Opportunities, Inc. and Office of Economic Opportunity

Mike Mansfield 1903-2001
Statement of Senator Mike Mansfield (D. Montana)

Mr. President, not long ago I received a letter from Mr. Francis Mitchell, Director of "Opportunities, Inc." of Great Falls, Montana. Mr. Mitchell addressed himself very thoughtfully and very thoroughly to a matter soon to be debated by this body -- I am referring to legislation extending the life of the Office of Economic Opportunity.

In the interest of assuring informed discussion on this subject by members of the Senate, I would like to share with my colleagues some of the major points made in Mr. Mitchell's letter. I ask unanimous consent to have my remarks and highlights of Mr. Mitchell's letter printed at this point in the Congressional Record.

Mr. Mitchell talks about Community Action. We know that OEO's Community Action Division is responsible for stimulating such programs as Head Start for pre-school children: Upward Bound a pre-college program for talented but underprivileged teenagers; the Job Corps for unskilled and unemployed teenage men and women; legal services for the exploited poor; and other programs essentially conceived by OEO and encouraged at the local level. But Mr. Mitchell reminds us that Community Action is even more than this. He said:

"I feel that a vital part of success in Community Action is the stimulation and coordination of non-Federally related activities to assure the community comprehensiveness in the poverty attack. We are
involved in the areas of Neighborhood Improvement, preventive health care, student tutoring, and the stimulation of other agencies activities, stimulating a coordinated youth plan among the numerous youth-serving groups, and providing community information about local and Federal resources. Although these activities are not directly related to a Federally funded project, they are possible only because of the administrative framework and staff provided through the OEO administration grant. We consider this type of stimulation, coordination, and community support as products of a good Community Action Program. Therefore, when Congress views administrative costs of a local Community Action Agency, it ought to keep in mind that one of the important jobs Community Action Agencies have to do is mobilize all segments of a community in the effort. It is not just a matter of administering a Neighborhood Youth Corp or Head Start project."

Mr. President, it is this great flexibility that Community Action gives to the OEO which is jeopardized by the ill-conceived suggestions that some OEO functions be "spun-off" to other Federal agencies. Many of these programs are imaginative and still experimental, they belong in OEO where they were begun and under whose aegis they are beginning to show results. As Mr. Mitchell points out:

"...for Congress to prematurely diminish the role of OEO or restrict the flexibility of Community Action planning and funding in favor of transfer of operations to the "old line" agencies (even with newly established bureaus) is to reject a hopeful and yet unproven innovation (Community Action) for the stated intent of these old line agencies to
commit the departments and people who have not in the past shown a special interest in the problems of poverty. For example, the Department of Labor says - We are reorienting our thinking and, therefore, should control all Manpower activities - while OEO has hardly been given the time to begin to prove its commitment and ability to innovate the Manpower area. Stating it more simply, let the old line agencies prove their ability to carry out their intent at the local level before OEO and Community Action are abandoned or weakened."

OEO has shown a remarkable responsiveness to the needs of a local community. In his letter, Mr. Mitchell reminded me of the willingness of OEO officials to grapple with problems which called for unique and different approaches:

"As you also know, you have not been bothered by requests from us to facilitate funding through OEO. You in Congress said that we will set up OEO to provide the funds and to respond to local needs. In our experience this is exactly what OEO has done and it has not required costly rewriting or frustrating bickering and calls for legislative assistance."

Finally, Mr. Mitchell offered some interesting comments on expeditious OEO practices in handling project applications. He had the highest praise for the OEO procedure of accepting for consideration proposals which required certain changes instead of returning them for frustrating and time-consuming re-writing and re-submission. The OEO practice, he explained, is to negotiate minor changes and include them as conditions to the approval of a grant.
"By direct and indirect experience with application to such agencies as the Department of Labor and Health, Education and Welfare I have seen project proposals returned for complete rewriting contrasted to the OEO practice of negotiating minor changes and including them as conditions to a grant. The OEO practice, therefore, eliminates hours and hours of paper work, wasted postage, and wasted man hours on the local and Federal levels. Representatives of OEO come in with the apparent attitude of 'How can we help you make your program better?'"

Mr. President, we can help make the Anti-Poverty program even better than it is, by strengthening and continuing the Office of Economic Opportunity.