Ode to Watts: The War on Poverty in South Los Angeles

Maria Nolasco

The United States in the 1960s was a nation divided by lines of race and class. Economic issues such as poverty have become ever more impossible to ignore. The fight for civil rights reached a point where it could no longer be ignored. Neglected communities were rising and demanding to be heard. Government officials guiding the nation had spent decades classifying poverty as a social problem based on a person's character and not something to be changed by governmental policy. Unemployment was becoming more permanent in the nation, leaving leaders no choice but to take some form of initiative in aiding citizens and alleviating the problem. After much deliberation on the initiative, U.S. President Lyndon B. Johnson set out to pass legislation to improve the issue. The Economic Opportunity Act was passed in 1964, setting the War on Poverty in motion. The efforts initiated by this legislation sought to bring power into disenfranchised communities long ignored by the government because of racial, ethnic, or economic level demographics. As a result of trials and tribulations discussed later in this essay, parts of the War on Poverty program did not survive but left behind frameworks that individuals in communities like Watts utilized to form effective organizations that aided their residents.

The Watts Labor Community Action Committee (WLCAC) was formed in 1965 with the mission to improve the quality of life of Watts residents. Utilizing a combination of secondary sources from individual investigations of the War on Poverty, the arrival of the program in Los Angeles, and the WLCAC's participation as part of the Community Action Program (CAP), documents created by the WLCAC, and newspaper articles from the time, this paper proves that the WLCAC succeeded in bringing "for the people, by the people" programs, community aid, and development to Watts despite the conditions of the city and the failed initiatives of the War on Poverty program. Despite their small-scale beginnings, the WLCAC alleviated some problems in the long term and has stood the test of time. This paper contributes to the historiography of the War on Poverty by highlighting the community of Watts, providing a success story with setbacks and a realization of the War on Poverty program through resilience.

A National Effort

President Lyndon B. Johnson declared the War on Poverty with the passing of the 1964 Economic Opportunity Act (EOA), the realization of an idea from President John F. Kennedy. The issue of poverty had been a contested topic between Democrats and Republicans before its rise to center stage in the 1960s. Before his assassination, President Kennedy had taken a particular interest in the state of poverty affecting much of the U.S. population. Guided by his belief that the government's duty rested in its "ability to solve social and economic problems," Kennedy called the chairman of the Council of Economic Advisers (CEA), Walter Heller, to investigate the issue further.[1] Receiving information on the issue from CEA staff consultant Robert J. Lampman, Heller concluded that poverty was more widespread than presumed and believed poverty not only to be "an economic or moral problem but also a political one." Although the consensus was to categorize poverty and civil rights issues as separate problems, they were closely associated. In the hope of passing civil rights legislation, President Kennedy had to draft initiatives disguised as educational and training programs, which would benefit all citizens and get Southern voters and representatives to support the movement to eliminate the issue of poverty. Kennedy's strategy addressed both civil rights and economic concerns. The presentation of antipoverty initiatives allowed him to work around political barriers. Representatives were more likely to support initiatives that provided a solution to the problem of poverty, which they believed was a problem of character. Therefore, legislation had to include forms of rehabilitation instead of being a system of transfers. This new antipoverty effort had to align with economists' "faith in society's ability to train, educate, and reform individuals." Considering this, Heller gathered CEA senior staff, William M. Capron, to work with Lampman to devise a program that would fit these characteristics. The idea of community action projects attracted all of those involved. Through these projects, "the federal government would directly fund service-oriented [and] coordinated efforts in localities where poor people resided in significant numbers." This would offer the ability to bypass federal bureaucracies and mobilize people at the local level.

Following the assassination of President Kennedy in 1963, President Johnson carried on with the antipoverty plans devised

[1] Carl M. Brauer. "Kennedy, Johnson, and the War on Poverty," *The Journal of American History* 69, no. 1 (1982): 103.

by CEA planners under the previous administration. He passed civil rights legislation as an homage to Kennedy and adopted the poverty issue as his own, stating that his administration was to declare an "unconditional war on poverty."[2] This legislation led to the Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO), which aimed "to coordinate federal antipoverty initiatives and empower the poor to transform their communities." The EOA required that funding be directly distributed among poorer areas and those with a higher number of nonwhite residents. Two conditions separated this piece of legislation from others: funds released to individual states were free to be used how and wherever these states deemed appropriate, and the federal government could directly fund two private and nonprofit organizations without intervention from state or local governments. These conditions were unique because they "encouraged the development of customized programs" to tackle the problem of poverty while also "[allowing] the federal government to work around widespread de jure segregation."[3] Since the OEO's grants allowed independent public and private organizations to secure funding undetermined by the "political importance" of their specific geographic area, this was an opportunity for neglected communities to seek empowerment and resources.[4] Communities throughout the nation, like Watts in Los Angeles, California, that were not politically represented or having their grievances heard by their local government could now seek aid from the federal government directly without local political intervention, or at least that was the idea.

The Fight for Equal Representation in Los Angeles

The War on Poverty arrived in Los Angeles but was resisted by city officials. In the 1950s and 1960s in Los Angeles, segregation characterized public spaces, employment, housing, and schools. Efforts elsewhere in the country and locally prompted promises toward the realization of equal civil rights, especially for

[2] Brauer, 117.

[3] Martha J. Bailey and Nicolas J. Duquette. "How Johnson Fought the War on Poverty: The Economics and Politics of Funding at the Office of Economic Opportunity." *The Journal of Economic History* 74, no. 2 (2014): 352-353.

[4] Bailey and Duquette, 383.

Black Americans. Black Angelenos entered a stage of activism to desegregate public space to experience beaches, shopping centers, theaters, restaurants, nightclubs, sporting events, and parks without everyday harassment from their white counterparts.[5] In the city, however, monumental legislation like the Equal Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 had failed to provide the widespread relief promised by their guidelines. Los Angeles was also a city segregated by the economic levels of its residents. Entire communities were suffering from widespread poverty due to high unemployment rates and overcrowding, resulting from discriminatory practices in housing and preventing the hiring of individuals of color to open positions.[6] These problems were engulfing communities composed of mainly people of color, specifically Black Americans.

Local and national organizations such as the Congress for Racial Equality (CORE) and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) documented community grievances and instances of racial discrimination experienced throughout the city. These organizations demanded change by calling the attention of these establishments and their owners for their discriminatory practices. Campaigns, public demonstrations, and everyday interactions in public spaces met with ever-present police harassment. This escalated the level of tensions between Black Angelenos and the Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD), who accepted the task of reinforcing these racial barriers. The department was severely understaffed, causing officers to be unfamiliar with their assigned patrol areas, leading them to employ prejudiced practices such as racial profiling to determine whether someone was worthy of suspicion or inquiry. Black and other nonwhite Angelenos constantly faced harassment from LAPD officers. Instances of random frisking and physical abuse from authorities were extremely common and constant. When there was a police presence in these communities, this presence typically involved harassment rather than the protection and service of residents from these authorities.

Incorporated in 1907, the community of Watts sat at the

[5] Josh Sides, *L.A. City Limits: African American Los Angeles from the Great Depression to the Present*, 1st ed., (University of California Press, 2003), 132.
[6] Lonnie T. Brown Jr. "Different Lyrics, Same Song: Watts, Ferguson, and the Stagnating Effect of the Politics of Law and Order." *Harvard Civil Rights-Civil Liberties Law Review* 52, no.2 (2017): 325.

heart of South-Central Los Angeles. In 1965, this community was over 81 percent Black, a result of changing community compositions and incoming migrants from the south of the United States.[7] On August 11, 1965, Marquette Frye, a Black man, was arrested under the suspicion of driving under the influence by California Highway Patrol officer Lee Minikus.[8] The stop was a standard procedure until tensions quickly turned as reinforcements arrived on the scene. Frye's arrest became the catalyst for what ensued for the following six days. This series of violent confrontations between the LAPD and residents of Watts became known as the Watts Riots of 1965. As the tension rose in the city, unheard concerns surrounding the growing poverty, hunger, unemployment, inadequacies in education, transportation, and recreation, as well as repeated altercations with the LAPD, continued to characterize the climate of social relations in the city. Frye's arrest was the community's breaking point. Ongoing efforts advocating for the betterment of these conditions had gone unrewarded by local governments, and the community had become restless, and six days of unrest followed. From August 11 to 17, citizens of Watts and the surrounding South Central Los Angeles area burned, looted, and wreaked havoc as a response to the continuous neglect experienced by Black Angelenos.[9]

By the third day of unrest, it was clear that the LAPD was not adequately prepared to deal with a situation of this magnitude. As a result, the state called for the assistance of the California National Guard.[10] Upon arrival, tensions heightened, fires ran rampant throughout Watts and the surrounding South Central Los Angeles area, and participants prevented emergency personnel from controlling these arson attacks. The upheaval subsided because of the continued presence of authorities and the imposition of a curfew in the Watts and surrounding South LA area.[11] There were

---

[7] U.S. Department of Commerce, "Special Census Survey of the South and East Los Angeles Areas: November 1965," *Technical Studies* 23, No. 17 (March 23, 1966): 2.

[8] Brown Jr. "Different Lyrics, Same Song," 313.

[9] Brown Jr., 306.

[10] John H. M. Laslett, "Employment, Housing, and the Struggle for Equality in the Civil Rights Era, 1965–1980." in *Sunshine Was Never Enough: Los Angeles Workers, 1880–2010*, 1st ed.
(Oakland: University of California Press, 2012), 238.

[11] Brown Jr., 315.

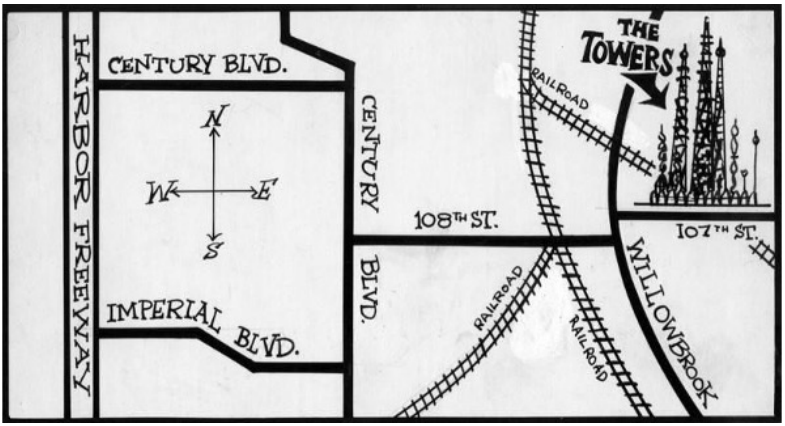


Figure 1: "Watts Towers Map," 1978. Los Angeles Public Library Photo Collection.

nearly 4,000 arrests, thirty-four deaths, and over 1,000 injuries.[12] Property damages totaled over $40 million, and 103rd Street in Watts became known as Charcoal Alley.[13] Media coverage categorized the events under the guise of lawlessness, insurrection, and conspiracy.

Following the events of 1965, the Assistant Secretary for Economic Affairs, U.S. Department of Commerce, Dr. Andrew F. Brimmer, recommended conducting a survey of the South and East Los Angeles area. This survey was partially funded by the Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO) and carried out by the Census Bureau. The results showed that about 27 percent of South Los Angeles residents lived below the poverty line, 19 percent in Willowbrook, and an astonishing 42 percent in Watts. The median income level had decreased by 8 percent from $5,100 in 1959 to $4,700 in 1965, the area had a 10 percent unemployment rate, and the median gross monthly rent increased from $69 to $78 in only five years. This report also investigated the physical state of residential buildings and housing and discovered that the amount of dilapidated units increased from 3 percent in 1960 to 5 percent in 1965. In addition, the number of deteriorating units had increased from 15 percent

[12] "Watts Riots of 1965," *Britannica Academic,* s.v., accessed November 21, 2023, https://academic-eb-com.mimas.calstatela.edu/levels/collegiate/article/Watts-Riots-of-1965/606138.

[13] *Britannica Academic,* "Watts Riots of 1965"; Budd Schulberg, "Introduction." in *From the Ashes: Voices of Watts,* ed. Budd Schulberg (New York: New American Library, 1967), 3.

to 28 percent within the same time frame.[14] Although the riot's spark was the arrest of Marquette Frye, the social, economic, and physical conditions of the area can be considered the dry leaves that fueled the fire. Classified as riots and most widely known as the Watts Riots, rebellion was the true essence of these six days. Constant neglect and overlook by Los Angeles government officials, police harassment, and continual racial discrimination culminated at this moment. This rebellion marked an instant where a community decided to stand up and make their voices heard.



Figure 2: "August 13, 1965: National Guard troops secure a stretch of 103rd Street, dubbed Charcoal Alley, in Watts to help Los Angeles Times authorities restore order."
Los Angeles Times.

The War on Poverty efforts and Los Angeles after the Watts Riots of 1965 changed the social and racial panorama of the city preceding these events, which triggered this outburst from frustrated citizens. "Black Community Transformation in the 1960s and 1970s" from *L.A. City Limits: African American Los Angeles from the Great Depression to the Present* tracks the impact of the Riots, arguing that "the riots did what more than a year of political wrangling had failed to do: it finally brought the War on Poverty to Los Angeles." The War on Poverty had a rough start in Los Angeles; even though a clause of the EOA sought to prevent the intervention of local and state governments in the release of funds to community organizations, Los Angeles officials did not comply. The Riots, as a result of this conflict between city officials and Black community organization representatives, "forced white Los Angeles to publicly face the long history of racial inequality in the city."[15] Previous

[14] U.S. Department of Commerce, "Special Census Survey of the South and East Los Angeles Areas: November 1965," 1-2.
[15] Sides, *L.A. City Limits,* 17

claims from Mayor Sam Yorty in his classification of Los Angeles as being home to "the best race relations […] of any large city in the United States" was "violently and permanently obliterated" by the 1965 Riots.[16] Systemic issues aimed to be addressed by the War on Poverty program came to the forefront, imposing that a change be made. The compromise between the OEO and African American leaders led to the development of the Economic and Youth Opportunity Agency of Greater Los Angeles (EYOA), which eventually launched the Neighborhood Adult Participation Program (NAPP) to begin allocating funds to communities and ethnic populations in need. The Watts Riots "[broke] the deadlock."[17]

The Neighborhood Adult Participation Program (NAPP) was a War on Poverty program of the Los Angeles city and county controlled EYOA, the city's designated Community Action Agency (CAA).[18] This program was created in April of 1965, with social worker and advocate Opal Jones as its director. It became one of the few community-action programs predating both the Watts Riots and the official declaration of the War on Poverty through the Youth Opportunities Board (YOB), established in 1963. The primary function of this program was to encourage citizen participation in antipoverty programs and initiatives. NAPP was a network of thirteen separate offices, each located in an area determined by the Los Angeles Welfare Planning Council to need help from antipoverty initiatives; and staffed by "poor and unemployed residents who lived in the community in which they worked." The point was for these staff members to work to better their communities, sparking initiative and motivation to formalize these programs while also preventing outsiders from coming into the community to dictate what they determined needed by residents without community input.

NAPP's focus on operating a community participation organization and the EYOA's opposition to this approach led to

[16] Sides, 169.
[17] Sides, 178.
[18] Robert Bauman. "The Neighborhood Adult Participation Project: Black-Brown Strife in the War on Poverty in Los Angeles." in *The Struggle in Black and Brown: African American and Mexican American Relations during the Civil Rights Era*, ed. by Brian D. Behnken (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2011), 104-105.

Jones's firing by EYOA director Joe Maldonado. She was reinstated shortly after opposition to the decision was made clear by individuals like Councilman Tom Bradley, but that was not the end of Jones's tribulations with the EYOA. It is important to reiterate that the EYOA was city and county-controlled, a gray area between one of the clauses of the EOA in which local government was not to interfere with local organizations receiving funding through the War on Poverty program. Jones originally opposed the appointment of the EYOA as the CAA for the city of Los Angeles out of fear of violating this exact clause. Jones feared that Mayor Sam Yorty would manipulate the agency to prevent representatives of these poor Los Angeles neighborhoods, specifically African and Mexican Americans, from receiving aid.[19] Jones's skepticism was not unwarranted. The sum of $20 million allocated for Los Angeles in War on Poverty funds was withheld for distribution for over a year because of disputes between Yorty and community representatives stemming from the controversy surrounding the community-action clause of the EOA.[20]

Tensions surrounding the racial makeup of NAPP's offices and the placement of their outposts came into question by Mexican American leaders of the program. They believed that NAPP's positioning of only three outposts in predominantly Mexican American neighborhoods headed by Mexican Americans symbolized an unequal depiction of representation.[21] Upon the declaration of the War on Poverty, Mexican American organizations like the League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC), the American G.I. Forum, and the Mexican American Political Association (MAPA) wanted to make sure funds were equally allocated between the Mexican American and the African American communities. They argued that the African American community was receiving a larger part of the allocated funds because of the events of the Watts Riots. Mexican American leaders like Congressman Edward R. Roybal and LULAC president Alfred Hernandez made statements alluding "that [African Americans] obtained War on Poverty programs and funds because they rioted, not because they were deserving."[22] For NAPP and Director Opal Jones, these accusations

[19] Bauman, 108-109.
[20] Sides, 117.
[21] Bauman, 109.
[22] Bauman, 110.

signified a battle between her leadership and staff. In a case of insubordination and malicious conduct, Jones fired the Mexican American head of the NAPP Boyle Heights outpost, which triggered a protest in which members of the Mexican American and African American communities stood at opposite ends.

Funding for these communities was being allocated based on the positioning of the NAPP outposts, locations that had been chosen based on the Los Angeles Welfare Planning Council report. This report identified areas throughout the city that needed more resources. Jones clarified that contrary to popular belief, the results of this report became the core reasons why funding was seemly and disproportionately only being distributed to African American communities, not as a result of favoritism or because of rioting.[23] A spirit of competition between Mexican American and African American members of NAPP grew stronger with repeated accusations of racial prejudice from either group against the other. This competition only intensified, culminating in the reorganization of the EYOA into the Greater Los Angeles Community Action Agency (GLACAA). Unfortunately, developing a "new" separate agency did not lessen these tensions.

The War on Poverty network, starting with its Community Action Agencies (CAA), Economic and Youth Opportunities Agency (EYOA), Neighborhood Adult Participation Program (NAPP), late arrival Greater Los Angeles Community Action Agency (GLACAA), ultimately failed in collaborating to deliver wide-reaching inclusive community-action programs to Angelenos. Political disputes and intervention from officials combined with racial tensions between Mexican American and African American community leaders drove the well-intended War on Poverty EYOA program into the ground. That is not to say that parts of the program did not survive; a framework for alleviating poverty in disenfranchised communities throughout the nation exists now. This program prompted the formation of individual independent "community-controlled antipoverty organizations" like the East Los Angeles Community Union (TELACU), Chicana Service Action Center (CSAC), and the Watts Labor Community Action Committee (WLCAC), to name a few.[24] They utilized the framework of the War on Poverty to "expand the opportunities of

[23] Bauman, 113.
[24] Bauman, 118.

African Americans and Chicanos/as in Los Angeles."[25]

Watts Labor Community Action Committee

The Watts Labor Community Action Committee (WLCAC) was established months before the Watts Riots, led by Ted Watkins, with the purpose of addressing labor injustices against community members in Watts. Since then, it has contributed parks (green spaces), localized medical services, housing building projects, public transportation, and jobs to the community since its inception.[26] This organization of Black community leaders was the "the most ambitious and successful" projects in the War against poverty and unemployment.[27] From its inception, this organization has aimed to provide the community with services that are "by and for the people." In addition, the "[WLCAC] used the War on Poverty funds not just for economic programs but also for the development and elaboration of community control."[28] This organization "[expanded] the roles available to the poor, people of color, and women in the Los Angeles War on Poverty," therefore granting agency to the community.[29]

Director of the WLCAC, Ted Watkins, was born in Meridian, Mississippi, in 1923. After an altercation with white neighborhood locals working for the local Western Union, Watkins was forced to flee Mississippi in 1938.[30] He embarked on a journey across the country to Los Angeles, where he began working as a mechanic for the local Ford Motor Company plant.[31] He soon became involved in the local United Automotive Workers (UAW) union chapter, first as a member, then moving on to be elected to the Ford Negotiating Committee, eventually

---

[25] Bauman, 119.

[26] "About Us," Watts Labor Community Action Committee (WLCAC), accessed September 8, 2023, https://wlcac.org/about-us/.

[27] Sides, 185.

[28] Kazuyo Tsuchiya, "Recasting the Community Action Program: The Pursuit of Race, Class, and Gender Equality in Los Angeles," in *Reinventing Citizenship: Black Los Angeles, Korean Kawasaki, and Community Participation* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2014), 115.

[29] Tsuchiya, "Recasting the Community Action Program," 82.

[30] Watts Labor Community Action Committee, "A Practical Man" YouTube, September 13, 2012, video, 17:22, https://youtu.be/MDmYEVxb4wI?si=vP4U-HAJzqPMWPSXz.; Sides, 185.

[31] Robert Bauman, *Race and the War on Poverty: from Watts to East L.A.* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2008), 73.

becoming the international representative for the UAW.[32] Leading and organizing came naturally to Watkins and can be seen in his involvement not only with the union but also in local organizing efforts within the community. He and his wife, Berenice, were involved in the local chapters of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and the United Civil Rights Committee.[33] He further involved himself in organizing for the residents of the housing projects he resided in before the inception of the WLCAC. In recognition of his leadership capabilities and success, UAW President Walter Reuther appointed Watkins to work full-time in the community of Watts as director of the WLCAC.[34]

The WLCAC, originally, was an organization created to battle against the issues between the EYOA, the holdup of OEO funds by Mayor Yorty, to push the OEO to move these funds along and to eventually have the WLCAC be recognized as the Community Action Agency (CAA) for the Watts area.[35] The idea sprouted from a series of discussions between Watts residents, union representatives, and academics seeking to find a solution to the unfavorable findings of social studies of the area, to begin implementing the report's recommendations, and to solve these problems.[36]

The WLCAC is a nonprofit organization dedicated to developing the Watts community and its residents.[37] In its inception, the organization was headed by an Advisory Board composed of Trade Union representatives: United Automotive Workers (UAW), the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America, Building Service Employees, the International Association of Machinists, the Teamsters, the International Longshoremen and Warehousemen, United Packinghouse Workers, among others.[38] This

[32] "A Practical Man," YouTube; Bauman, *Race and the War on Poverty,* 73.
[33] Bauman, *Race and the War on Poverty,* 73.
[34] "A Practical Man."
[35] Bauman, *Race and the War on Poverty,* 70.
[36] "Statement of Policy," *Antipoverty Program in New York City and Los Angeles: Hearings before the Subcommittee on the War on Poverty Program of the Committee on Education and Labor, House of Representatives, Eighty-Ninth Congress* (1965), 188.
[37] "Statement of Policy," 1967, SPC.2018.001, box 1, folder 3, Watts Labor Community Action Committee (WLCAC) Papers, Gerth Archives and Special Collections, California State University, Dominguez Hills, Carson, CA (hereafter cited as
"Statement of Policy," WLCAC Papers).
[38] "By-Laws," 1966, SPC.2018.001, box 1 folder 1, Watts Labor Community Action Committee (WLCAC) Papers, Gerth Archives and Special Collections, California State University, Dominguez Hills, Carson, CA (hereafter cited as

Advisory Board would be where the WLCAC would receive its funding, later joined by the Institute of Industrial Relations of the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA).[39] They funded expenses and projects and paid the salary of WLCAC Chairman Ted Watkins. In addition to this Advisory Board, the WLCAC would include an Executive Board alongside their general membership, strictly composed of residents of the Watts area, abiding by the "for the people, by the people" community action model from the War on Poverty program framework.[40] Service to the organization and participation required no dues or initiation fees. The WLCAC only required participants to show initiative and dedication to improving their community.

Exercising their union skills and organizational experiences, members of the WLCAC set out "to attempt to improve and revitalize" the community where they resided.[41] They planned to do so by "promoting and providing much-needed services to its neglected citizens" and "building permanency through the development of an economic base which the Watts area lacked and would require to become a healthy, self-sustaining segment of Los Angeles.."[42] The WLCAC was set to adopt projects unique to its mission. A community-action organization did not previously exist in the area; the WLCAC was separate from political and civil rights organizations, moving to advance in those two areas. The WLCAC utilized community input to determine the types of initiatives they would move forward with, and in cases that overlapped with efforts from other organizations, they sought to collaborate with them. The WLCAC embarked on projects that covered a wide range of areas to meet the necessities of Watts residents. These projects included health and hospital facilities, street maintenance and lighting, trash collection, jobs, housing, police and ambulance services, library and related facilities,

---

"By-Laws," WLCAC Papers); Bauman, 71.

[39] "Fact Sheet," 1967, SPC.2018.001, box 1, folder 3, Watts Labor Community Action Committee (WLCAC) Papers, Gerth Archives and Special Collections, California State University, Dominguez Hills, Carson, CA (hereafter cited as "Fact Sheet," WLCAC Papers).

[40] "By-Laws," WLCAC Papers.

[41] "Background Information," 1968, SPC.2018.001, box 1, folder 3, Watts Labor Community Action Committee (WLCAC) Papers, Gerth Archives and Special Collections, California State University, Dominguez Hills, Carson, CA (hereafter cited as "Background Information,"
WLCAC Papers).

[42] "Background Information," WLCAC Papers.

education, welfare, voter registration, business practices, and new businesses.[43]

Since one of the primary goals of the WLCAC was to bring progress to the community of Watts by providing its citizens with the services and resources they were in high need of, one of their first projects was establishing a medical facility in the area. After the 1965 Riots, California State Governor Edmund Gerald "Pat" Brown called for the creation of a commission to investigate the causes.[44] The McCone Commission Report, headed by John M. McCone, was released on December 2, 1965, just four months after the riots. The report included an analysis of the physical, social, and economic state of South Los Angeles, including a specific section titled "Welfare and Health," which surveyed the state of public welfare and health problems in the area, specifically highlighting the inadequate lack and state of medical facilities in the area. "[Facilities] to provide medical care are insufficient […] the number of doctors in the southeastern part of Los Angeles is grossly inadequate as compared with other parts of the city," and "the two large public hospitals, County General and Harbor General, are both distant and difficult to reach."[45] Watts residents had to embark on a fifteen-mile journey to receive medical attention.[46]

As a result of the experiences of Watts residents and the findings of this report, in 1965, the WLCAC set out to initiate a county-wide drive to get the plans for a medical facility in the Watts area on the ballot.[47] The Los Angeles County field office, working out of a rented building in Watts, coordinated the efforts of over eighty organizations and three hundred volunteers to get the plans approved; the initiative won support for the construction

---

[43] "Statement of Policy," *Antipoverty Program in New York City and Los Angeles: Hearings before the Subcommittee on the War on Poverty Program of the Committee on Education and Labor, House of Representatives, Eighty-Ninth Congress* (1965), 189.

[44] "Background Information," WLCAC Papers.

[45] "Violence in the City — An End or a Beginning?" McCone Commission Report. Governor's Commission on the Los Angeles Riots (December 2, 1965), 73-74.

[46] Bauman, *Race and the War on Poverty,* 76.

[47] "Watts Labor Community Action Committee Demonstrated Leadership in Community Services and Development," circa 2001, SPC.2018.001, box 1, folder 4, Watts Labor Community Action Committee (WLCAC) Papers, Gerth Archives and Special Collections, California State University, Dominguez Hills, Carson, CA (hereafter cited as "Watts Labor Community Action Committee Demonstrated Leadership in Community Services and Development," WLCAC Papers), 3; "Fact Sheet," WLCAC Papers; "Watts Labor Community Action Committee Demonstrated Leadership in Community Services and Development," WLCAC Papers.

of the medical facility with over one million votes in 1967.[48] The County Board of Supervisors began designing and constructing the "Watts-Willowbrook Southeast County General Hospital" in June 1968. The project was completed in 1971 as the "Martin Luther King, Jr. Medical Center."[49] This facility's opening not only provided the community with much-needed localized medical services but also tackled the issue of unemployment. The construction of the hospital created approximately 1,400 jobs in the area, and "more Watts residents have worked there than for any other private or public employer in the area."[50]

In 1966, the WLCAC set out to establish another one of its monumental programs, which received notable publicity and recognition from outsiders and government officials. The Community Conservation Corps (CCC) was a program for Watts area youth aged seven to twenty-one to participate in recreation, education, and community service activities.[51] The CCC was initially funded through the Office of Manpower Policy, Evaluation, and Research, the Neighborhood Youth Corps by the United States Department of Labor, and the unions on the WLCAC's Advisory Board. In this program's first year, the CCC recruited more than two thousand participants working towards "achieving its objectives of changing self-images and strengthening the sense of community pride and responsibility among a wide age range of Watts area youth."[52] One of the major highlights of the CCC was its goal of "providing [participants] with opportunities to succeed [since] many of these young people have never experienced success in even the smallest degree." The WLCAC's CCC did so through their age scale programs. Youth ages sixteen to twenty-one participated in a program named the Neighborhood Youth Corps (NYC), in which they worked for a wage of $1.27 for a total of thirty-two hours

[48] "Fact Sheet," WLCAC Papers; "Background Information," WLCAC Papers; "March of Progress," u.d., SPC.2018.001, box 1, folder 4, Watts Labor Community Action Committee (WLCAC) Paper, Gerth Archives and Special Collections, California State University,
Dominguez Hills, Carson, CA (hereafter cited as "March of Progress," WLCAC Papers).

[49] "Fact Sheet," WLCAC Papers.

[50] "Background Information," WLCAC Papers; Bauman, *Race and the War on Poverty,* 76.

[51] "Statement of Policy," WLCAC Papers, 3; "Fact Sheet,"
WLCAC Papers, 2.

[52] "Statement of Policy," WLCAC Papers, 3.



Figure 3: "Labor Committee finds ways to help young people of Watts," The Machinist, November 7, 1966. Gerth Archives and Special Collections, CSU Dominguez Hills.

per week with eight hours set aside for "counseling and remediation."[53] They followed the order of a standard workday, including punching a time clock upon arrival, before and after lunchtime, and at the end of the day to encourage their passage towards employment or schooling. Union contributions and federal funds allocated for the CCC programs funded their activities, lunch, pay, and equipment.[54] The NYC would work on projects such as the construction of play areas, community beautification by planting, and fulfilling the roles of "crew chef, clerical, audio visual, remediation, kitchen, and research aides, and as security guards." Youths ranging from fourteen to fifteen years old also worked within the program for a total of forty hours per week with compensation for sixteen hours of community service at $20.[55] The CCC Cadet Corps included participants aged seven to thirteen; they were unpaid but participated for an equal number of hours per week in which teachers assisted students with reading comprehension, math, and English.[56] The CCC also included field trips, arts and crafts, music, and drama workshops in which participants gained the opportunity to explore their city and creativity.

In addition to their physical well-being, educational, and community betterment initiatives, the WLCAC also set out to boost morale within the Black community of Watts. With this intent came the proposal for what would become known as the Watts Summer

[53] "Fact Sheet, WLCAC Papers, 2.
[54] "Labor committee finds ways to help young people of Watts," *The Machinist*, November 1966, SPC.2018.001, box 5, folder 20, Watts Labor Community Action Committee (WLCAC) Paper, Gerth Archives and Special Collections, California State University, Dominguez Hills, Carson, CA (hereafter cited as "Labor committee finds ways to help young people of Watts," WLCAC Papers).
[55] "Fact Sheet," WLCAC Papers, 2.
[56] "Labor committee finds ways to help young people of Watts," WLCAC Papers; "Fact Sheet," WLCAC Papers, 2.



Figure 4: "Participants show off items and fashion to be included in the annual Festival outside of Headquarters," 1967. Los Angeles Public Library Photo Collection.

Festival. Close to the first anniversary of the 1965 Riots, in an environment of community, came the idea to celebrate the six days that had brought devastation to Watts.[57] In this spirit, planning for the Watts Summer Festival began. The festival aimed to showcase Black culture and serve as a reminder of last year's events.[58] The planning committee was headed by Stan Sanders, Rhodes Scholar and local graduate of Jordan High School in Watts, alongside a team of other community leaders, with the support of the Los Angeles County Commission on Human Relations, the WLCAC, and the Westminster Neighborhood Association brought the first year iteration together.[59] The 1966 Watts Summer Festival featured an arrangement of concerts, poetry readings, fashion shows, parades, and beauty pageants.[60] Members of the Watts Writers Workshop, the Studio Watts Workshop, and surrounding community organizations found their place at this celebration. Jimmie Sherman of the Watts Writers' Workshop presented *Ballad from Watts* while Studio Watts performed an interpretation of Genet's *The Blacks*.[61] Streets were lined with vendors selling anything from food to jewelry, children could enjoy carnival rides, and city and country agencies could be found at their designated booths. Attendees ranged from locals to visitors from as far as

[57] David Colker and Marc Lacey, "From Watts Riot Ashes: Bright Hopes, Heartaches," *Los Angeles Times (1923-1995)*, May 10, 2017, A24.
[58] Roger Smith, "1 Week to Plan: Watts Summer Festival Draws Few to Concerts." *Los Angeles Times (1923-1995)*, August 18, 1980.
[59] Bruce M. Tyler, "The Rise and Decline of the Watts Summer Festival, 1965 to 1986." *American studies (Lawrence)* 31, no. 2 (1990): 63.
[60] John Blaine and Decia Baker, eds. "Watts Summer Festival." in *Community Arts of Los Angeles* (Los Angeles Community Art Alliance, 1973), 16.
[61] Schulberg, "Introduction," 16.

San Diego.[62] The Watts Summer Festival continued annually for decades well into the 1980s, bringing celebration to the streets of Watts for a handful of days in the month of August. The festival peaked in 1972 and 1973, hosting concerts at the Los Angeles Coliseum that attracted over 100,000 people.[63] Despite opposition and threats from outsiders, authorities, antagonistic groups, and individuals, the festival returned in the 1990s; the *Los Angeles Sentinel* dubbed it "Los Angeles' oldest African American cultural celebration."[64]

The War on Poverty had been declared a year prior with the passing of the 1964 Economic Opportunity Act (EOA), the Watts Riots had just swept through the community, and the WLCAC set out to "[open] the doors of economic opportunity for African Americans and [encourage] community action" and has continued to do so since its inception almost sixty years ago in 1965.[65] The War on Poverty program was designed to aid communities directly through funding provided by the federal government, eliminating the trouble of having to go through state and local officials and finally bringing much-needed attention and aid to the "problem" of poverty. The War on Poverty's purpose was to grant agency to disenfranchised communities like Watts in South Los Angeles, which the government had long ignored because of its racial, ethnic, and economic levels. This plan, although well-intended, was not carried out successfully.

With the passing of the EOA came the establishment of satellite offices throughout the nation, concentrated on areas with high poverty and unemployment. The Economic and Youth Opportunities Agency of Greater Los Angeles (EYOA) was established, bringing about the Neighborhood Adult Participation Program (NAPP), headed by Opal Jones, as the local Community Action Agency (CAA) for the city. Both the EYOA and NAPP were unsuccessful and surrounded many government and political opinions and racial prejudice in and outside of both initiatives that hindered its growth and delivery to the community.

Despite the shortcomings of the War on Poverty program initiatives and the ultimate failure of the program, it successfully accomplished one vision effectively. The frameworks created by

---

[62] Tyler, "The Rise and Decline of the Watts Summer Festival, 1965 to 1986," 64.
[63] Tyler, 68.
[64] "Watts Summer Festival." *Los Angeles Sentinel*, 1993.
[65] Bauman, *Race and the War on Poverty,* 87.

individuals in communities like Watts were utilized to form effective organizations that aided their residents. Organizations like the WLCAC have succeeded in bringing "for the people, by the people" programs, community aid, and development to Watts despite the conditions of the city and the failed initiatives of the War on Poverty program. Through their work in bringing to fruition the Martin Luther King, Jr. Medical Center, the Community Conservation Corps (CCC) creation, and organizing the Watts Summer Festival, they have stood the test of time and continue to be an "indispensable organization to Watts."[66] My prediction is that they will continue to be for decades to come.

[66] "Letter from Councilman John S. Gibson to Chairman Ted Watkins," October 10, 1966, SPC.2018.001, box 5, folder 20, Watts Labor Community Action Committee (WLCAC) Papers, Gerth Archives and Special Collections, California State University, Dominguez Hills, Carson, CA.