



THE ANTI-POVERTY SOLDIER



Community Action

By Clarence Hightower, Ph.D.

Civic Engagement is vital to our democracy and the health and wellness of all Americans

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A constitutional democracy is in serious trouble if its citizenry does not have a certain degree of education and civic virtue.

– Phillip E. Johnson

Civic education and civic responsibility should be taught in elementary school.

– Donna Brazile

I was raised to believe that we all have a civic duty and a responsibility as Americans to improve our neighborhoods and our nation.

– Paul Cook

The key to civic engagement—whether as a volunteer running a marathon for breast cancer, as a devoted employee in a non-profit organization or as an elected official—starts with a sense of commitment to improve the lives of others...Successful and satisfying civic engagement requires deeply held convictions, authenticity, risk-taking, courage in the face of adversity, integrity, and civility.

– John Parisella

In last week’s column, I explored a number of recent trends toward restricting voting rights in America. I also highlighted a potential landmark Supreme Court case that could have a decidedly detrimental impact on our democracy should the State of Ohio be allowed to purge tens of thousands or registered voters from its electoral rolls for no other reason than not casting a ballot in a two-year period.

I began that particular article referencing a number of quotes from both sides of the partisan aisle that championed the “sacred” right of Americans to vote in local, state, and national elections. Our own Senator Al Franken famously said that “I grew up in Minnesota, where we treasure our tradition of civic engagement – and our record of having the nation’s highest voter participation.” And, in this week’s column, I want to emphasize the first part of that quote and demonstrate that voting is not the only measure of a citizen’s (or a community’s) civic engagement.

As in last week’s column, I have cited remarks from both liberals and conservatives with regard to the importance of civic engagement. At Community Action, it is not solely about registering people to vote, but training and developing new leaders, public servants, and other key stakeholders to take an active role in their personal destiny and that of their communities.

To that end, our agency has our own tradition of programs and services that began more than a decade ago with our Low-Income Fellows Program, which evolved into You Be the Change.

Together, these initiatives developed community leaders that were seated on nonprofit boards, run for school board and other elected offices, advance their education, participate in legislative initiatives designed to reduce poverty, make presentations at poverty-related conferences around the nation, and established their own nonprofit agencies.

In 2016, Community Action implemented a new program called Getting Ahead, which provides low-income residents the means to thoroughly investigate the impact that poverty has on themselves, their families, and the larger community. Participants also develop short-term and long-term plans to overcome poverty through advanced leadership development, civic engagement, and community empowerment strategies. All of these programs speak to Community Action's mantra of Serve – Educate – Transform.

And although we are making an impact in the lives of many, there are so many more that need access to these tools and opportunities. Historian Jeffrey J. Lloyd, known colloquially as Aberhani, writes "Discourse and critical thinking are essential tools when it comes to securing progress in a democratic society. But in the end, unity and engaged participation are what make it happen."

One of the overarching themes during the 53-year history of the Community Action movement is helping low-income households actively chart their own course out of poverty and toward self-sufficiency. Actively engaging citizens in electoral politics, their school boards, non-profit boards, grassroots advocacy, outreach and education, and other initiatives is key approach.

Still, I am reminded of an occasion where I heard another gentleman say, "The world is run by those who show up." I assumed that he was quoting

someone else and when I researched it, I discovered these words had been attributed to many individuals over the years, but no one knows exactly who coined the phrase. I suppose that doesn't ultimately matter, but what interested me in its origins is that on some level these words offended me.

I certainly understand and appreciate the general premise of this quote, but wondered to myself, "What about those who are unable to show up?" Children, for example, who are not yet old enough to participate in civic society but are in desperate need of advocates. Or, the elderly, the disabled, or other vulnerable people who for one reason or another lack the resources or ability to speak and act on their own behalf.

The rest of us must show up for them. And it is not about ruling the world, but the power to determine our own destinies and lifting up those who need our help. Civic engagement strategies can do this; we just need more of them.

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