The Hidden War:
FINDING OPPORTUNITY AFTER 54 YEARS
INTRODUCTION: MEMORY LANE MILESTONES  

THE OPPORTUNITIES  

Reframe: Poverty or independence?  

Rethink: Mission driven or government directed?  

Modernize: Social services or social innovation?  

NEXT STEPS: THE GREAT SOCIETY FORWARD™  

THE UNPACK™ PROMISE: SAVE (10%) OF THE CSBG  

ABOUT DARWIN: A CENTER FOR SOCIAL IMPACT
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“The solution to these problems does not rest on a massive program in Washington, nor can it rely solely on the strained resources of local authority.”


Assessing the state of poverty in a nation requires addressing five obvious and logical questions:

1. What percentage of the population is experiencing poverty,
2. What is the demographic and psychographic profile of those living in poverty,
3. What are the factors that influence the propensity to fall into or the inability to climb out of poverty,
4. What are the nation’s leaders doing to reduce the incidence of poverty via political will and program leadership, and
5. Who is working on the front lines in the nation’s communities to manage change?

In this report, we’ll address the less obvious questions. This report does not promise to serve as a data-heavy dive into any one of the five elements—there are many noble organizations who have been crunching early data and monitoring modern plot lines. Instead, The Hidden War: Finding Opportunity After 54 Years functions as an interdisciplinary assessment of the inter- and intra-workings of each of the questions. The webbing, if you will.

We specifically turned our attention to Community Action Agencies, The Community Action Partnership, and the Community Services Block Grant (CSBG)—the front lines of the original and lingering War on Poverty. After two years of research, exploration, and collaboration, we can now point to clues, correlations, and insights that changemakers and policymakers can harness to advance the cause and optimize outcomes.

As a center for social impact with roots in Washington and wings across the nation, Darwin has the compelling advantage of sharing both a grassroots and a grasstops perspective of the most pressing social issue areas along with offering a unique combination of business acumen, human-centered design ingenuity, and policy sophistication.

In our mission to move society forward, we have developed a theory of change which begins with management consulting and concludes with policy change. Within the continuum, we function as a “think-do tank” harnessing learnings from individual engagements to produce scalable social innovation models that can yield delightfully disruptive systems change.

Why the push for systems change? The anti-poverty sector is powered by a significant portion of U.S. tax dollars as well as hefty fundraising sums. We need to put those funds to work. According to the CSBG 2016 Annual Report, in FY2015 states allocated over $596.5 million, or 92 percent [of the total CSBG appropriations], to the 1,026 community action agencies who serve 15.6 million individuals and 6.5 million families.
Tucked away in neighborhoods across the nation—rural, suburban, and urban—and often housed in nondescript office buildings lies a hidden cause. Flying the flag of a movement once illuminated in lights and fueled by a national call-to-arms, what remains is a time capsule teeming with legacy and displaying artifacts of a noble promise. The War on Poverty. President Lyndon B. Johnson. 1964.

A BRIEF HISTORY FOR CONTEXT

In 1964, Lyndon B. Johnson (LBJ) was confronted with a harsh state of affairs: the economic despair and human suffering that resulted from The Dust Bowl, The Great Migration, and The Great Depression compounded into a national crisis—20% of Americans were living in poverty. Johnson’s resulting promise was to put an “end to poverty and racial injustice” in America. The sweeping plan, (The Great Society, the War on Poverty, and its centerpiece legislation, the Economic Opportunity Act (EOA)) was catalyzed by a combination of staggering statistics and mounting political pressure to create equality in the midst of the Civil Rights Movement. Time was ripe to take action. The Economic Opportunity Act, housed within the Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO), included provisions for programs such as Head Start, Job Corps, Work-study, VISTA, Neighborhood Youth Corps, and CAPS (Community Action Programs).

ROCKY START, UNCLEAR PURPOSE

Despite LBJ’s grand vision, the legacy remains controversial. While some of the EOA programs have since been rescinded, others have become ubiquitous household names. One program in particular, however, has weathered a storm from the start. Community action agencies (formerly Community Action Programs) were thrust into the crossfire of federal and local politics leaving questions of purpose and position unanswered. This led to early controversy that disrupted the power balance in local establishments as the mandate to create “maximum feasible participation” meant shifting voice and power to the local poor to dictate where federal funds would be used to help improve their lives. Today those organizations who carry the community action agency federal designation continue to struggle with purpose as they fly under the radar in anonymity.
If you ask 100 people what community action means, you’ll get 100 different responses, even from people who deal with it every day. To some, it is the Peace Corps self-help concept, to someone else it’s a quick dash to the federal treasury, to someone else it means you can do anything that isn’t a felony.

— Representative Sam M. Gibbons [Dem. Fla.], *Congressional Quarterly*, 1967

**THE BIPARTISAN BUDGET BUCKLE**

Sadly, Newton’s Third Law quickly applied to the War on Poverty. With the same great force that championed the legislation, an equal backlash force responded over nine presidential administrations that reflected a universal commitment to dismantle the OEO, defund the EOA, and demand measurable results. Positioned on the defense, numerous historical accounts of the community action programs expose their vulnerable and fragile nature. Most notably: “Distracted by War, EOA is Saved,” “Turbulent Times for OEO,” and “[Community action agencies] were ‘Grandfathered.’” It may come as a surprise to many to learn that the “Poverty Programs” were controversial across party lines, starting with Johnson himself.

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**JOHNSON**

I recommend that the Economic Opportunity Act be amended...to help local community action agencies define their purpose more precisely and improve their planning, auditing and personnel systems.

— *Special Message to the Congress: America’s Unfinished Business, Urban and Rural Poverty*

**NIXON**

Too often the lines of responsibility in OEO programs have been badly blurred; too often there has been no method for determining whether a program has succeeded or failed and what is responsible for failure and success.

— *Statement on the Office of Economic Opportunity*
introduction // memory lane milestones

FORD

Now, we are all against poverty—Republicans, Democrats and Independents—but with a situation like this I say that it’s time to take the profit out of poverty!

— Eisenhower Birthday Dinner

REAGAN

With the best of intentions, government created a poverty trap that wreaks havoc on the very support system the poor need most to lift themselves out of poverty: the family. Dependency has become the one enduring heirloom, passed from one generation to the next, of too many fragmented families.

— Address Before a Joint Session of Congress on the State of the Union

BUSH

America began a war on poverty more than three decades ago, a story of good intention but conflicted results. There were important successes. No doubt about it, there were some good successes.Seniors were lifted out of poverty. Poor families got basic health care. Disadvantaged children were given a headstart in life. Yet, many Americans, in Bob Woodson’s words, were injured by the helping hand.

— Remarks on the Welfare Reform Agenda

OBAMA

People want a hand up, not a handout. Are there people who abuse the system? Yes, both at the bottom and at the top.

— Interviews by Univision Noticias (Spanish News)
BATTLE FOR CSBG
From the beginning, and as the above administrations’ sentiments convey, the community action agencies’ program budgets were continuously under the threat of partial or complete defunding. After much turbulence, in 1981, President Reagan eventually introduced a new way to distribute funds through the Community Services Block Grant (CSBG), which placed the Community Action Programs and other recipients under more intense scrutiny. Naturally and subsequently, five years later, two national advocacy units were formed—the Community Action Partnership and the National Community Action Foundation. Ever since, the primary focus has turned to preserving funding streams and reacting to new grant regulations. How did we lose sight of the vision? How did the War on Poverty become the perennial Battle for Community Services Block Grant (CSBG)?

More on community action agencies’ history here.

If the politicians who fund our programs don’t recognize that we are part of a large network, we would be easier to cut.

— Frontline community action leadership

To illustrate: according to their blog as of Spring 2018, National Association for State Community Services Program (NASCAP) has written about CSBG more than 600% as often as poverty.
FAST FORWARD 54 YEARS
Today, most community action agencies begin their story with history. As time passes, the desire to begin at the beginning is becoming overly burdensome and irrelevant. The innocuous attempt is analogous to introducing oneself using this adlib “Hello, my name is [name], I was born on [date] to [mother’s name] and [father’s name] in [city, town], a [adjective describing the economy]. My ancestors came to this country from [country name].”

One might inquire: What percentage of Americans know this story, or care to indulge in a mini-political history lesson? How is that relevant to the human story behind this cause?

“When you start in 1964 you can see their eyes glaze over.”

— Frontline community action leadership

Let’s turn back to that hidden cause. Who are these potential heroes? Community action agencies—our communities’ best kept secrets. How can we reinvigorate the passion and capitalize on the infrastructure across our nation to once and for all conclude the war?
Two years ago, Darwin did not realize we would be crafting a groundbreaking report and developing innovative solutions for one of the most pressing issues of our lifetime. And yet, as a sort of accidental innovation, here we are. Our journey began with a typical RFP (request for proposal) response to a community action agency in Pennsylvania who was looking for a partner to “effectively engage our stakeholders (public, donors, clients), increase awareness of our good work and programs to new audiences, increase donated revenue, launch a compelling communications program that succinctly incorporates our diverse programs and effectively tells our story.” Within months, the RFPs mushroomed across the nation—Nebraska, Michigan, New Mexico, and even Washington, D.C., from the Community Action Partnership headquarters itself: help us.

As a privately-funded company, we dedicated enormous resources for our consultants and researchers to discover the state of affairs of the nation’s 54 year-long attempt to develop the largest social services network chartered to eliminate poverty. We worked on the ground at the 2017 CAPCON (Community Action Partnership’s annual national convention) to meet privately with the 1,000+ members; interviewed and surveyed more than 300+ frontline employees, local government supporters, board members, and funders; and hosted a free competition to generate energy around the possibilities. The result: we uncovered the shared symptoms, which in turn, we discovered, demand shared solutions.
Across the nation, the public and nonprofit sectors are awakening. The cultural, political, and media shifts that have occurred since mid- to late-20th century nonprofits chartered their missions and governments penned their legislation have created overwhelming pressure to reclaim relevance and resonance with stakeholders. Branding, design, and technology—common tools of the trade for the private sector—have emerged as a potential bridge between intent and outcome for noble causes.

Community action agencies could easily serve as a poster child for this call to action. From its original debut to every modern budget cycle, brochure, and board meeting, they’ve struggled with the insurmountable challenge to shape a strong narrative and promote an identity with a clear purpose, strong position, and unwavering promise. A solid messaging frame can endure the harshest fiscal years, galvanize supporters, and empower leaders to chart the course ahead.

POVERTY OR INDEPENDENCE?
Which side would you bet on? Which team would you play on? Those simple, yet provocative questions underscore the seriousness of the frame decision. Words have power. When unpacked, choosing to promote poverty in the modern context could prove futile to those intending to garner public support, fiscal commitment, and media traction. In a time where empowerment and equality are the common refrain, creating a class of “others” is an illogical disservice to advancing the cause.

THE #NOTME MOVEMENT?
Who wants to be diagnosed as having “poverty?” A movement that has been swollen with violent and ostracizing language like poverty-fighting, War on Poverty, eradicate, eliminate, and break the cycle conjures a negative connotation that plagues the narrative prohibiting widespread adoption and ambassadorship. Compounding the issue is the weak internal communications capacity. Websites still read 1995 and social media presences are often mere obligatory newsletter replacements. The advent of the internet and social media snuck up on the nonprofit sector. Now’s the opportunity to reframe the message for the modern media context and provide latitude for brand building and democratization of the message for the masses.

ACRONYMS ARE DOA
Those on the frontlines have to reconsider their message given their distance from the Hill. With a narrative rooted in bureaucracy, the message is riddled with cryptic acronyms and fractured programs resulting in a perception of government identity. But perception is reality. Community action agencies must think beyond federal designation and funding streams and begin charting their course under a unifying message that provides a powerful throughline.
reframe // poverty or independence?

“Our aim is not only to relieve the symptoms of poverty but to cure it—and above all, to prevent it.”
— Lyndon B. Johnson, “State of the Union Address,” January 8, 1964

**FUNDERS FUND “DONE”**

Gone are the days of pity pandering. Funders are thinking bigger and more strategically. The public demands the hopeful optimism that a results-oriented narrative can deliver. While most community action agencies receive core funding from CSBG, the looming threat of reduced revenue is real. As organizations attempt to diversify funding streams to shore up the balance sheet, they are increasingly turning to private donors through individual fundraising and institutional development. The opportunity exists to shift focus from counting heads to mission complete.

**PROGRESS IS PURPLE**

East of “social justice warriors” and west of “Trump country” lies opportunity for innovation and progress. Yes, the sands have shifted. Yet, with a longer aperture, they always have been. The cause has ballooned beyond the borders of 1964 and into unchartered territory—new situational, generational, and cultural realities are clouding the solution. The face of poverty in our nation no longer reflects simple, two-dimensional dichotomies—white or black, Appalachia or big city urban. New on the scene are: debt-ridden millennials without a plan; 20th-century industry Americans with outdated skills; opioid-affected families and communities grasping for help; refugees and immigrants starting from square one; descendants of persistent, generational hardship; and older Americans with no support. Meanwhile, a recent Harvard study revealed the obvious fact that solving poverty takes a upstream-downstream intervention, a two generational approach. Are those our biggest and best ideas? To effectively navigate turbulent political and public discourse, organizations must step outside their comfort zones and echo chambers to find shared core beliefs, mutual benefits, and breakthrough strategies.

“It used to be that if you were poor, you just didn’t have the basic things, like maybe you didn’t have a washer and dryer, and you were able to get by. Now what I see with families is if you’re poor, you’re poor in every avenue: emotionally, supportwise, familywise.”
— Kelly Wells, “NPR, War on Poverty 50 Years Later,” May 2017

Image from the article Audacious Philanthropy by Susan Wolf Ditkoff and Abe Grindle
r rethink // mission driven or government directed?

21st-century nonprofits must rise to the occasion of tending to their missions with the rigor and dedication of an independent organization. While it’s true that many nonprofits were founded and launched operations with single funding streams, they must resist the temptation of settling for the status quo and falling into the trap of becoming a “government contractor.” Today’s strongest nonprofits avoid mission creep, develop a culture of innovation, design operations around those they are trying to serve, and actively pursue diverse funding streams which include individuals, institutions, and fee-for-service.

Community action agencies use 1964 and the ensuing policy and budget cycles timeline as their North Star. The legacy mission dominates the conversation and status quo so much so that often the more critical parallel of their own organization’s business strategies, including mission, vision, and strategic planning are missing.

“For the war against poverty will not be won here in Washington. It must be won in the field, in every private home, in every public office, from the courthouse to the White House.”
— Lyndon B. Johnson, “State of the Union Address,” January 8, 1964

“I want us to be better than the funding sources. I worry branding becomes, “We are CSBG.” That’s not right. I think we need to have our vision, not a funding source vision.”
— Frontline community action leadership

INDEPENDENTS PROMOTING INDEPENDENCE

It’s time to sharpen focus, especially given the Battle for CSBG. Early along the legacy timeline, these compassionate and dedicated groups were designated independent 501(c)(3)s. Hitching identity and viability to a funding stream guarantees time well spent on mission will be misdirected to the whims and desires of shifting policymakers. Anxiety-filled federal advocacy campaigns, burdensome and consuming quarterly reporting, and prescribed and restrictive program mandates have become the norm over the possibilities of local grassroots campaigns and events, impact milestones and celebrations, and innovative programs tailored to the local community. The harsh realities of closing operations or merging with neighboring community action agencies dots the retrospective, further underscoring the argument to abandon the blind servant leadership in exchange for bold new directions.

WISDOM AND WORDS FROM WASHINGTON

While the Community Action Partnership offers a membership model for those organizations who receive CSBG funding, they are designed to be a conduit from Washington. Their mission is to “strengthen, promote, represent and serve our network of member agencies to assure that the issues of poverty are effectively presented and addressed.” Federally-based advocacy groups are commonplace in the nonprofit sector. These units are intended to keep an ear to the ground and boots on the Hill, monitoring appropriations threats, policy changes, and program guidelines that might affect the government contractors downstream. Credit should be given to the DC-based CSBG guardians. They actively pursue opportunities for members to convene around shared learning objectives and develop frameworks to help organizations meet or exceed CSBG criteria—keeping the lights on the and funding flowing.
rethink // mission driven or government directed?

IS COMMUNITY ACTION A PROPER NOUN?
Proper nouns convey strength, uniqueness, ownership, and recognition. While 1,000+ organizations carry the community action agency designation, yet only a fraction carry the phrase “community action” in their name. Today, the general notion of community action as a grassroots movement has spread across sectors and issues, rendering the phrase a common noun. Taking a trademark lens, this would fall under the category generic term: “A generic term is not capable of serving the essential trademark function of distinguishing the products or services of a business from the products or services of other businesses, and therefore cannot be afforded any legal protection.”

OUT OF MANY, NONE
What are the rules? Are there rules? “To hell with the rules.” There’s a clear identity crisis plaguing community action agencies. When identity becomes tied to grants management and organizational charts reflect a clear delineation of people-by-program-by-funding, silos stand tall and missions remain fragmented, further diluting the opportunity for strong leadership, communications, and impact. But these organizations are so much more than the sum of their parts. Keystone programs like the darlings Head Start and LIHEAP dominate the identity and even overshadow the opportunity for an independent organization to stand firm on a platform of purpose and position. Communicating a story to clients, funders, and community supporters becomes a game of chance, like threads blowing in the wind.
REMEMBER THE FLETCHERS
In 1964, the populist movement took the nation by storm as neighbors rallied alongside neighbors with the help of LBJ’s famous public relations tour. But we have moved well beyond The Fletchers. As the decades have passed, public and political support for the poor has waned and the image of poverty is a stark departure from its original charter. Yet organizations continue to put funders in focus as their primary audiences—not the people they were tasked to serve. Defining audiences and dissecting their needs is paramount to designing and managing services in a community. Today Tom Fletcher’s family still lives in poverty and his daughter-in-law works for the local Head Start program—a common practice where upward mobility involves employing the local poor with programs intended to create independents.

More on the longitudinal outcomes of the Fletchers here.
operators,” and VISTA volunteers often fill the role of task-based communications staff. There is no C-suite slot for a seasoned communication strategist. In fact, we uncovered a rule of thirds. One third of community action agencies—often with small budgets or under the threat of mergers and acquisitions—use the national advocacy brand and strategies that are passed down from the Community Action Partnership. While these strategies and tactics are dated and unrelated to local communication, they’re an easy substitute. Another third has broken away completely from legacy to chart their own course with strategy, funding, and communications—flying independently, while still preserving some CSBG ties. The final third has a choice while straddling the divide: allegiance to the halls of power or the real streets and rural roads of America?

The wise words from Tom Fletcher—after enduring a 5-year routine of reporter’s journeying to check in to see “if he was still poor”—reflect the exhaustion and disbelief of the unwavering pursuit of legacy:

“I’m getting tired of it,”

Fletcher told an Associated Press reporter in 1994, the 30th anniversary of the War on Poverty.

‘After all this time, I’d think they would be letting it go.’”
Look up. Look around. Today’s modern nonprofits are taking the world by storm. Recent trends have bolstered the potential of the entire sector to assert itself as composed of savvy altruists, authorities in action who command the attention of deep-pocketed funders and a cause-driven public. Amid the buzz of global tech innovation, social innovation is taking its rightful place in the ecosystem. Thought leaders are challenging long-held beliefs: those who once maintained thin management budgets now recruit top talent and invest in success; those who once considered marketing and advertising to be four-letter words from the private sector now consider brand a top priority to elevate stature and discourse; those who once led with grant and program management tacticians now employ left brain strategists and creative visionaries to collaboratively to design systems that work to fulfill missions through theories of change.

It appears these trends haven’t been adopted by many community action agencies. While some standardizations have come out of CSBG and the Community Action Partnership to help facilitate strategic planning and operations management, a general culture of innovation is missing.

*modernize // social services or social innovation?*

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“...to give promise of progress toward elimination of poverty or a cause or causes of poverty through developing employment opportunities, improving human performance, motivation, and productivity, or bettering the conditions under which people live, learn, and work.”

— Economic Opportunity Act, Title II, SEC 202

**CONCEIVED TO BE INNOVATIVE**

Community action agencies were designed to innovate. Descend into our nation’s communities, work on the front lines with those struggling to achieve independence, and design programs that work. Today social scientists and nonprofit leaders would call this approach finding and addressing the *social determinants of poverty*. The necessity to move from service provider to social innovator is stronger than ever, and sister sectors have new research, models, and energy from which to learn and take action. Beyond ROMA (*Results-Oriented Management and Accountability*) and CCAP (*Certified Community Action Professional*) a whole new world awaits those courageous enough to commit to excellence.

**YOU KNOW YOU ARE RIPE FOR DISRUPTION WHEN EVEN THE “GREAT COMMUNITY ORGANIZER” HAS DOUBTS...**

Social program funding is no longer an issue of partisan politics. As national debt swells, all budget options are on the table. Let’s rise above the fear of funding cuts and establish a position rooted in purpose and steered toward independent missions.

“Since they were instituted, community service block grants have helped to support community action organizations in cities and towns across the country... These are the kinds of programs that President Obama worked with when he was a community organizer, so this cut is not easy for him. Yet for the past 30 years, these grants have been allocated using a formula that does not consider how good a job the recipients are doing. The president is proposing to cut financing for this grant program in half, saving $350 million, and to reform the remaining half into a competitive grant program, so that funds are spent to give communities the most effective help.”

— Jacob J. Lew, Director of the Office of Management and Budget (OMB), *The Easy Cuts Are Behind Us*, February 5, 2011
modernize // social services or social innovation?

“'The concept of the poor's involvement is good, but I think the concept got all messed up...' He said he did not think 'you should turn over the whole war on poverty to the poor any more than you should turn the hospitals over to the sick.'”

— Representative Sam M. Gibbons [Dem. Fla.] Congressional Quarterly, 1967

MORE THAN A PHOTO OP, AN OPPORTUNITY

“Maximum feasible participation,” meet human-centered design. Tom Fletcher didn’t have to die poor. Despite Representative Gibbons’ and others’ disdain for the requirement of maximum feasible participation—that people could speak for themselves to solve their challenges—his criticism was actually foreshadowing an emerging business management discipline.

The noble call to give voice to those being served is now galvanizing the private, public, and academic sectors: human-centered design and design thinking. It was Apple’s claim to fame. Listen to the people, first. Take the photo later.

“Mike Markkula—one of the first investors in Apple...wrote his principles in a one-page paper titled 'The Apple Marketing Philosophy' that stressed three points. The first was empathy, an intimate connection with the feelings of the customer: 'We will truly understand their needs better than any other company.' The second was focus: 'In order to do a good job of those things that we decide to do, we must eliminate all of the unimportant opportunities.' The third and equally important principle, awkwardly named, was impute. It emphasized that people form an opinion about a company or product based on the signals that it conveys. 'People DO judge a book by its cover,' he wrote. 'We may have the best product, the highest quality, the most useful software, etc; if we present them in a slipshod manner, they will be perceived as slipshod; if we present them in a creative, professional manner, we will impute the desired qualities.'”

SLOW AND STEADY WORKS IN CHILDREN’S BOOKS, NOT SOCIAL CAUSES
Tortoise, meet hare. While community action agencies stood at podiums telling the story of 1964, a young innovator found a gap and filled it. Kirsten Lodal, founder of LIFT, rose from a “college sophomore in 1998” to leading “one of the foremost anti-poverty organizations in the country.” Today LIFT is making impact by using their proprietary theory of change to empower families to break the cycle of poverty.

*LIFT, Theory of Change*

She stands clear as a model for what’s possible when courage, insight, and determination are channeled toward change. LIFT is poised for scale, primed for impact, and positioned on solid ground with the support of nationally-recognized private funders.
But most of all, the Great Society is not a safe harbor, a resting place, a final objective, a finished work. It is a challenge constantly renewed, beckoning us toward a destiny where the meaning of our lives matches the marvelous products of our labor.


Darwin’s vision is simple: catalyze progress on legacy causes through the practical application of modern methods rooted in research. Insights from The Hidden War: Finding Opportunity After 54 Years can change the way we address poverty.

As momentum grows across the nation, now is the chance to lead the charge. Let’s build a culture of independence for all our neighbors. Combine wisdom from Washington with experience from the front lines.

CONNECTING DOTS. CHANGING SYSTEMS.
From Georgia to Alaska, Pennsylvania to Maryland, and Missouri to Michigan, we heard the struggle to increase community awareness, diversify funding sources, unify siloed program brands, and promote a promise. The opportunities have been uncovered. With the release of this report, we are sharing actionable national insights to move to next steps. We’ll continue to engage according to our three-pronged theory of change as we move deeper into our commitment to contribute to the theoretical and practical issue of poverty.

CONSULTING
The cornerstone of our practice is management consulting. We continue to partner with changemakers across the nation to inform and influence organizational outcomes. Our proven framework—smartdesign™—is designed to expose barriers, close gaps, and chart the course. Our process is led by an interdisciplinary team that unites business acumen, human-centered design ingenuity, and policy sophistication.

SYSTEMS INNOVATION
Systems change requires a deep, structural movement of the status quo. Our process translates in-depth analysis and robust discourse into strategic insight to create solutions that move the world. Our unpack™ poverty initiative works upstream and downstream to align visions, challenge entrenched methods, and optimize systems to transform the entire landscape on a grand scale. Learn more at madebydarwin.com/unpack/poverty/

POLICY CHANGE
The ultimate wins are modernized legislation and refined program design. We will conduct listening sessions with local, state, and federal policymakers as well as influential funders to inform next-generation change. Our investments are long-term and focused on developing proofs of concept followed by groundswell support.
the unpack™ promise // save (10%) of the CSBG

Following our national study, the shared symptoms we encountered across community action agencies indicated the need for shared solutions. Steered by insights from our research, we have developed four off-the-shelf strategy models based on the nuances in approach we witnessed between agencies. The products are ready-made, impact on demand. With this systems innovation, we are able to offer our unpack™ solutions at 50% less than our typical market rates for consulting, communications, and technology—all without sacrificing face-to-face consulting time with the agency.

The frequency of RFPs for strategic and creative consulting emerging from community agencies across the country reflects the size of the investments being made into similar services. In our experience, many agencies have a tendency to gravitate toward working with a local marketing agency who “is familiar with the community and has nonprofit experience.” Unfortunately, the result is often a graphic design solution for a strategic issue created by a partner who has only a surface understanding of the legacy of community action and its current context.

When community action agencies pivot to adopting unpack™ solutions, changemakers and policymakers are poised to make a strategic and a fiscal breakthrough. With these informed solutions available at significantly lower costs, modern strategy and communications platforms are accessible for even small-budget agencies. As each agency adopts one of the four models, the network harnesses the opportunity for national alignment on public messaging, increased recognition, and exponential human impact. And, as illustrated below, the potential national costs savings is nearly $60 million, which reflects almost 10% of the annual CSBG spending, or $596.5 million, that is allocated to community action agencies.

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We can’t rely on [Washington] to solve local problems. We are confident that this will work.

— Diane Rogers, Community Services Director
Concerted Services Inc.

Darwin has connected the dots.

— Bryan Singleton, Executive Director
Concerted Services Inc.

I appreciated your incorporation of the history while also framing the issues within our present context. The way forward is both inspiring and concrete.

— Kathryn Lawler, MPP, Executive Director
Atlanta Regional Collaborative for Health Improvement
about darwin // a center for social impact

Welcome to Darwin. As a center for social impact, we partner with changemakers locally, nationally, and globally to solve complex issues.

Founded by a trailblazer convinced the pace of progress can be accelerated, we assemble the sharpest minds and introduce new methods to bridge the gap between intent and outcome.

Our management and design experts inform solutions that reframe narratives, rethink systems, and modernize policy. Since 2014, we’ve worked at the intersection of changemaker and policymaker to provide impact services: strategy, design, media, transformation.

86,000 people. 28 missions. 9 issue areas. Society forward™

ABOUT THE AUTHOR
Laura Kisailus, Founder and CEO

Madison Avenue creative turned D.C. diplomat turned social disruptor. Laura is an award-winning creative strategist with 15 years combined experience in private, public, and nonprofit sectors. She has led transformations for changemakers locally, nationally, and internationally.

Early learning from Rutgers University Business School. Grit from taking Rosetta Stone to a successful IPO. Perspective from managing the State Department’s digital diplomacy. Ongoing life skills from raising three budding disruptors alongside a very patient man.

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