physical environment including such things as streets, parks, drainage and utilities.” Blair Justice also told Houstonians that they could reasonably expect more than $20 million in federal Model Cities funding over the next several years. Welch and Justice had become champions of using federal funding to fight poverty in Houston, even though they and other city officials had provided very minimal support for the city’s community action agency and had even attacked its community organizers, who for several years had been attempting to accomplish what Welch now supported.\(^{29}\)

The mayor’s disingenuousness about why he was an advocate for the Model Cities program, however, did not end with his newfound appreciation for attacking the root causes of poverty. Welch also pretended to have become a strong supporter of the ideal of maximum feasible participation of the poor in the poverty program. The mayor

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28 Larry Temple to Lyndon Johnson, memorandum, 3 December 1968, Box 8, Folder 1, White House Central Files, Local Government (Ex LG), LBJL; Ellen Middlebrook, “$268,500 for Model Cities Planning Granted to Houston,” \textit{Houston Post}, December 13, 1968.

proclaimed that Urban Renewal had been a failure all over the country because the program did not include poor people in its planning and implementation. Model Cities, according to Welch, was different because it took into account the wishes of the poor. Yet Welch had left out HCCAA completely, the organization in Houston, despite its internal controversies and increasingly conservative approach to solving poverty, with the best means of including the poor in a meaningful way through its neighborhood councils. While appearing to care about the plight of the poor, in reality Welch had successfully taken control of antipoverty funding in the city and removed HCCAA from the center of the poverty program in Houston.30

When Richard Nixon assumed the presidency in January 1969, he disliked the Model Cities program because of the large federal bureaucracy it created, particularly within HUD. At the same time, however, the new president believed that a program like Model Cities fit in quite well with his overall agenda of decentralization and his effort to give local governments control of the War on Poverty. Though he was somewhat conflicted, Nixon allowed the Model Cities program to continue. In Houston, Welch was moving swiftly to implement the planning grant and prepare for a full Model Cities grant application the next year. In January 1969 Welch created a Model Cities department within the city government and appointed George McGonigle, former executive at the Humble Oil Company, as Model Cities director. The mayor also continued to court the involvement of the Community Welfare Planning Association (CWPA), rather than HCCAA, as the organization that would assess the community impact of Model Cities decisions and improvements and ensure citizen participation in the program. By April


As this process of creating a city agency to direct the Model Cities program moved forward, Welch assumed a steadily increasing amount of power over the poverty program in Houston as he centralized the administration of a large part of it in the city government. With HCCAA beset with administrative difficulties, internal conflicts, and a clear lack of direction due to the lengthy absence of an executive director, Welch was able to consolidate his own authority over the War on Poverty in the city. As other Sunbelt politicians welcomed federal funding so long as they could control how it would be spent, Welch had become an open advocate of the Model Cities program precisely because, unlike the Community Action Program, he could control every aspect of it through his own Model Cities department within the city government. In the process, he was also able to marginalize HCCAA even further. No longer would most of the federal antipoverty funds flow into an organization outside of the city bureaucracy. From then on, according to the plan, Welch would enjoy determining how a large portion of the federal money coming into his city would be spent.
Despite Welch’s efforts, however, a full Model Cities grant never materialized in Houston. Welch and other city officials put extraordinary emphasis on preparing an application acceptable to HUD administrators, but several city council members remained uncooperative on the issue of land control in the city as government officials wrangled over how to spend the millions of federal dollars sure to come to the city. By the time Nixon finally ended the Model Cities program in 1973, Houston officials had still not been able to draw up an acceptable application for a full grant. In its place, Nixon implemented his revenue sharing plan, which was never able to address the problems of the nation’s cities adequately. The long saga of Model Cities in Houston, therefore, ended in disappointment. More importantly, however, despite Welch’s failure to gain federal Model Cities funding, the mayor was able to use the Model Cities program in the city to push HCCAA to the sidelines in the fight against poverty in Houston. The entire process was emblematic of how changes in the War on Poverty in Washington greatly affected the poverty program at the grassroots level. Welch and other city officials, as well as many HCCAA administrators, responded to Nixon’s efforts to decentralize power and return authority back to local governments. While HCCAA scrambled to regroup, Welch assumed control of the poverty program in Houston. By becoming an advocate of the Model Cities program, even though the final result was a failure, Welch was able to take control of federal antipoverty initiatives and marginalize HCCAA while also appearing to fight on behalf of the poor.32

While Welch pursued Model Cities funding for the city and HCCAA increasingly became irrelevant in the War on Poverty, the Volunteers in Service to America (VISTA) program in Houston attempted to sustain its somewhat clandestine attack on the root

32 Unger, Best of Intentions, 335.
causes of poverty by continuing to employ community organization and empowerment of the poor. For the previous three years Reverend Wallace B. Poteat, EF-LAC project activista, and VISTA volunteers had largely flown under the radar of local officials in their quest to effect social change in Houston by organizing the poor. Beginning in 1969, however, VISTAs in Houston experienced a marked increase in harassment from the city’s police department, particularly its criminal intelligence division. Although VISTA volunteers were able to carry out their direct attack on poverty in the city for a longer period of time than the Community Action Program did, they nevertheless eventually suffered significant defeats at the hands of the city’s public officials who wanted to stop the volunteers’ radical community organizing and confrontational tactics. By 1972 the VISTA program in Houston was a shell of its former self, and late that year the sponsoring organizations bid farewell to their last volunteer.

The final demise of the VISTA program in Houston did not, however, come solely as a result of attacks by local officials. In addition to police harassment, the city’s VISTA volunteers suffered from a changing focus in Washington. As Nixon had reorganized OEO, consolidated power in the White House, and placed loyal conservatives in charge of key programs, the new president likewise sought to centralize control over VISTA and reorient the volunteer program away from its confrontational tactics. Although an ideological attack on the VISTA program was not to come until Nixon’s second term in office, which was after the VISTA program had ended in Houston, the new president did successfully lay the groundwork for the conservative assault on VISTA between 1969 and 1972 by reorganizing the federal bureaucracy overseeing the volunteer program. As historian T. Zane Reeves has shown, Nixon
assigned the task of evaluating the VISTA program's alleged accomplishments to the newly created Office of Management and Budgeting (OMB), whose staff members were interested in quantitative measurements of the War on Poverty's effectiveness. VISTA, however, was not a program with accomplishments that were easily quantifiable, and predictably the OMB was not satisfied with anecdotal stories of success.  

Nixon also instructed staff members of OEO's Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation (OPRE) to investigate and submit detailed reports on all War on Poverty activities, and OPRE's report on VISTA justified the eventual conservative attack on the program. Even before the investigation began, according to Reeves, OPRE investigators were "convinced that VISTA projects were proposing political organization for the poor rather than self-help programs for them." OPRE's final report on VISTA, argued Reeves, "revealed an activist culture at VISTA that confirmed conservatives' worst fears." Authors of the report concluded that for the majority of the volunteers, their experience as VISTA volunteers politicized and radicalized them, exposed them to leftist political ideologies, and made them suspicious of the government and of the intent of federal social programs.

Nixon knew he could not simply eliminate the VISTA program outright for fear that a political showdown with a mostly sympathetic Congress and several popular VISTA support groups would threaten his chances of reelection. Rather than simply cutting the VISTA program from the War on Poverty, the president, as he had done with

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33 Reeves, Politics of the Peace Corps and VISTA, 44-47.
34 Reeves, Politics of the Peace Corps and VISTA, 48-49. OPRE's study of VISTA also revealed that the politicization process began within the VISTA training centers scattered throughout the country. In Michael Balzano's policy analysis study of the VISTA training centers, however, the author concludes that not all of the centers were radicalizing. See Michael Pasquale Balzano, "The Political and Social Ramifications of the VISTA Program: A Question of Ends and Means" (Ph.D. diss., Georgetown University, 1971). Reeves concluded that the majority of VISTA training centers did instill a radical political philosophy in the volunteers.
the Job Corps and Head Start, removed the VISTA program from OEO’s jurisdiction and placed it in a new agency called ACTION that would oversee the activities of national voluntary service, including VISTA and the Peace Corps. According to Reeves, the conservative ideologues who staffed ACTION believed if VISTA remained in OEO, its activist culture and radicalizing tendencies would be retained. These conservatives believed that "drastic action must be taken that would change the organizational cultures in antipoverty programs. Only if agency volunteers and staff carried an achievement ethic to the poor would there be any hope of liberating the poor from poverty. In their assessment, VISTA had done more harm than good for the poor." By 1971 Nixon had begun directing his conservative appointees within ACTION to instill an explicitly conservative ideology into the VISTA program that would eliminate all community organizing activities and establish conservative alternatives to VISTA for college-aged volunteers. According to Reeves, this new conservative ideology driving VISTA would allow administrators to have greater control over the volunteer program and to rid it of "an embarrassing legacy of activist idealism."  

During the first two years of Nixon’s efforts to reorient the VISTA program to be more in line with conservative principles, most VISTA volunteers in Houston remained committed to community organization and empowerment of the poor. Reverend Wallace Poteat and other members of the Ecumenical Fellowship’s Latin American Channel (EF-LAC) project, the major VISTA sponsoring organization in Houston, remained steadfast in their pledge to eradicate the evil of poverty in the city using prophetic religion and Saul Alinsky-style community organization. One way Poteat tried to continue the fight

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35 Reeves, *Politics of the Peace Corps and VISTA*, 49-51, 55-56. For a more detailed description of Nixon’s reorganization of War on Poverty programs and his appointment of conservative ideologues to top positions, see Reeves, *Politics of the Peace Corps and VISTA*, Chapters 3-4.
against poverty in Houston using VISTA volunteers was to team up with Reverend Earl Allen's organization, known as Human Organizational, Political, and Economic Development, Incorporated (HOPE). Following the turmoil within Houston's community action agency when the HCCAA Board forced him to resign in August 1967, Allen created his own antipoverty organization to continue using tactics of radical community organizing and protest demonstrations to force confrontations with the city's public officials. In 1968 both Poteat and Allen worked to strengthen the ties between HOPE members and VISTA volunteers and devised several antipoverty projects on which the two groups could work together. During an EF-LAC board meeting in February, Allen made it clear that HOPE community organizers were attempting to teach the poor the power of collective action and confrontation and that the VISTA volunteers must agree with this approach if they wanted to work with HOPE organizers. Poteat assured Allen that the VISTAs were indeed committed to the same confrontational tactics and that he had personally notified VISTA administrators that the EF-LAC project was interested in receiving only militant volunteers in the future rather than "nice middle-class kids." Over the next two years the relationship between EF-LAC and HOPE would grow stronger, until by 1970 new VISTA volunteers arriving in Houston to work with the EF-LAC project were immediately assigned to a training program led by Earl Allen and other HOPE leaders to teach the new volunteers how to organize the poor and confront local public officials in their effort to combat poverty in Houston.36

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36 Minutes of EF-LAC Board of Directors, 21 February 1968, Box 2, Folder 5, Volunteers in Service to America Collection, Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library, Houston, Texas (hereafter cited as VISTA Collection) (quotation); EF-LAC, "Resolutions Submitted to the Board of Trustees of the Lack Project," 28 February 1968, Box 2, Folder 2, VISTA Collection; Charles Hall to Earl Allen, 9 April 1970, Box 3, Folder 7, Houston Council on Human Relations Collection, Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library, Houston, Texas (hereafter cited as HCHR Collection).
Houston's VISTA program also went through a leadership change in 1968 and 1969 that showed how committed the volunteers and members of the sponsoring agencies remained to community organization and confrontational tactics. In early 1968 Reverend Poteat announced that he would resign at the end of the year to assume a position in Tulsa, Oklahoma, directing a War on Poverty program similar to the EF-LAC project. In August 1968 EF-LAC project members held a meeting to select Poteat's replacement. The EF-LAC board had narrowed their pool of candidates to two finalists, Barry Kraut and Paul Allen. Kraut worked at a local Presbyterian church in the city and had served for several years on the EF-LAC board, while Allen currently directed an antipoverty program in Washington, D.C. During the meeting, the board allowed both Kraut and Allen to explain their antipoverty philosophy and describe how they would lead the EF-LAC project and the VISTA volunteers in the city. It became clear early during the meeting that Kraut held a very conservative view of what the proper role of a VISTA volunteer was in a community, while Allen demonstrated that he would be a better fit with the organization created by Poteat to organize the poor and confront the evil of poverty. While Kraut stated that he viewed the VISTA volunteer as a model for the poor to teach them how to join the middle class, Allen proclaimed that the role of the volunteers was to force the establishment to change when needed. The focus, according to Allen, should be on organizing the poor in order to empower them to challenge local public officials and institutions and bring about needed structural changes in Houston. At the end of the meeting, EF-LAC board members and VISTA volunteers voted overwhelmingly to name Paul Allen the new director of the project.37

37 "Houston Poverty Fighter Takes Battle to Tulsa," n.d., newspaper clipping, Box 2, Folder 7, VISTA Collection; EF-LAC, "Resolutions Submitted to the Board of Trustees of the Lack Project," 28 February
Houston’s VISTA volunteers continued to develop new and innovative programs to combat poverty in the city through 1971. In 1969 the VISTAs established projects that included an urban arts program to help develop any latent talent among poor residents, a welfare rights organization, the strengthening of neighborhood centers, community organizing to put pressure on the Legal Services program to fight for the rights of the poor, and a free educational system called the University of Thought that attracted more than 1,000 students during the summer of 1969. Later in the year, after Houston’s Legal Services personnel proved to be impervious to pressure from the city’s poor residents and their VISTA allies, volunteers developed a VISTA Legal Program to “educate the poor in, and enable the poor to act upon, their rights under the law.” The VISTA legal program would go further, however, in its effort to attack some of the root causes of poverty in the city. The VISTA lawyer would be encouraged to “go beyond the individual services approach of legal aid by developing a working knowledge of a specific area of law that has direct impact upon the poor.” These areas of expertise might include consumer advocacy, school desegregation and discrimination, economic development, discrimination in health services, human rights in employment and law enforcement, housing issues, discrimination in public services and utilities, and welfare rights. All the while VISTA volunteers continued to pressure the Legal Services program in Houston to fulfill its mission as a catalyst for law reform.38

1968, Box 2, Folder 2, VISTA Collection; Minutes of EF-LAC Board of Directors, August 1968, Box 2, Folder 5, VISTA Collection.
A community organizing effort in which the VISTA volunteers put a large amount of effort, and one that aroused the indignation of public officials like Mayor Welch, was an attempt to include poor residents in the decision-making processes of the proposed Model Cities program. Welch had become attracted to Model Cities precisely because he could bypass the community action agency and ignore poor residents in his attempt to secure federal funds to make improvements to the city, even though he had openly advocated the involvement of the poor in the program. Unfortunately for Houston’s poor people, HCCAA Board and staff members were in no position to demand the inclusion of poor Houston residents in the program’s planning stages. The mayor had not considered, however, that the city’s VISTA volunteers might begin organizing poor residents to claim their rightful place in the Model Cities program. As early as May 1968 VISTAs and members of the EF-LAC project expressed concern that Welch was attempting to keep total control over Model Cities and to prevent residents from having a voice in how federal funds might be used in Houston. By the end of the year, EF-LAC project members and VISTA volunteers had familiarized themselves with the Model Cities legislation and were determined to make sure that Welch followed the federal requirement that residents of a city must consent to the mayor’s plan for Model Cities funding.  

During the summer of 1969, after the city council approved the application for a Model Cities grant and Welch had created a government department to oversee the program in Houston, VISTA volunteers initiated an organizing drive in the city’s poor neighborhoods to create a Model Cities Citizens’ Council, as stipulated by the program’s

39 Minutes of EF-LAC Board of Directors, 28 May 1968, Box 2, Folder 5, VISTA Collection; Minutes of EF-LAC Board of Directors, 23 October 1968, Box 2, Folder 5, VISTA Collection.
requirements. As a VISTA newsletter stated in July, Houston’s volunteers were “devoting much of their effort in the time before the August 3rd election in letting the neighborhoods know that they should have a voice and they have a mandate to become a part of Model Cities if this program is going to become what it can be.” Despite the mayor’s public pronouncements, citizen involvement in the Model Cities program in Houston was simply too radical for Welch and his appointed officials in charge of implementing the program in the city. In October 1969 Houston’s Model Cities Director George McGonigle contacted Benton Russell, one of the city’s VISTA sponsoring officials, and strongly suggested that he regain control of the activities of the VISTAs, particularly with regard to organizing poor residents to make demands on the city’s Model Cities department. Russell replied to McGonigle first by explaining the relationship between a VISTA sponsoring agency and the volunteers. “The projects in which [the volunteers] work are ‘their’ projects,” Russell stated, “and although we are interested and concerned about them, we could never dictate policy to them in autocratic or bureaucratic methods. Our direction is through advice and counsel. We do not ‘instruct.’ We are their sponsors, if you will, not their bosses.” With regard to citizen participation in the Model Cities program, Russell scolded McGonigle: “I think we should perhaps examine our programs which we in our middle-class, middle-aged way undertake. I am sure we do not see the problems exactly as the younger generation, but let us not condemn their actions when they do what seems best. . . . If the [Model Cities] program is worthwhile, it can stand on its merits. Let’s make sure, however, that our program is ‘of’ the poor and not ‘for’ the poor. Let’s be sure that our program is listening to and abiding by the will of the area people, for this is what model cities is all about. If
we have put together such a program, then I don’t think we have much to fear from well-meaning VISTAs.” In other words, Russell granted full sanction to the VISTA volunteers’ efforts to organize the poor to make sure they would be allowed to participate in the decision-making processes of the Model Cities program.40

It was probably no coincidence that in 1969, as the VISTA volunteers ramped up their efforts to develop innovative programs to empower the poor and placed a major emphasis on their efforts to include the poor in the Model Cities program, the Houston Police Department launched a series of harassment campaigns against the volunteers. In January HPD Intelligence Division officers began conducting surveillance of a support group for former presidential contender Eugene McCarthy, and in a report they noted that several VISTA volunteers attended an organizational meeting for the group. HPD officers also began focusing on the volunteers’ alleged misuse of government vehicles. In May an officer on patrol near the construction site for Houston’s new airport came upon a government-issued vehicle that contained Dorothy Brown, a white VISTA volunteer, in “an apparent embrace” with Terence Smith, an African American male. “This does not seem to be official business,” the officer stated in his report, “so please report this to the proper authorities.” HPD officials turned their report over to the General Services Administration, the federal agency responsible for overseeing use of government property, and GSA representatives subsequently performed an investigation of the charges and concluded there was no wrongdoing on the part of Dorothy Brown or the Houston VISTA program. Brown maintained that she had stopped the vehicle to discuss with Smith a particular problem he was having adjusting to life in Houston after recently

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40 Houston Council on Human Relations, newsletter, 22 July 1969, Box 2, Folder 20, HCHR Collection (first quotation); Benton S. Russell to G. L. McGonigle, 15 October 1969, Box 3, Folder 7, HCHR Collection (second and third quotations).
moving from Alaska, and while they were having this conversation the police officer
approached. HCHR and EF-LAC project leaders did, however, give her a warning for not
taking into consideration how the situation might have appeared to enemies of the War on
Poverty and of the VISTA program in Houston.41

The rising amount of interest in, and resulting criticism of, the VISTA volunteers’
activities in Houston, however, stemmed not only from the city’s public officials but also
from the community action agency. By the fall of 1969, as VISTA volunteers were
launching organizational drives to create citizens committees to participate in Model
Cities planning, HCCAA officials began showing a surprising amount of concern about
the activities of the VISTAs. In November the HCCAA Board of directors, which
included representatives of the mayor’s office, appointed a special committee to study the
role of Houston’s VISTA volunteers in the War on Poverty in the city, allegedly at the
request of the Texas OEO office. After making a few telephone calls, however, Houston
VISTA supervisor Roger Armstrong discovered that the Texas OEO office had never
ordered HCCAA to investigate the activities of VISTA volunteers in Houston. In an
angry letter to HCCAA Executive Director Francis Williams, Armstrong exclaimed, “If
HCCAA – its administration or its board – desires to know more about Houston’s VISTA
Project, we would be happy to supply you with information on its activities. . .
However, in the absence of any concrete reason why a special HCCAA Board committee
should study the role of Houston’s VISTA Project, you should be aware that we would
consider the establishment of such a committee precipitous. It would be unwarranted and

41 D. E. Williams to Bertrand Harding, 13 May 1969, Box 1, Folder 2, Office of Economic Opportunity,
Southwest Region, VISTA, Correspondence, 1969-Copies of Letters Sent, 1969, Central Files (Address-
Blank Form), Record Group 381, NARASW (quotations); Robert Perrin to D. E. Williams, 5 June 1969,
Box 1, Folder 2, Office of Economic Opportunity, Southwest Region, VISTA, Correspondence, 1969-
Copies of Letters Sent, 1969, Central Files (Address-Blank Form), Record Group 381, NARASW.
[cause] an undue negative reflection on Houston’s VISTA Project and its existing sponsorship."^{42}

When this threat of an investigation failed to bring the VISTA program under the control of the HCCAA Board, several board members moved to consolidate all of Houston’s VISTA volunteers under the direction of the HCCAA Board. These board members were able to convince a state OEO official that HCCAA should run the VISTA program in the city, and this official submitted a formal request late that fall to consolidate all the VISTA volunteers in Houston under the direction of the HCCAA Board. This strategy also failed; VISTA Regional Administrator Edward Dela Rosa rejected the request, stating that the “present sponsors have demonstrated the ability to carry out an effective VISTA program in Harris County.” Dela Rosa also expressed hope that HCCAA officials and members of the city’s VISTA sponsoring agencies would be able to resolve their disputes with each other and to continue to carry out the War on Poverty in Houston in an effective way. As long as each group had such strikingly different and competing ideas about how to attack poverty and what role the poor should play, however, it seemed unlikely the friction between HCCAA and the VISTA program would resolve itself.^{43}

Between 1969 and 1972, a series of changes at the national level damaged the VISTA program in Houston and ultimately brought it to an end. During an EF-LAC board meeting in February 1969, project director Paul Allen reported on a recent trip to Washington during which he noted several changes in the VISTA program. The national

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^{42} Roger D. Armstrong to Francis Williams, 11 November 1969, Box 3, Folder 7, HCHR Collection.
^{43} Edward Dela Rosa to B. C. Allen, 20 November 1969, Box 1, Folder 21, Office of Economic Opportunity, Southwest Region, VISTA, Correspondence, 1969-Copies of Letters Sent, 1969, Central Files (Address-Blank Form), Record Group 381, NARASW.
VISTA training centers were no longer recruiting young college-aged volunteers but rather individuals with bachelor's and master's degrees who were specialists in some particular field. The VISTA program was being professionalized, according to Allen, and national VISTA officials were calling for more direct supervision on the part of local sponsoring agencies. This national development ran counter to everything Houston's VISTA program stood for, whose sponsoring agencies prided themselves on using young and idealistic volunteers who were free to attack poverty in the city with a remarkable amount of freedom to determine their own tactics. The national OEO office, under the direction of Donald Rumsfeld, was also trying to take more direct control over the VISTA program nationally and to use local community action agencies to control VISTA activities in local communities. This effort by the new OEO leadership prompted OEO Official Paul Duncan to issue a position paper on the place of VISTA in OEO, which he sent out to all regional OEO administrators in June 1969. In the position paper Duncan stated that VISTA must remain autonomous within the OEO structure because VISTA was "more a movement than a program" and "must be concerned with equity and idealism in order to produce results." VISTA must retain its independence from the establishment and from local community action agencies, according to Duncan, in order for the program to stay relevant to young people and to preserve the victories achieved by volunteers all over the country. "VISTA is working well," Duncan concluded, "why make a change? Why risk a good thing?"  

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44 Minutes of EF-LAC Board of Directors, 12 February 1969, Box 2, Folder 5, VISTA Collection; Paul A. Duncan to Regional Administrators, memorandum, 16 June 1969, Box 1, Folder 4, Office of Economic Opportunity, Southwest Region, VISTA, Correspondence, 1969-Copies of Letters Sent, 1969, Central Files (Address-Blank Form), Record Group 381, NARASW (quotations).
Despite Duncan's pleadings, national OEO administrators continued their efforts over the next several years to strip the VISTA program of its autonomy and force the volunteers to drop their confrontational tactics. By 1970, these national changes had produced visible effects on Houston's VISTA program, not the least of which was decreased morale among the volunteers and a nagging uncertainty about the future of the entire volunteer program. In a letter to Congressman George Bush in April 1970, Houston VISTA supervisor Roger Armstrong expressed great concern that national developments in the VISTA program were negatively affecting the volunteer effort in Houston. "I think VISTAs are making clear," Armstrong stated, "that they feel that a number of recent actions by OEO both nationally and regionally indicate that there is a lack of support of VISTA by the Office of Economic Opportunity administration. They feel that these new developments will result in either making VISTA less effective in working with the poor or possibly could result in VISTA being cancelled altogether. . . . I feel that this would be tragic if true." Armstrong requested an urgent meeting with Bush in order to make sure that Bush supported the continuation of the VISTA program in Houston. The next month, after Bush had failed to respond favorably to Armstrong's overtures, the HCHR director fired off another letter exclaiming that the VISTA volunteers in Houston "are deadly serious in their concern that someone listen to their cries of alarm. They do feel recent administrative decisions within the Office of Economic Opportunity have not been in the interests of the poor or of the VISTAs who are working on behalf of the poor." Armstrong again requested a personal meeting with Bush, but this also went unheeded.45

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45 Roger D. Armstrong to George Bush, 28 April 1970, Box 3, Folder 7, HCHR Collection (first quotation); Roger D. Armstrong to George Bush, 18 May 1970, Box 3, Folder 7, HCHR Collection (second quotation).
After failing to receive an adequate response from Congressman Bush, Armstrong sent an equally urgent letter to OEO Director Donald Rumsfeld expressing alarm over the diminishing amount of support for community organizing and institutional change from national OEO and VISTA officials. After detailing a few of the VISTA-initiated programs in Houston, Armstrong stated that many VISTA volunteers in the city were “seeking social and institutional change. This . . . is needed if the causes as well as the symptoms of poverty are to be addressed. However, as you know there are certain special interest groups in society who are threatened by such change and react against it. It would be sad indeed if national and regional support of these VISTA efforts were to wither under the pressure of these reactionary forces.” Armstrong pleaded with Rumsfeld to reply with a word of encouragement that would show the VISTA volunteers in Houston that OEO continued to support their grassroots efforts, but Rumsfeld never responded to the letter.46

Most likely Rumsfeld did not reply to Armstrong’s letter because he would not have been able to provide those reassuring words. Nationally, the VISTA program was being consolidated under the ACTION umbrella. Nixon was beginning to appoint conservative ideologues to top positions within that agency, a development that would ultimately change the nature of the federal volunteer program all over the country. VISTA volunteers and members of their sponsoring agencies in Houston felt these changes acutely by 1970. In an annual report on Houston’s VISTA activities that year, VISTA supervisors lamented the fact that national developments had irreparably harmed the VISTA program in Houston. In addition to a lack of support for community

46 Roger D. Armstrong to Donald Rumsfeld, 27 May 1970, Box 3, Folder 7, HCHR Collection (quotation); Roger D. Armstrong to George Bush, 9 July 1970, Box 3, Folder 7, HCHR Collection.
organizing and empowerment of the poor, authors of the report presented a list of several additional decisions made by new OEO officials that had a negative effect on the VISTA program in Houston, including a withdrawal of the one-year draft deferment for volunteers, the perpetual vacancies in top-level VISTA positions in Washington, and a changed VISTA recruiting policy that steered many college-aged volunteers away from the program. "Many volunteers began to feel that the VISTA in the field was no longer being supported in his work," the report stated, and the result was "a drop in re-enrollment from 60% last year to 10% this year, and a decrease in expected new National Pool Volunteers by 50%." In just two years, the changes in the VISTA program at the national level had had a profoundly negative effect on the local volunteer program in Houston.47

In 1972 national VISTA and OEO officials made a decision that finally brought an end to the VISTA program in the city of Houston. Once Nixon had moved the VISTA program into ACTION, the new agency changed the funding requirement for volunteer sponsoring organizations. Whereas the VISTA sponsoring agency had been responsible for only 10 percent of the funding before 1972, ACTION's new requirement stipulated that the sponsoring agency must pay half of the cost of the volunteers' expenses. For Houston's VISTA program, the total sum would have been more than $12,000, an amount no VISTA sponsoring agency in the city could afford to pay. The current VISTA volunteers were allowed to continue their work until the end of the year, but many volunteers believed this was simply the first step in a process to eliminate the VISTA program completely from the War on Poverty. As a local newspaper reporter covering the

VISTA story stated, the VISTA program in Houston thus “came to an end on a note of sorrow and bitterness.” As a final blow to community organizing and confrontational tactics, the EF-LAC project, whose members had defined their mission based on using VISTA volunteers, finally disbanded in 1972 and ceased to be a force for social change in the city of Houston.  

With the VISTA program gone from Houston, HCCAA remained the only agency in the city charged with carrying out the War on Poverty in the early 1970s. By that time, however, HCCAA had become a simple deliverer of social services, but even those services were severely scaled back and the participation of the poor was virtually nonexistent. In 1976, after President Gerald Ford dismantled OEO and reorganized the community action agencies under the newly created Community Services Administration, HCCAA likewise reorganized and renamed itself the Gulf Coast Community Services Administration (GCCSA), which still exists today. In order to accomplish this reorganization, however, GCCSA administrators made one final assault on the participation of the poor in the poverty program. In January 1976, just months before the organization became GCCSA, HCCAA Board members voted to remove any administrative powers that remained within the ten delegate agencies, which were responsible for implementing the various community action initiatives in the target neighborhoods and for making sure the poor were involved in the planning and implementation of these programs. While the ten delegate agencies would still serve as a “voice for the poor,” in reality they would have no power to enforce anything. Despite

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48 Jane Manning, “Fruits of VISTA Labor in Past Year Will Be Harvested for Long Time,” Houston Chronicle, n.d., newspaper clipping, Box 2, Folder 7, VISTA Collection (quotation); Jim Ferguson, Joyce Shaw, W. M. McKenzie, and Ken Nicoll to Thomas L. McKenzie, 30 June 1972, Box 1, Folder 4, VISTA Collection. The VISTA program did not end nationally, as many volunteers in Houston feared, but the shape of the program changed dramatically in the early 1970s.
opposition from several parties, including the city NAACP chapter’s president who argued that the withdrawal of the administrative duties of the ten delegate agencies was "a gross disappointment to the idea of getting the program to the grassroots," the HCCAA Board approved the plan. As evidenced by GCCSA documents detailing the organization’s activities, by 1976 the War on Poverty in Houston consisted of a disorganized assortment of a few social services delivered by an agency totally uninterested in the participation of the poor, social change, or empowering those Houston residents who had been systematically denied power over their own lives.49

Between 1969 and 1976, the War on Poverty gradually came to a close in Houston. While the Green Amendment initiated this process in 1967 and 1968, the decline of the poverty program in the city took several years to play out as Mayor Welch and other public officials pushed the city’s community action agency to the sidelines of the War on Poverty. More importantly, changes within OEO at the national and regional levels had profound effects on the War on Poverty in Houston. Without a doubt, grassroots antipoverty activists who were responsible for implementing the poverty program on the ground in Houston were vital for the success of the War on Poverty, but equally important for its fate was the federal government and national OEO officials. The dynamic relationship between the federal government and local antipoverty activists had determined the course of the War on Poverty in Houston, and between 1969 and 1976 this relationship brought the poverty program to a close in the city. Whereas grassroots

49 Tommy Miller, “Community Action Association Board Approves Reorganization,” Houston Chronicle, 14 January 1976, newspaper clipping, Box 11, Folder 1, Community Services Administration, Region VI (Dallas, Texas), Records Relating to County Community Action Agencies, 1976-78, Record Group 381, NARASW (quotation). For the types of activities in which GCCSA members engaged in the late 1970s, see Fred Hofheinz to Ben Haney, with attached activity report, 14 September 1976, Box 11, Folder 1, Community Services Administration, Region VI (Dallas, Texas), Records Relating to County Community Action Agencies, 1976-78, Record Group 381, NARASW.
activists in the mid-1960s had enjoyed a remarkable amount of support from federal OEO officials to carry out a progressive, confrontational, and even radical Community Action Program in Houston, beginning in 1969 they saw that support gradually disappear because of Nixon’s reorientation of the poverty war. The Green Amendment, therefore, was the beginning of the end of the War on Poverty drama in the city of Houston because it launched a process that took several years to complete. The Nixon Administration’s efforts to reorient OEO away from confrontational tactics and shrink the size of the poverty program’s bureaucracy was thus the final blow to the War on Poverty in Houston, and by 1976 there was virtually nothing left of what was once a vibrant, proactive, and confrontational program to address the problems of the poor in the city.
Conclusion

Beyond Success or Failure

In January 2008, as the presidential election season was beginning to bloom, a reporter asked candidate Hillary Clinton to comment on a recent speech given by her rival Barack Obama in which he blasted his critics, including Clinton, who said he was building up false hope for change in America and suggested he should instead focus on giving the country “a reality check.” Obama, who was building his presidential campaign on the idea that grassroots political organizing could provide enough support to get him elected, said that Clinton’s comments were akin to someone telling Martin Luther King that he was giving people false hope during the civil rights movement. When asked about this speech, Clinton attempted to highlight the role of political leaders and their relationship with the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s. “Dr King’s dream,” Clinton said, “began to be realized when President Lyndon Johnson passed the Civil Rights Act of 1964, when he was able to get through Congress something that President Kennedy was hopeful to do and that presidents before had not even tried. But it took a president to get it done. That dream became a reality – the power of that dream became real in people’s lives – because we had a president who said, ‘We’re going to do it.’” Thus began one of the many minor controversies of the 2008 election campaign that launched a national debate about the nature of social change and the rewriting of American history.¹

The debate about the nature of the civil rights movement that Clinton’s comments spawned, including the very lively conversation among historians that occurred in many arenas ranging from National Public Radio call-in shows to online H-NET discussion groups, highlighted the continuing disagreement over where social change occurs in American society. Does change happen in a top-down way, as Clinton suggested, or does it happen from the bottom-up? Is social change initiated by politically powerful individuals at the top of society or by relatively powerless people at the grassroots?

The implementation of the War on Poverty in the city of Houston between 1964 and 1976 provides further evidence that social change actually comes from the bottom of society. In this case, it was the grassroots antipoverty activists and poor residents of Houston who transformed a fairly moderate federal social welfare program into a vehicle for social change. Although the federal legislation was important, it was the local people on the ground in Houston who recognized that the War on Poverty was opening a window of opportunity creating favorable conditions for the formation of a powerful social movement that could have a significant impact on society. This was clearest in Houston in late 1966 and early 1967, when William Ballew, Earl Allen, and an army of community organizers won a series of small victories against the city’s public officials.²

Yet did the War on Poverty open a window of opportunity in Houston long enough for grassroots antipoverty activists and poor residents to create a powerful social movement capable of bringing about a measurable degree of social change? In other words, were they able to achieve what many radical, labor, and New Left groups had failed to achieve in the past; namely, the creation of an interracial movement of the poor?

² For an excellent theoretical discussion of how these windows of opportunity periodically open to allow for the formation of a social movement, see Sidney Tarrow, Power in Movement: Social Movements and Contentious Politics (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).
First, it is clear that grassroots activists and poor residents in Houston were able to achieve some significant victories in their battle against local public officials and conservative defenders of the status quo. The extension of water and sanitation services to poor areas of the city, the opening of the Settegast Clinic, and the registration of large numbers of new voters were just a few examples of the ways in which local activists had empowered the poor in Houston. These achievements certainly indicated that conditions were favorable for the creation of a powerful social movement in the city.

These successes, however, also provoked a powerful backlash from pillars of local power in Houston, and this counterattack was ultimately fatal for the building of a strong social movement in the city. In many ways the conservative backlash made perfect sense. Grassroots antipoverty activists and poor Houston residents were indeed using the War on Poverty to present a powerful challenge to the city’s public officials and were threatening to upset the traditional balance of power in the city. In short, they challenged the very idea that local public officials could continue to govern the city without taking the interests and demands of the poor into consideration. With the help of grassroots activists, poor Houston residents stood up to be counted as full citizens of the city and demanded that their voices be heard. As a serious political challenge, Houston’s public officials understandably dealt with it as such. Local public officials discredited the city’s community action agency and VISTA program by linking their activities with the threat of an urban riot and by locating conservative allies on the HCCAA Board and staff to begin dismantling their community organization efforts.

It remains difficult, therefore, to assess the legacies of the War on Poverty in Houston. Despite the small victories that historians are uncovering through grassroots
studies of the poverty program, we must be careful not to confuse relatively small
achievements with the overall success of the War on Poverty. In other words, we must
resist the temptation to turn the War on Poverty into a grassroots success story. At the
same time, however, we should also not attach too much significance to the failures of
the War on Poverty at the grassroots level. The failures, of course, were obvious and
numerous. Perhaps most damaging, grassroots activists and poor residents misunderstood
and underestimated their opponents. Activists like Ballew and Allen, who had read Saul
Alinsky’s work and seemingly understood the complexities of power, failed to
comprehend the immense power of local public officials, particularly Mayor Louie
Welch, Congressman George Bush, and Police Chief Herman Short. They also were
never able to offer poor residents a clear articulation of how Alinsky-style community
organization would provide solutions for the problem of income inequality. Grassroots
activists and poor residents were ultimately unable to create a broad multiracial coalition
of poor residents united by class, and in the end they were unable to sustain themselves
and their efforts in Houston’s poor neighborhoods when the conservative counterattack
came along and federal support dwindled. So if we should not focus too much attention
on these questions of success versus failure, what should we be concerned with? Why is
the story of the War on Poverty in the city of Houston important?

The implementation of the War on Poverty in the city of Houston reveals that the
fluid interaction between federal policies and grassroots activists created a significant site
of conflict over the meaning of American democracy and the rights of citizenship in the
1960s and 1970s that has been largely overlooked by historians. Houston’s experience
with these antipoverty programs shows that grassroots activists – if only for a short
period of time—were able to seize the tools and authority provided by the federal
government through the War on Poverty to challenge conservative defenders of the status
quo. In so doing, they contested mainstream liberal definitions of democracy, which
many local public officials and their constituents in Houston had narrowly interpreted in
such a way that it did not have a place for meaningful participation of the poor in the
decisions that affected their lives. By opening avenues for grassroots activists and poor
residents to transform federal policies into vehicles for social change, the War on Poverty
provided an array of tools for many different activists with various ideologies to use in
their struggles to bring about a more participatory form of democracy on the ground in
Houston that would include more citizens in the political, cultural, and economic life of
the city. By viewing the War on Poverty through this new paradigm of democracy, the
focus can be shifted from whether or not the federal antipoverty program eradicated or
significantly reduced poverty in the United States to how the War on Poverty helped
expand democracy in America, and along the way historians can gain valuable new
insights into the nature of the American political system.³

By placing the story of the War on Poverty within a larger narrative about
struggles over democracy in America, historians can free the history of the War on
Poverty from the narrow constraints of the decade of the 1960s, federal social policy, or

³ The term “participatory democracy” refers to a form of democracy articulated by Jean-Jacques Rousseau
in The Social Contract (1762) that envisioned citizens participating fully in collective decisions.
Representative democracy, according to this view, was not a legitimate form of democracy at all because,
Rousseau argued, citizens forfeit their own participatory power by electing others to act for them. In the
1960s, many intellectuals and grassroots activists, particularly those associated with the emerging New
Left, began calling for a political revolution in order to implement a more participatory form of democracy
in America. The Port Huron Statement of the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), issued in 1962,
spelled out this vision. See Dahl, Democracy and Its Critics, 225-231; and Frank Cunningham, Theories of
his national study of the War on Poverty, argued that the Community Action Program sought to “produce
social change through participatory democracy,” but failed to investigate the claim further. See Andrew,
Lyndon Johnson, 68.
even the fate of twentieth-century American liberalism. Seen in a new light, the War on Poverty appears as an integral part of the democratic experiment in America, and its implementation at the grassroots level in Houston reveals both the possibilities and the limits of American democracy. The story of the War on Poverty thus fits into a larger tradition of efforts to expand and broaden the definition of American democracy as well as efforts to defeat them.4

By taking the longer view, the short-term success or failure of the War on Poverty shrinks in importance. What is significant is that this story happened at all. The fact that grassroots activists and poor Houston residents were able to transform a federal poverty program into a vehicle for social change, even for a short period of time, highlights the ingenuity and creativity of local people struggling to expand the meaning of democracy in America. When another window of opportunity to expand the meaning of democracy

presents itself, perhaps today's democratic activists can draw on these lessons from the War on Poverty.
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