

**Outside Witness Testimony of Jenae Bjelland, Executive Director,  
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**Before the U.S. House Committee on Appropriations, Subcommittee on Labor, Health and  
Human Services, Education, and Related Agencies**

**Fiscal Year 2019 Appropriations, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office  
of Community Services, Community Services Block Grant (CSBG)**

As Executive Director of the National Association for State Community Services Programs (NASCS), I am pleased to submit testimony in support of the Department of Health and Human Services' (HHS) Community Services Block Grant (CSBG). We are seeking a Fiscal Year 2019 appropriations level of \$750 million for CSBG. NASCS believes that this funding level will ensure that states and local communities have the resources they need to lead the fight against poverty through innovative, effective, and locally tailored anti-poverty programs.

NASCS is the member organization representing the State CSBG Directors in all 50 states, Washington D.C., and 5 U.S. territories on issues related to CSBG and economic opportunity. NASCS also provides training and technical assistance to help State Offices implement program management best practices. The State Offices represented by our organization would like to thank the members of this committee for their support of CSBG over the years as well as in the recent FY 2018 Omnibus package.

CSBG is a model example of a successful Federal-State-Local partnership, a fact I can personally attest to having worked for almost 20 years in various roles within the CSBG network. However, CSBG is arguably one of the most misunderstood programs within the federal government. CSBG is often confused with other programs and there is substantial misinformation about how the program operates. I would like to highlight three main points in my testimony:

1. The **structure** of CSBG empowers states and local communities to take the lead on poverty.
2. The robust local, state, and federal **accountability measures** of the CSBG Performance Management Framework are unique and bold compared to other federal programs.
3. CSBG creates **impact** in communities across the country by leveraging additional private, local, state, and federal investments to fight poverty.

## **Structure**

Critics of federal anti-poverty programs emphasize the need for state and local leadership to address poverty, asserting that state and local leaders are best equipped to tackle the challenges facing their communities. CSBG embodies this very principle. CSBG is a block grant administered and managed by states, which distribute funds to a nationwide network of over 1,000 local CSBG Eligible Entities, also known as Community Action Agencies or CAAs. The CSBG network serves 99% of U.S. counties, touching urban, rural, and suburban communities. In some rural counties, the CAA is the only human services organization serving that community. Community Action Agencies utilize CSBG funds to address specific needs, which may include services and programs that address one or more of the core domains in which we work: employment, education and cognitive development, income, infrastructure and asset building, housing, health and social behavioral development, and civic engagement and community involvement. The CSBG Act also requires that the work of Community Action Agencies must be shaped by a community needs assessment performed every three years. This process ensures that CAA programs and services are tailored to unique community needs, rather than a one-size-fits-all solution. The needs assessment prevents duplication and incorporates community feedback in the strategic planning process. Furthermore, the CSBG Act requires one-third of a Community Action Agency's board to be composed of people who are low-income or

their representatives, ensuring that local needs are accurately reflected in the priorities of the organization.

### **Accountability**

In addition to a structure that empowers states and local communities, CSBG is bolstered by a Performance Management Framework to ensure accountability at all levels of the network. This federally established Performance Management Framework includes state and federal accountability measures, organizational standards for Community Action Agencies, and a Results Oriented Management and Accountability (ROMA) system. Under the Performance Management Framework, the CSBG Network reports outcomes through the new CSBG Annual Report, which is the network's most recent update of CSBG data collection and reporting since the CSBG Information Survey (CSBG IS) was expanded upon in 2009. The CSBG Annual Report was designed to complement Results Oriented Management and Accountability (ROMA) and supports the overall CSBG Performance Management Framework. Within this reporting mechanism, National Performance Indicators are used across the network to track and manage progress, ensuring CAAs have the data they need to improve and innovate. The ROMA system allows local communities to strengthen their impact and achieve robust results through continuous learning, improvement, and innovation. Furthermore, CSBG State Offices monitor local agency performance and adherence to organizational standards, providing training and technical assistance to ensure high quality delivery of programs and services.

### **Impact**

CSBG is a sound federal investment that produces tangible results. Federal CSBG dollars are used to support and strengthen the anti-poverty infrastructure of our communities. In Fiscal Year 2016, for every \$1 of CSBG, CAAs leveraged \$7.70 from state, local, and private sources,

including the value of volunteer hours at federal minimum wage. This leveraging of funds allowed CAAs to expand and maintain highly successful programs. Including all federal sources and volunteer hours, the CSBG Network leveraged \$20.19 of non-CSBG dollars per \$1 of CSBG. Without CSBG, many rural communities across America would not be able to implement critical programs that address poverty at both the community and family levels. Terminating CSBG would be detrimental to the lives of the over 15.8 million people with low-incomes who the CSBG network served in Fiscal Year 2016. Here is just a snapshot of the impact of CSBG:

- **5.8 million participants** with low-incomes obtained supports which reduced or eliminated barriers to employment, acquired a job, obtained an increase in employment income, or achieved “living wage” employment and benefits.
- **3.1 million** community resources or opportunities (e.g. transportation programs, youth programs, health care services, affordable housing, and child care programs) were improved or expanded for people with low-incomes as a result of CSBG Network projects or initiatives.
- **9.9 million** individuals and families with low-incomes received emergency assistance from the CSBG Network such as disaster relief, emergency clothing, temporary shelter, or protection from violence.
- **3.2 million** vulnerable individuals with low-incomes received services and secured or maintained an independent living situation as a result.

Looking beyond the data, we can see that the CSBG Network is delivering innovative, comprehensive, and effective programs across the country that put individuals and families on a path out of poverty:

- **Fighting the Opioid Epidemic in Washington State:** From 2011 to 2015, Snohomish County experienced 16.18% of all heroin-related deaths in the state, even though the county represents only 10% of the state population. Community Action took the lead in an initiative to reduce opioid overdoses through training on the administration of Narcan, an emergency opioid reversal drug. Bringing together several community partners and leveraging additional funds, the initiative has trained over 795 law enforcement personnel and 679 other personnel in treatment agencies, housing providers, emergency shelters, and school districts. The program has saved over 100 lives.
- **Overcoming Barriers to Employment in Arkansas:** ARVAC Inc., a Community Action Agency serving a rural nine county region in the western part of the state, runs the Fresh Start Vocational Rehabilitation Program. The program provides clients with substance abuse treatment, internships, job coaching, resume building, references, and

referrals while they search for employment. ARVAC partners with a local county workforce center, community corrections and parole agencies, and multiple local employers to help populations that face barriers to employment secure and maintain living wage jobs.

- **Family Reunification in New York:** Spurred by research showing that reunification post-incarceration strengthens families and enhances safety in communities, the State of New York engaged its Community Action Agencies as crucial partners in its statewide Family Reunification Pilot Program. New York's CAAs worked to reduce rates of recidivism by encouraging successful family reunification post-incarceration for those individuals whose family lives in public housing. The flexible nature of CSBG allowed CAAs to tailor services to a family's unique needs such as employment, education, and housing.

In closing, we ask the committee to fund CSBG at no less than \$750 million for FY 2019, the funding level necessary to grow and sustain this nationwide network with an over 50-year record of success. The structure of CSBG empowers states and local communities to take the lead on reducing poverty, while prioritizing locally determined solutions. The CSBG network is subject to the extensive accountability mechanisms of the CSBG Performance Management Framework, ensuring that the Federal Office, State Offices, and local Community Action Agencies are effective and responsible stewards of federal funds. Finally, CSBG is producing concrete results, serving millions of vulnerable Americans each year who need a hand-up to successfully move out of poverty. NASCSP looks forward to working with Committee members in the future to ensure that CSBG continues to help families achieve outcomes that strengthen our communities and make a difference in the lives of our most vulnerable neighbors. Thank you.

Respectfully submitted,

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