

Chicanos in Cowtown: The Establishment of the Greater Tarrant County Community Action Agency

On July 16, 1967 John Moulder of the *Fort Worth Press* reported that “The Community Council’s role in the War on Poverty here was born in controversy, reared in controversy and in controversy met with sudden death.”¹ This succinct statement summarizes the failure of the Tarrant County Community Council (TCCC), an organization established in 1928 to provide various social services to the greater Fort Worth community, to effectively implement federally-funded programs meant to improve the lives of the poor in Fort Worth and its suburbs. Just as in other major cities across the country, Fort Worth had a war on poverty and activists tried to use it for broad social change to address deep structural racism in city, while others tried to limit that vision and redirect it into safe social services. Activists’ success in wrestling for the control over funding and decision making from TCCC was an essential obstacle to overcome in the path toward real change for the city’s poor, but it was not the only one.² Although Black and Brown activists eventually came together across racial lines, they took rocky steps toward that unity.

President Johnson called for a national war on poverty in 1964 and signed into law the Economic Opportunity Act (EOA) “to mobilize the human and financial resources of the Nation to combat poverty.”³ In order to carry out the initiatives created by the EOA, Congress established the Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO) and the Community Action Program (CAP) that would approve and administer the federal funds, and initiate and manage the programs on a local level, respectively. According to this legislation, each local agency that conducted these programs should be “administered with the maximum feasible participation of residents of the areas and members of the groups served.”⁴ When TCCC made a unilateral decision in May 1965 to create a local CAP board from its current members, that they would

oversee, to coordinate the federal funds distributed by OEO, they had to seek out additional representatives from the community's that the programs would serve. Otherwise, this CAP board, made up of TCCC board members, would not be in compliance with CAP's directives.⁵ Under this arrangement, TCCC charged the local CAP board to implement programs to fight poverty in Tarrant County but made the ultimate decisions on which programs went into effect. In other words, TCCC controlled all the funding and yet did not represent and were not familiar with the poor people of Fort Worth. Indeed, before any substantial transformation took place among the poor, those with the power to enact change in the city had to first realize that poverty existed in Fort Worth.

A *Fort Worth Star-Telegram* article in October 1966 began by stating, "The war on poverty in Tarrant County is going along pretty much like poverty in Tarrant County has gone along – unnoticed."⁶ The president of CAP and member of TCCC, Jack Bean, stated in the same article that "I really didn't know at first. Someone said I wouldn't know poverty if I had my nose rubbed in it. It took me some time to understand that taking a bath, brushing your teeth, combing your hair is a problem to some people."⁷ Marcus Ginsburg, chairman of TCCC believed that "the CAP 'has not been widely accepted by some in Tarrant County' . . . and that it has been difficult to give guidance in the program."⁸ Manuel Jara, chairman of CAP beginning in 1967, believed that in the two years that funds should have made its way to fight poverty in Fort Worth, TCCC served as more of a gatekeeper than a facilitator of that federal funding. When TCCC began CAP in Fort Worth in 1965 they created neighborhood centers in high poverty areas, initiated a household management aid program for poor families, and provided access to Planned Parenthood services. They also attempted to provide jobs to at-risk youth, but they often struggled to convince businesses to hire the teens. Although CAP funding paid \$1.25 per hour,

local businesses claimed it was an unfair pay rate because it was higher than what they paid their current employees.

One of the program's more successful first year endeavors, according to its annual report, was the household management program that placed newly trained young female social workers into various homes to help with developing better shopping, sewing, and cleaning habits. Yet both the allegedly problematic habits and their cures were in fact culturally specific. For example, the report lists 45 visits to "Family 'A' (Latin American)" and notes that the wife "makes tortillas 3 times a day," which it deemed excessive. The report then touts the progress that the family has made: "They are serving more Americanized foods and baking their own sweets" and have "learned the value of good eating."⁹ Other family's successes included, "house much cleaner and better arranged," and "family sitting down to eat meals together."¹⁰ These socially safe programs may have created more family dinners and cleaner homes and made the founders of the program feel as though they made a difference. However, they essentially blamed the poverty conditions on the poor themselves and did not make any substantive change.

Toward the end of CAPs first year, in August and September 1966, Fort Worth City Council members and Tarrant County Commissioners argued over whose organization should bear the responsibility of funding the needed \$4,000 to fulfill the ten percent local funds mandated by OEO.¹¹ TCCC planned to contribute an additional \$4,000 that would complete the \$8,000 CAP needed to get OEO approval for their \$80,000 budget for the following year. In the same article that stated an approval for "the advertising for bids for the demolition of 31 substandard houses," and on the same page with an article discussing the pay increase to city manager, the *Star-Telegram* reported that the Fort Worth City Council denied CAPs request.¹² City Councilman T.Z. Hamm believed that it was not "wise for the city to contribute \$4000 to

the war on poverty efforts here since it was a countywide project.” At the same time, the county claimed that the majority of the funds would be used in the city so they should cover the cost. The county eventually conceded and agreed to provide the rest of the necessary local funds.

Over the next year, CAPs youth job program failed, the neighborhood centers continued to meet with families and provided them with the information on how to apply for welfare assistance and their conservative leaders continued to claim progress. Clarence Williams, an African American director of CAP neighborhood centers, believed that “there is no evidence of the black power movement in Fort Worth. He stated that CAP programs “are ‘making it unnecessary.’”¹³ Williams made this declaration during an interview with the *Star-Telegram* after speaking at a forum sponsored by the Unitarian Church of Fort Worth. He told the audience that “all minorities have the same problems” and that the efforts of the Black Power Movement alienates other groups. He also stated in the interview that “it [the Black Power Movement] appealed only to the lower class Negro. ‘The middle class Negro doesn’t want to be identified with it . . . after we can get the question away from race . . . we can talk about needs and principles.’”¹⁴ His statements demonstrate TCCC’s lack of people leading the War on Poverty efforts in Fort Worth who genuinely represented the people CAP supposedly aim to serve. TCCC was not fulfilling the “maximum feasibility” clause of OEO with fidelity.

By the summer of 1967, TCCC began losing control over OEO funding as both Mexican and Black leaders worked to take the reins on the War on Poverty in Fort Worth. In June 1967, attorney Harold Valderas claimed in a civil suit that TCCC’s decision to reduce its board from fifty-nine members to nine violated federal law. He argued that this change “took the Community Action Program, which administers the poverty war, out of the hands of many and placed it into the hands of the few.”¹⁵ The following month TCCC recommended that OEO deny

the newly formed Neighborhood Action Incorporated's (NAI) request for \$247,500 in federal funding, expressing a TCCC board consensus that the new group would duplicate CAP's efforts to combat poverty in the city. For its part, the NAI, led by Black physician and former CAP board member, hoped to "contribute to the effectiveness of the attack on poverty by operating multipurpose centers in . . . poverty areas that are predominantly Negro."¹⁶ He believed that "we [presumably speaking for Black residents of Fort Worth] needed something like NAI to speed up the process [of poverty work]."¹⁷ Conservative members of TCCC called the creation of the NAI a political move to take control of funding from OEO. Fort Worth attorney, George A. Crowley, whose wife is the president of the predominately-White, liberal Tarrant County Democratic Woman's Club filed the group's charter application.¹⁸ However, OEO approved NAI's request over TCCC's objection.

The founders of the NAI, including Dr. Marion Brooks, held a meeting in July 1967 to discuss the future make-up of the board for the newly formed organization. The meeting "at one point promised to become a shouting match between [the moderator], who had a microphone, and a Latin American in the predominantly Negro audience."¹⁹ The issue on table concerned the possibility of a dominance of African Americans on the thirty-member board. Manual Jara, whom the NAI founders invited to the meeting, "jumped to his feet and stated 'we're only going to have four Latins on this board making decisions.'"²⁰ Dr. Brooks admitted that the board may end up with "the possibility of Negro dominance," adding, "We've got more poor folks than you." He also believed that, "We're [Black and Brown] bonded much more by poverty than by race." This meeting that focused on the North Side community center the NAI planned to build ended with a decision to split the board members and the six-member nominating committee equally by race.

Amid this chaos and in response to the civil suit filed by Valderas, OEO stated that TCCC could no longer administer the federal funding and all control over the War on Poverty in Fort Worth should be given directly to CAP. In response to this proclamation from OEO, Marcus Ginsburg, chairman of TCCC, stated that TCCC “was pulling out of the war on poverty.”²¹ CAP then separated from TCCC, changed its name to The Greater Fort Worth Tarrant County Community Action Agency (CAA), and kept Manual Jara as its chairman. Unfortunately, this did not end the power struggles for Jara. He had to request the local cost-sharing funds again from the Tarrant County Commissioners. TCCC also initially walked back their own commitment to funding the other half of the needed ten percent of the proposed budget. Jara however managed to secure all the necessary funding and began programs for disadvantaged children and teenagers during the summer and negotiated with the NAI to integrate them into the CAA as a delegate agency. Under this agreement, NAI appointed Jara to its board, CAA had approval power over NAI’s budget before they submitted it to OEO, and NAI could not duplicate any of CAA’s initiatives.²²

Just as in other major cities across the nation, President Johnson’s plea to fight a war on poverty, in part by mobilizing the talents and instincts of the poor and their representatives, threatened the established power structure in Fort Worth.²³ TCCC, whose members did not understand poverty, accepted Johnson’s directive but implemented socially safe programs. Unsatisfied with these lackluster efforts, middle class Black and Brown leaders took this opportunity to claim a space within a predominantly White city where they could make advocate for the disadvantaged members of their communities.

¹ John Moulder, “FW’s Bickering War on Poverty,” *Fort Worth Press*, July 16, 1967.

² For more on the War on Poverty and activists’ struggles over control and efforts at multiracial alliances see, William S. Clayson, *Freedom Is Not Enough: The War on Poverty and the Civil Rights Movement in Texas* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2010); Gordon Keith Mantler, *Power to the Poor: Black-Brown Coalition and the Fight*

for *Economic Justice, 1960-1974* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015); Annelise Orleck and Lisa Gayle Hazirjian, *The War on Poverty: A New Grassroots History, 1964-1980* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2011).

³ Economic Opportunity Act of 1964, Pub. L. No. 88-452, 78 Stat. 508 (1964).

⁴ Economic Opportunity Act of 1964, Pub. L. No. 88-452, 78 Stat. 516 (1964).

⁵ “Panel Named to Coordinate Federal Anti-Poverty War,” *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*, May 6, 1965.

⁶ “Tarrant’s War on Poverty Grinding Along Slowly,” *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*, October 23, 1966.

⁷ “Tarrant’s War on Poverty Grinding Along Slowly,” *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*, October 23, 1966.

⁸ “CAP Held Help to City Social Unites,” *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*, February 24, 1967.

⁹ Community Services Administration OEO – Southwest Region, CAP-Records Relating to City Economic Boards, 1965-1968, Fort Worth, Mrs. Tom Joyce Cunningham, “Agricultural Extension Service of Texas A&M University,” Box 9, National Archives Records Administration, Fort Worth, TX.

¹⁰ Community Services Administration OEO – Southwest Region, CAP-Records Relating to City Economic Boards, 1965-1968, Fort Worth, Mrs. Tom Joyce Cunningham, “Agricultural Extension Service of Texas A&M University,” Box 9, National Archives Records Administration, Fort Worth, TX.

¹¹ Bob Schieffer, “Auditor Figures Hamm Amiss in Percentages,” *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*, September 29, 1966.

¹² “No \$4000: Request Denied Action Program,” *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*, September 27, 1966; “Pay Hike

Awarded Brownlee,” *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*, September 27, 1966.

¹³ “Black Power Needs to Join Others – CAP Chief,” *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*, February 18, 1967. The article describes Williams as “a Negro Community Action Program leader.” For more on Fort Worth’s Black History see, Richard F. Selcer, *A history of Fort Worth in Black & White: 165 Years of African-American Life*, (Denton, TX: University of North Texas Press), 2015.

¹⁴ “Black Power Needs to Join Others – CAP Chief,” *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*, February 18, 1967.

¹⁵ “Program Changes Defended: Head on Poverty Denies Illegality,” *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*, June 13, 1967.

¹⁶ Mabel Gouldy, “New Group Seeks To Combat Poverty,” *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*, June 17, 1967.

¹⁷ “Neighborhood Action News,” Volume 1, Number 1, Services Administration OEO –Southwest Region, CAP-Records Relating to City Economic Boards, 1965-1968, Fort Worth, Box 9, Neighborhood Actions Folder, National Archives Records Administration.

¹⁸ Jon McConal, “Council Vote Rebuffs New Poverty Group,” *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*, July 21, 1967.

¹⁹ Mike Buchholz, “Negro Rule of Board Charged,” *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*, July 21, 1967.

²⁰ Mike Buchholz, “Negro Rule of Board Charged,” *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*, July 21, 1967.

²¹ John Moulder, “FW’s Bickering War on Poverty,” *Fort Worth Press*, July 16, 1967.

²² “CAA Will Add NAI to Program,” *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*, April 3, 1968.

²³ Rhonda Y. Williams, “‘To Challenge the Status Quo by Any Means’: Community Action and Representational Politics in 1960s Baltimore,” in *The War on Poverty: A New Grassroots History, 1964-1980*, edited by Annelise Orleck and Lisa Gayle Hazirjian (Athens: University of Georgia Press), 2011, 64.