



# THE ANTI-POVERTY SOLDIER

By Clarence Hightower, Ph.D.



Community **Action**

## **The vital role that volunteers play in the efforts to reduce poverty**

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Even prior to the start of “The War on Poverty” more than 50 years ago, there was a dedicated push to establish innovative volunteer programs that addressed social and political inequities both in America and the world. One such program was the Peace Corps, an idea that was first introduced in the halls of Congress by Minnesota’s own Hubert H. Humphrey. Established in 1961 under the Executive Order of President John F. Kennedy, the Peace Corps has sent more than 200,000 Americans to volunteer in nearly 140 countries.

The first director of the Peace Corps, Robert Sargent Shriver, would go on to become the “architect” of the War on Poverty and is considered the father of the Community Action movement in America. Although the Peace Corps focused on addressing inequity and cultivating social and economic development in foreign nations, Shriver was instrumental in the design and implementation of numerous volunteer and anti-poverty programs in the United States.

Examples include several initiatives that remain in existence today such as VISTA (Volunteers in Service to America), Senior Corps, Foster Grandparents, Legal Services, and Job Corps.

It is quite clear that those who helped facilitate the War on Poverty recognized the vital role that volunteerism must play in this fight. Their vision and leadership has inspired a flood of volunteer organizations dedicated in the struggle against poverty, hunger and other forms of social injustice. As author and activist Frances Moore Lappé argues, hunger and poverty will not be eradicated by bureaucrats and policy makers but “will only be solved when people like you and me decide to act.”

And yet there are those who argue that the modern “philosophy of volunteerism,” which took flight in the latter half of the 20th century, is insufficient as a tool to alleviate social problems. For example, scholars such as James Petras and Chronis Polychroniou suggest that poverty and related issues are “structural” and considerable policy changes would be required to adequately address and remediate these problems.

Regardless of which idea one might agree with, the citizen activism of Lappé or the call for fundamental policy shifts by Petras and Polychroniou, I am wholeheartedly convinced that volunteerism remains an indispensable weapon in the fight against poverty. Certainly the practice of volunteerism alone is not enough to eliminate poverty. Still, after 35 years in the Twin Cities nonprofit sector I have witnessed firsthand the indelible impact volunteers have on the lives of their fellow citizens.

In 2016, Community Action Partnership of Ramsey & Washington Counties benefitted from the tireless efforts of more than 1,200 volunteers who contributed over 20,400 volunteer hours to Community Action programs and initiatives.

Among these initiatives is our Tax Preparation Clinic, where volunteers prepare and file tax returns free of charge to low-income residents. As part of this volunteer service, many participants learn about and are able to take advantage of the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC). The EITC has been called “one of the most successful anti-poverty tools in the United States” lifting millions Americans out of poverty each year.

There is absolutely no way that our agency could have the impact that it does, serving upwards of 65,000 low-income individuals each year, without the assistance of a committed volunteer corps. Nevertheless, in spite of our large volunteer base, we could always use more help, as could most if not all nonprofits and community-based organizations.

So regardless of whether or not the philosophy volunteerism can in and of itself eliminate poverty and other social ills, there is no doubt in my mind that it can and does change the world for the better. In fact, volunteerism should be a required strategy of any social change movement.

Perhaps equally important, volunteerism speaks to the best in all of us and our commitment to one another. In that spirit, I am reminded of a quote from Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., who in 1957 said, “Life’s most persistent and urgent question is, ‘What are you doing for others?’”

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