

## T E S T I M O N Y

*Before the Oregon Senate Committee on Housing and Development  
of the Community Action Partnership of Oregon, Scott Cooper, President*

Sen. Jama, Vice Chair Linthicum, my name is Scott Cooper, I am the president of the Community Action Partnership of Oregon.

I'm here today to talk to you about the role of the community action network as the delivery system for state and federal resources.

Community Action is codified in statute, specifically at ORS 458.505.

Community Action agencies have been around at the federal level since 1964. Oregon recognized the potential for a network that could distribute funding and do deep work on meeting the needs of struggling Oregonians in the late 1980s.

Subsequently, a network of 18 organizations statewide has been purpose-built to ensure that every community has access and capacity to receive the benefits of often complicated federal and state programs. One of those organizations is the Oregon Human Development Corporation, also recognized in statute, which has been serving agricultural workers and other disadvantaged individuals statewide since 1979. Throughout our network, we have created local partnerships with more than a thousand non-profits, for profits and faith based organizations to help low-income Oregonians.

What kind of work do we do? We all have fancy mission statements, but I often tell my staff, "We do the work nobody else wants to do."

Our core programs include Housing Assistance, Energy Assistance, Weatherization & Home Repair, Lending, Home Ownership and Financial Counseling and Food banking. Some of us also are Head Start and childcare providers, veterans services providers, transit providers of service to the elderly, and economic development programs. The shape of any one program depends on community needs and whether there are other providers available, capable and willing to do the work in a manner that meets funder requirements. In many cases, especially in rural and remote parts of Oregon, the community action agency is the only service provider in the area—in keeping with the concept that we do the jobs nobody else is willing—or able—to do.

Community Action agencies are either private organizations or they are embedded in county government. In Oregon, there are four "public" organizations embedded with Multnomah, Clackamas, Lane and Benton and Lincoln and Linn counties. These are governed by county commissioners. The other 14 of us are governed by private boards, consisting, by law, of one-third elected officials, one-third low-income individuals, and one-third community members. In recent years, we have laid a diversity lens across our board recruitment and as a result have added additional voices and perspectives from our community. In our agency's case, we track minority status, gender, age, disability and

veteran's status, and I can report that we have had success in recruiting in all those demographics and have a healthy and balanced board that looks very much like our community.

The role of the network became incredibly important in 2020. As you all know, the CARES Act was passed by Congress with incredible speed. And the roll out of funds to states began almost immediately. When you move fast, there is always a high risk that you will break things. Fortunately, community action is experienced enough and nimble, flexible and entrepreneurial enough that we could move fast—or at least as fast as state government—and get resources flowing to the ground.

Many of us had some memory of a previous crisis—the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009, which was intended to address the financial meltdown of that period. Community Action was significantly involved in distributing those resources, so this new crisis simply required us to dust off the machinery and rev the engine.

The response was swift and broad. Statewide, community action agencies distributed 68,875 months (almost 6,000) of rent to Oregonians. Total amount spent through December 31 according to the latest published report of the Oregon Housing Community Services Department was almost \$64 million. However, that number is significantly underreported. Data entry sometimes lags service, so the real number, once all the numbers are in, is likely very close to \$68.5 million.

Community Action Agencies also distributed energy assistance in 2020 to keep consumers safe and to reduce financial pressure on desperate households. Nearly \$20 million was distributed in Energy Assistance helping 21,500 households.

But that is not all. Community Agencies converted Head Start classrooms to virtual learning centers overnight and Community Action Agencies mobilized volunteers to distribute millions of pounds of additional food to needy families. In partnership with local governments, community action agencies distributed business assistance grants and provided mortgage relief through direct payments to businesses and homeowners. Those community action agencies involved in childcare helped prop up providers with cash assistance and technical assistance to allow them to be open to emergency responders and to remain open to serve the community once the pandemic recedes.

Throughout the pandemic, community action agencies were very sensitive to the fact that communities of color experience poverty to a much greater degree than their white counterparts. I refer the committee to the table below for more information about the disparity.

American Community Survey/US Census, 2019 1-Year Estimates

Data Extract from Table S1703: Selected Characteristics of People at Specified Levels of Poverty in the Past 12 Months (Oregon)

Race identification	Population in state	Percentage living at or below 100% of federal poverty level
<b>One race</b>	3,935,790	11.2
White	3,461,237	10.7
Black or African American	74,081	25.2
American Indian and Alaska Native	48,194	18.5
Asian	190,923	11.8
Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander		14.5
Some other race	147,769	13.4
Two or more races	200,752	14.4
Hispanic or Latino origin (of any race)	554,226	14.8
White alone, not Hispanic or Latino	3,103,602	10.2

Community Action Agencies have long been aware of this disparity—we see it in our everyday work and in the faces of the people who present at our doors asking for help. And we respond. In Multnomah County, nearly three-quarters of those served were minorities; in Salem, it is 63 percent; in Klamath Falls it is 41 percent; Eugene, Corvallis, Bend, McMinnville and Hood River, the number is about one third. Not surprisingly, the Oregon Human Development Corporation with its focus on the farmworker community, not surprisingly served mostly minorities, who represented 87 percent of its clients. We in community action understand the challenge that minorities face in our state. We are currently responding and will continue to respond to historical injustice and ongoing need in minority communities.

During the pandemic, Community Action played a key role in helping minority households. Even late into the pandemic, it was unclear whether federal dollars could be used to assist minority households. Guidance between Treasury and the State continued to be “murky,” and the resulting uncertainty created a risk that federal dollars spent might be subject to recapture in a future audit, and might create risk for clients of being subject to a public charge claim. Yet there were real, immediate and heartbreaking stories happening right in front of all of us. Community Action remedied the problem by bringing private and state resources to the table. This repurposing of our resources allowed the rent relief program to move forward serving all people in need while the resources lasted.

Earlier in this presentation, I mentioned that the Community Action network was “purpose built.” There are several reasons in particular why the current system is efficient and effective at rapidly distributing public resources.

First: the network covers the entire geography of Oregon. All Oregonians have physical access to services and personnel and to the full range of programs of assistance, no matter where they live.

Second: the network has the technical expertise to administer complicated federal and state programs, the required knowledge of legislation, regulation, guidance and best practices. This knowledge has been gained over 40 to 50 years of operation and is not easily transferred or replicated in new organizations.

Third: the individual network partners have well established strategies for financing the float associated with many governmental programs. Many policymakers do not realize or think through the ramifications of government systems which are based entirely on reimbursement. Now every nonprofit can extend \$2 million to \$3 million while waiting for the State to process reimbursement or even issue contracts timely. This is a serious impediment to handing out funds to just any organization, and it is a serious advantage of having the community action agency network available to the state.

Fourth: Community action agencies leverage private funding, volunteer capacity and the ability to cross refer among their many programs. That eases the burden of administration and program delivery by adding resources and it enables clients to be served holistically through a “One Stop Shop” experience.

Community Action is a critical part of the state delivery system—and it has been for decades. Oregon is somewhat unique among the states in the close working partnership that the state enjoys with its community action agencies. Oregon have relatively few community action agencies, compared to many other states, allowing Oregon to achieve the right mix of access and efficiency. The engagement of elected officials through representation on our boards and relationships maintained with you and your colleagues ensures that local service delivery systems and statewide direction are aligned, leading to more opportunities to serve more people in the best way we can.

As we see the end of the pandemic tunnel, we as a network are very concerned that now is not the time to declare victory and go home. As you well know, the economic fallout of the pandemic is yet to come. And when it comes, your constituents will turn to us at community action, and we, in full partnership with you, will serve them to the best of our ability and the full extent of our resources.

It was we have always done. It is what we always hope to do.