

**MVCAA Community Champions Luncheon**  
**KD Keynote Address**  
**October 30, 2013**

Hello, thanks to MVCAA Executive Director Amy Turner, MVCAA Board and staff, NYSCAA staff and all in attendance here today.

This morning many of you had the opportunity to participate in the Poverty Simulation, an effort to help you walk in the shoes of people living in poverty. Hopefully, this exercise gave you some insight into the challenges and barriers faced every day by people living in poverty. However effective the activity was, it was as its name implies, a simulation, not real life, and at the end of the day, most of us will go home to a place that is warm, safe and includes a well-stocked kitchen and refrigerator. The people whose lives you were simulating and who are served here at Mohawk Valley Community Action Agency, don't have this luxury. They may live in a place that they may struggle to heat, perhaps in a dangerous neighborhood, and they may well go home to a kitchen that looks more like Mother Hubbard's cupboard than my over-stocked pantry.

One of the things about the simulation that is real and accurate is the diversity of those who participated. Despite the myths and misconceptions that seem to dominate the public dialogue about poverty, we, in this room and in the simulation this morning, are not all that different from our neighbors who are living in poverty. Poverty is not a condition that exists in a world of "others" nor is it caused by some individual "defect" or characteristic. Poverty exists in every community in our state and people living in poverty represent a diversity of ethnicity, geography, age. And I suspect that I am not the only person in this room who lived in poverty at some point in our lives. My time was some years ago when, as a young woman, I found myself a single mother and needed to seek public assistance in order to take care of my infant daughter and myself. I can tell you with a high degree of confidence that the experience of being poor, hungry and homeless is a profound and life changing experience. And for the millions

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of children born into poverty the experience of being poor may affect them for the rest of their lives as research consistently reveals the devastating health, educational, spiritual and social impact of poverty. Put it simply, being poor is bad for your health and well-being and for children it can have life-long, negative consequences on their development and physical and mental health.

As you may know, next year we will recognize the 50th anniversary of Community Action and the War on Poverty. We are honoring this history amid the dual and potentially existential threats of cuts to our funding and the frightening and maddening public discourse on poverty. We are forced by the political and economic circumstances of this time to respond to criticisms about our work and the people we serve and to respond to the frankly pompous and dishonest pronouncements about the failure of the war poverty, a failure attributed to the community based anti poverty programs and low income people themselves. Children, disabled people, veterans, seniors, it seems, are responsible for choosing to be one of the most vulnerable of the 99 percent, caught in the unfortunate historic moment when income inequality, poverty and political gridlock threaten the moral if not legal fabric of our nation.

Poverty is not an accident or unavoidable social condition. It is man made, a deliberate and predictable outcome of policies made over the last three plus decades that have ensured increasing privilege for the privileged and very little for the rest. We have erected structural and political barriers to economic opportunity and we have turned the war on poverty into a war on poor people. And we have retreated from the commitments made by President Johnson nearly 50 years ago when he signed the Economic Opportunity Act and declared that we had a moral obligation to help the “least among us.”

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We see the impact of these policies and our abandonment of the war on poverty in the most recent poverty data. The poverty rate in 2012 remains at about 15%, the level it was at in 2011. And in a clear and contemporary example of the “rich getting richer” paradigm, we can see that the “recovery” from the Great Recession has not reached poor and middle income people while those at the very top have experienced a real recovery in income and resources. In fact, low and middle income people were losing ground before the Great Recession as real household income declined more than 8% since 2007.

Critics of the social safety net see these numbers as indicative of a failure of the war on poverty. In fact, since the 1970’s we have seen a sharp increase in income inequality as low wage jobs failed to move people out of poverty and there are fewer opportunities for living wage jobs among the low and middle income people who had in previous generations worked their way out of poverty. Without the economic supports of the safety net programs including the diverse Community Action programs provided across the state, the poverty data and lives of people living in poverty would be even bleaker.

We need to fight the misconceptions and make very clear the fact that even our most miraculous and cost-effective work cannot solve the problem of poverty while we accept “political and economic priorities that privilege wealth accumulation for the few over the well-being of the many.” The recent vote to cut SNAP benefits is what Sasha Abramsky in his new book The American Way of Poverty calls “a collective breakdown of empathy.” Look at that vote to cut SNAP funding in the context of a continuation of large agricultural subsidies, including for members of congress who voted for the SNAP cuts. And think about these cuts in the context of the mind bending spectacle of the greatest nation on earth seeing its government grind to a near halt on some sort of frightening and perverse “principle” of needing to be sure poor and near poor people can’t access health care. This is more

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than a “breakdown of empathy.” It is a betrayal of our constitutional principles and history and a threat to our democratic form of government. It is also just plain wrong.

So, the occasion of Community Action’s 50th anniversary presents us with an opportunity and a responsibility. It is an opportunity to engage in a campaign of awareness raising, community outreach and education with a theme that connects diverse programs, communities and people and that recognizes and celebrates the very real successes of Community Action and the War on Poverty. During our 50 year life span, millions of people have been served and have seen their lives improved as a result of the work of Community Action and other Great Society programs. It is estimated that 40 million people have been kept out of poverty because of Social Security, the Earned Income Tax Credit, food stamps, Medicare and Medicaid. In the aftermath of the Great Society programs, poverty decreased from 22.4% to 11.1% at the end of the “boom times” of the 1990s. From the turn of the 21st century to date, the trend has been reversing itself and we have seen an even more dramatically rising trend of income inequality.

In the 50 years since the passage of the Economic Opportunity Act, more people have become concentrated at the bottom of the economic ladder and there is less economic mobility for people living in poverty. There seems to be even less political will to have a meaningful conversation about poverty. Policies are being made that consistently and painfully disadvantage low and middle income people. What does it mean that in a country with 300 million people, 30,000 people control 1 in 30 of all the dollars in circulation? Where the most affluent 1% control 40% of the wealth? Where 93% of the income gains in 2010 went to the top 1%, who saw income gains of 11.6% while the rest of us, the 99%, saw income gains of less than a quarter of one percent--0.2%. I would argue, it means, to put it simply, that the deck has

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been stacked against poor people, working class people, middle class people.....This is not an accident.

NYSCAA and the state's network of Community Action Agencies is responding to the call of this moment with *NYS Community Action 1964 - 2014 : From Poverty to Opportunity*, otherwise known as the Poverty Tour 2014. We hope you will participate in the tour and support our efforts to redirect public attention and resources toward the low and middle income people who work so hard to uphold their end of the social contract that tells us that hard work pays. We hope you will also support our efforts to combat the pervasive stigma and stereotypes about low income people and poverty.

In the poverty tour, we will organize a series of education and outreach programs in communities around the state. Through this effort we hope to make a valuable and visible contribution to activism, advocacy, and policy efforts at the state and national levels. Although the tour is planned to "officially" kick off in April, it really starts now as I challenge each of you to be part of this effort and to help bring the voices and faces of poverty out of the shadow.

The challenges faced by Community Action Agencies and the people we serve are enormous and daunting. In the richest nation in the history of the world, we have more people living in poverty than at any other time in our country's history. Over 15% of New York's citizen's live in poverty, with nearly half of the children in many of our cities living in poverty and a quarter of our African-American and Latino neighbors living in poverty. And the traditional pathways to prosperity, the blue collar and industrial jobs that created a vibrant middle class, are gone or markedly downsized, replaced by jobs that don't offer that same hope for prosperity. The American dream of economic mobility for all who work hard is at risk of becoming just a dream for far too many people.

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As we confront enormous challenges in our agencies and in our communities, we are heartened by the knowledge that we are not alone in this work and that others share our commitment. And while I am all too aware of how difficult this work is, we have no choice but to accept it as ours. In the face of doubt, criticism, skepticism and controversy, we will continue because we know that we will be judged by how well we choose to treat those who are live on the margins of society.

We don't get to opt out of this struggle nor to opt out of our obligation to confront the powerful interests that are determined to marginalize low-income people. This is a fight that transcends politics and religion and culture. It is a fight for the soul of our country; and a fight to live the values of our many religious traditions, all of which speak to our obligation to help the least among us. Together, we can prevent hopelessness and cynicism from engulfing us and the low income people and communities we serve. We can make real the dream of opportunity for all.

The Poverty Tour 2014, will be a vehicle for us to engage in a discussion about poverty, inequality and the programs that have worked so well to help our most vulnerable neighbors. In town hall meetings, press events and community outreach efforts we will engage in conversations that are just the beginning of what must become our second 50 years of advocacy and anti-poverty work. It is, I believe, sacred work, reaching out to and recognizing the dignity of every human being. And it is the work that will ensure that we pass to our children and grandchildren a legacy of hope, opportunity and love. It is hard to imagine anything more important. I hope you will join us and I look forward to seeing you "on the road" in 2014.

Thank you.

