

# Office of Economic Opportunity

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The **Office of Economic Opportunity** was the agency responsible for administering most of the War on Poverty programs created as part of United States President Lyndon B. Johnson's Great Society legislative agenda. It was created by R. Sargent Shriver (with the assistance of William B. Mullins) who also served as the Office's first director.

Programs such as VISTA, Job Corps, Community Action Program, and Head Start (though that program was later transferred to the Department of Health, Education and Welfare) were all administered by the OEO. It was established in 1964, but quickly became a target of both left-wing and right-wing critics of the War on Poverty. The OEO was dismantled by President Richard Nixon in 1973, though many of the agency's programs were transferred to other government agencies.

## The Impact of OEO on Native Americans

The Native Americans were one of the main groups of people that the Office of Economic Opportunity benefited when it was first established in 1964. The OEO prided itself on flexibility and creativity and allowed Indian tribes to receive direct funding. The key OEO institution was the community action program (CAP), bestowed with the unusually energetic congressional mission statement of "a program which mobilizes and utilizes resources . . . in an attack on poverty." Tribal CAPs dedicated the largest amount of funding to Head Start for preschoolers and home improvement. Other areas of emphasis included educational development, legal services, health centers, and economic development<sup>[1]</sup>.

One of the greatest accomplishments of the OEO Indian effort took place in Navajo country. The Rough Rock Demonstration School rose from the community's will to give its children education that both respected and integrated Navajo culture and prepared young people for dealings with the majority society. The school was run by Navajo and it became the first wholly Indian-controlled school since the federal government took over the schools of the Five Civilized Tribes of Oklahoma in the late 19th Century. Rough Rock's success led directly to the creation of the Navajo Community College (now Diné College), the first modern tribal college, and a movement that in time expanded to more than thirty higher education institutions<sup>[2]</sup>.

The OEO projects injected Indian country with confidence and determination and brought many benefits, but the generalized gifts of leadership and tribal control proved equally enduring. Although many problems were encountered along the way, more than a thousand Indian people, never before given the chance to assume major responsibilities, took the reins of OEO projects and then moved into leadership positions in the tribal councils, national and regional Indian organizations, and federal and state offices. American Indians had finally been given the power to either succeed or fail.

Although the Office of Economic Opportunity was abolished in 1973, its positive effects are still being felt today. Its programs have been curtailed or scattered among other federal agencies, particularly the Department of Health and Human Services. Many states have adopted an OEO that serves to increase the self-sufficiency of their citizens, strengthen their communities, and eliminate the causes and symptoms of poverty<sup>[3]</sup>.

## Directors, 1965-1980

- R.Sargent Shriver 1965-1968
- Bertrand Harding 1968-1969
- Donald Rumsfeld 1969-1971
- Frank C. Carlucci 1971-1972
- Philip V. Sanchez 1972-1973
- Arvin J. Arnett 1973-1974
- Nathan E. Chambers 1975-1980

## References

- <sup>^</sup> Wilkinson, Charles. *Blood Struggle: The Rise of Modern Indian Nations*. New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Company, 2005. 191-94.