

THE WAR ON
POVERTY
IN NEWARK, N.J.

STATEMENTS BY

MRS. LOUISE PATTERSON
MRS. JOANNE ROBINSON
MRS. BESSIE SMITH —
MRS. BILLIE LASSITER —
MR. THOMAS HAYDEN

These statements were presented to
Adam Clayton Powell's Congressional
Committee investigating the War on
Poverty, April, 1965

Statement by Tom Hayden, staff, Students
for a Democratic Society and Newark
Community Union Project, Newark, N.J.

Since early 1964, about 200 organizers of Students for a Democratic Society have worked with poor and voiceless people in Baltimore, Cambridge (Md.) Chester (Pa.), Philadelphia, Trenton, Newark, Jersey City, Cleveland, Chicago, Cairo (Ill.), Hazard (Ky.), and San Francisco. In most of these places we contributed to forming a local movement against the unfair and staggering problems faced by poor people. We are not interested in creating "SDS locals", but in taking the time required to build strong community organizations which the people control. These organizations, we feel, should be the essence of the war on poverty. The poor have been "invisible" to the majority of Americans these last few years largely because they have been unorganized. Only through concerted movements of, by and for the poor will the nation receive a true measure of its ills and a true perspective on what needs to be done. Anything short of this will leave us in the present situation where the poor have no role in defining or meeting their own problems, a situation in which it is not surprising that the proposed solutions do not work.

The local people with whom we work are mostly critical of the government's present war-on-poverty, though they hope very much that it might work. This committee already has heard the Citizens United for Adequate Welfare charge the Cleveland program with failing to represent the poor. Miners of eastern Kentucky, unemployed whites in Chicago, experienced civil rights veterans in Cambridge-- these people, and many others, are making known their objections to the exclusive and undemocratic character of these programs at the local levels. In case after case, the poverty money is a prize divided by big corporations, political factions, and local social agencies seeking to expand--the very groups which are presiding over, and which in our opinion must bear much of the responsibility for, the uncorrected poverty throughout the country.

In Newark, N.J. a staff of 15 persons, half from the local community, work on subsistence for the Newark Community Union Project, a grass-roots movement formed by SDS last summer. We know Newark to be a city of extreme and explosive poverty, affecting perhaps one-third of its 400,000 citizens. It is a city in which the poor, especially the Negro poor, are unorganized and unrepresented in the chambers of power. Yet it is one city in which at least an effort is being made to involve the poor in the formation of the anti-poverty agency. We think it is worthwhile to point up some dilemmas which Newark faces in trying to put a democratic program into practise. What does it take to involve the poor in social action about their own lives? Many wonder if the government is prepared to pay the cost, in dollars and cents, of the anti-poverty fight; but our question goes deeper: is the government prepared to pay the political costs of this kind of change?

Perhaps our unique contribution to this committee's hearing rests on our actual experience in organizing poor people, mostly Negroes in high-rent tenements, unemployed or on welfare, people excluded from the "mainstream" of American life. What we have learned about organizing is important, we feel, for the success of the government's poverty program. We believe, first, that effective organizing can be done only if there is a thorough identification with the daily lives of the people. We live in the neighborhood, we eat on about 50 cents each per day, we wake up in the morning with the ceiling falling in. We must impress people that we are not "above" their conditions. More than that, we must demonstrate that their conditions--especially the condition of being excluded and powerless in a society we do not like--will be our conditions, too, until we together change those conditions. Above all, we must make clear our unwavering respect for their ideas, their humanity,

and their ability to take matters into their own hands. All our organizing is meant to make people feel that talking and taking action is worthwhile and within their power to carry on through an organization of their own making. Finally, we believe it is correct and necessary to reject any explanations of poverty which blame the poor; instead, we hold responsible the private and public institutions which discriminate against and harm the poor people. It is only through the realization that the fault is social, and not personal, that someone can find the power to do something to change conditions.

This kind of "democracy", if it can be called that, is not tolerable within the framework of the Newark anti-poverty program. The non-profit corporation set up to administer the program, called the United Community Corporation, intends to be as democratic as possible. It has an open membership policy, elections of a rotating group of trustees, open "task forces" to set broad policy guides on issues, and several local "area boards" which are to be organized by grass-roots people. It has a director, Mr. Cyril Tyson (formerly with HARYOU in New York), who realizes the need to involve the poor. The Manual of Procedure itself declares that the approach must be to break free of the "traditional dependency-producing social service process" of the past. But, in reality, the UCC is dominated by everyone but the poor. The reasons for this lie in the apparent need to satisfy the various, existing power groups, the over-bureaucratic structure of the program itself, and the middle-class style and atmosphere in meetings.

Despite the presence of men with great good intention in the program, the real power being respected in the UCC is that of the major existing establishments. For instance, millions of dollars are being awarded, without the consideration of a single poor person, to the City of Newark for a Neighborhood Youth Corps and a senior citizens group, to Essex County and the Newark Housing Authority for re-training programs, and to the Welfare Federation for putting relief clients to work. The reasons for these awards are first, because of the timetable which requires cities to race for success in competing for funds and, second, the monopoly on expertise held by the presently-existing agencies. Given these objective facts, it soon becomes irrelevant to the poverty administrator, even if he is well-intentioned, that the poor people largely resent these establishments. The City Hall is controlled by the Italians and Irish; the Housing Authority is responsible for continuous mass relocation programs that keep the poor people moving; the Welfare is a totalitarian investigatory institution which keeps people on near-poverty budgets. Whether these characterizations are accurate is almost beside the point, because poor people in large numbers feel they are accurate. The poor know that they have no access to, much less control over, these huge agencies that shape their conditions.

Besides being a center of new resources for existing agencies, the UCC is a political battlefield for the various "in" and "out" factions in Newark. At one point the City Council threatened to withhold a grant to the UCC until all the councilmen were given trustee positions; a compromise was worked out, and the money was received with the councilmen getting "token" representation. One of the councilmen, on another occasion, charged that aspiring politicians were trying to "muscle in" on the program and "use the poor" for their own purposes. Shortly afterward, there was major controversy over the reasons for the UCC budget being cut, by Washington, from the proposed \$850,000 to about \$200,000. Some claim that the budget was loaded too heavily with administrative trivia, but everyone is clear that a basic reason, if not the only one, for the budget slash was to teach the political aspirants a lesson. One of the trustees, a local trade unionist, made this lesson clear in an official statement: "...local, County and State elected and appointed officials would view with jaundiced eye the emergence of a new power force, with

money, prestige and jobs. However, when this natural fear is compounded because of the participation in leadership roles of recognized political opponents, then it must be anticipated that efforts to weaken or destroy the UCC will occur...The purpose of the UCC is to wage war on poverty. The cooperation of the established power structure is a prerequisite for success. That the existing power structure would derive political dividends and enhancement is a fact of life, and we must accept this if we are serious about our determination to launch attacks on poverty...Our chief and indispensable weapon is money from Washington. Obviously, Washington will not send money to UCC if the political leadership in Trenton-Essex County and Newark oppose it."

There also are a few "independent liberals", without significant leverage, who are members of the trustees and who would like to see the program work for the poverty-stricken, if not be worked by them. Their inherent paternalism makes it impossible for them to ally with, and organize, a base among the community poor; therefore they are trapped into bargaining, without power, among the other groups within the UCC.

If the thrust of the program were to involve the poor, it would be entirely practical to begin an organizing campaign to gather the poor people and the resources, then from there take the time to decide on a program that poor people can carry out themselves. The "impracticality" of this kind of work is only political: the authorities would not permit it. For after all, if the poor set out to retrain themselves, they might raise the question: retrain for what kind of jobs? If the poor began to run their own neighborhood centers, they might be inspired with the idea of running their own city. And that is an inspiration which the power structure does not want.

Instead of aiming to let the poor decide, the structure of the Newark program reflects the dominance of established groups. The UCC was incorporated originally by 16 persons, including the Mayor, representatives of the religious community, several civil rights leaders, and persons connected with education and retraining programs. No poor people were among the incorporators; indeed, we can assume that no poor people knew that they could incorporate an anti-poverty agency. This group of 16 selected a Board of Trustees of 53 people (later enlarged by a dozen or so). This board reflects the organized interests of the city: big business, labor, churches, political incumbents and their challengers, civil rights and minority-group organizations. One person from our movement is on the board, but perhaps only because she was originally nominated by an established neighborhood group which she later departed.

Despite the obvious class and professional make-up of this board, from the outset its members pledged themselves to "eventually" involve the poor. The UCC is open to anyone who wants to join, and elections of a number of trustees are to occur each year. The shortcomings of this process are obvious. As in a large corporation, the "shareholders" have power in theory, but actual power flows from the full-time executives and administrators. In a financial corporation, however, the shareholders are at least middle class, possessed of the capacity for parliamentary maneuvering. Such politics, intangible as they are, are completely outside the experience of the poor and conflict with the need to involve people in something concretely related to themselves.

The main vehicles for injecting democracy into the UCC are not the yearly election meetings, however, but the "area boards" set up under the community action part of the program. In theory these boards, created so far in the three most poverty-stricken areas of the city, are to be open to the poor. They are to devise

programs fitting the needs of their area, gather funds from the UCC, and administer the programs themselves. Staff from the community is to be hired for each area, and work out of a local office (under supervision, however, from the central UCC staff).

But the area boards are distorted also by the dominance of established interests, especially those associated with the Democratic Party machine and middle-class reform groups. In two of the areas, where no independent groups of poor people exist, the boards are already dominated by existing political interests. However, in our area, where the Newark Community Union Project is based, there is an interesting drama being played out between the established leaders and the genuine poor who have come because of the interest developed through their experience in NCUP.

How did NCUP organizers persuade people to attend area board meetings? We knew that the poor people valued the brotherly atmosphere of NCUP meetings in which they were able to talk because their ideas were taken seriously, and where they drew strength from being among sympathetic people with the same problems and the same vision. They share a deep alienation from people with official authority, complicated language and a middle-class or parliamentary style. Their reaction to such people is often withdrawal or rejection: preferring not to participate rather than participating on undesirable or unnatural terms. Given this, we could not try to explain the President's war on poverty in positive terms, since we knew their real experiences would be less than positive. When we tried to be positive, in fact, we were met with wonderment by people who could not believe that such a program was for them. Usually, however, we talked about the need to make the genuine poor a part of the program and, if necessary, to protest the program as a fraud. This made some sense with those people who had been "in the movement" for some time, and who had some previous experience in political confrontations with City authorities. They decided to attend meetings, maintaining a view of themselves as the legitimate poor, and taking a wait-see attitude towards what would result.

With many people, however, there was a larger obstacle to organizing for the war-on-poverty area board meeting. They were never informed that there was a national war-on-poverty. These are people with no interest, much less faith, in the political arena, people from whom the idea of the President's program would be another cruel joke were it not so irrelevant to their lives. Here we tried the approach of implying that soon more "City Hall people" will be paid to get rich, patrol and control the neighborhood unless we did something to expose and resist them. There was little success in communicating even the intention of the president's program to these people. Our identification with them cannot be based on anything so remote from their world.

About 80-120 people attended the first several meetings of the area board, with the 25-40 NCUP people there being almost the only genuine poor people present. The structure and atmosphere of the meetings was certainly foreign, and sometimes hostile, to the poor people. Parliamentary procedure was heavy. People were nearly ordered to speak up and be "civic minded". Virtually all of our people remained silent, feeling worthless and out of place. Some few felt angered, and spoke out against the procedures, but with only a little success.

There were some thin "victories" in these meetings. At one, a poor person was elected temporary chairman, partly because she was poor and from the community, but also because the other votes were split among six candidates and perhaps also because her name is the same as that of a famous singer. At a later meeting, we proposed

that majority voting at meetings be poor people--defined as having a family income under \$4,000, or existing on unemployment or relief, or in bad housing. This motion passed, 52-44, amidst near pandemonium. Many people were claiming that the poor couldn't possibly govern themselves; they were insisting that NCUP was a bad and subversive influence. Since the motion is so complex, it is clear that persons with parliamentary ability will be able to use many weapons to dilute and subvert it, and this factional fight itself might stalemate the area board.

It is clear, even while the specific events are still in motion, that these "victories" have meant very little to the community; all they establish is the chance for NCUP to fight over a slice of influence on one of the city's area boards. We know that were it not for NCUP, this area board, too, would be completely subordinated to traditional interests. Even if our area board were open wider and made more comfortable to the poor, it would still face control-from-above through the UCC. As new trustees are now being proposed, it is obvious that no poor people will be elected with the exception of one or two NCUP people among the 50 or so nominated. Of the seven temporary chairmen on the three area boards, five are integral members of the political machine, one is a liberal minister, and one is a poor person. The list of 50-odd nominees includes missionaries, teachers, housing supervisors, political officials, ministers, social workers, etc. Only one poor person passed the nominating committee.

An evaluation of this program hinges on whether one believes that the problems of poverty stem from a lack of administered services to the poor, or from a lack of organized power among the poor. We are convinced that the service approach is dead-end: it is only a way to shore up existing bureaucracies which do little about the problems precisely because there is no pressure from the poor. We believe the problem lies with the privilege-tricken society, and that the organized poor are the force which can change this society, defining and satisfying their needs as they see them. Poverty is not an accident, as the concept of "underprivileged" implies. It is the result of racial, political and economic domination and therefore can only be eliminated by a movement that brings the poor to a position of freedom to act on their own without abuse. We believe there are persons in Newark and at the national level who fundamentally agree with this analysis. The problem for them is how money can be allocated by government to organize groups which may cause a political disturbance for the same government that gave the funds. Will men with established power take this risk? The answer to that question will determine the effectiveness of this national effort by the government, and perhaps will determine much more for this country.

* * *

The following are statements of several community people, all members of NCUP, with first-hand experience in the Newark poverty program.

Statement by Mrs. Bessie Smith, 61 Hillside Ave., Newark, New Jersey, April 26, 1965

§ My name is Mrs. Bessie Smith, and I live at 61 Hillside Ave., in Newark. I'm a member of the Newark Community Union Project (NCUP), and it was through NCUP that I first learned of the Anti-poverty Program, that would be set up in Newark. I was very enthused about it, once I heard the director of the program, Mr. Cyril Tyson, speak at the first meeting of Area Board #3. From the things that he said, I felt it would be a program of the poor and run by the poor, with the assistance

of anyone else that would want to make the program function. So far, we (NCUP) have tried very hard, as a community organization, to involve the poor people. In some of the committees and boards of the other areas (at least those meetings that I've attended) the concern to involve the poor people doesn't seem to be happening. There are a lot of people I know, in Area #3, as well as Area #1 and #2, that don't even know that this program is under way. From what I've seen so far, the chairmen and co-chairmen of the other area boards are not people that really represent the poor people. NCUP is the only organization in this area that have the poor people organized. In Area #1 and #2, it appear that they (the leaders) are people that have some type of connection with City Hall or with someone who is in a higher position, and it's not the ordinary people that this program centers around. A lot of people think that the group of people above the very poor must spearhead this program and show the poor what to do and how to do it, instead of letting the poor have the key positions in Newark's Anti-poverty Program. In Area #1 and #2, they're really going to skip over the poor people, and there will be programs set up supposed to be for the poor people but the poor people won't even bother to come, because they don't think it's for them, because they haven't been involved in it.

So far as I remember, the planning for the Anti-poverty Program began with a meeting called by the Mayor, of different organizational representatives within the community, like CORE, NAACP, Urban League, and key ministers--centered around the people that the Mayor knew. These were the people invited to the first meeting of the Anti-poverty Program. At that time there were members of NCUP in the Clinton Hill Neighborhood Council. We felt that as members of the Council, that we should have a representative to attend this meeting. It was through a petition that the members of the Clinton Hill Neighborhood Council sent a request to the Mayor that we should have a representative. Mrs. Louise Patterson went to this meeting as a representative for the Clinton Hill Neighborhood Council. As far as I know, this was the beginning of the Anti-poverty Program here in Newark, with no grass roots people invited to this meeting. And it was through the decisions of these people that attended the first meeting that the Area Boards were set up.

The Area Boards are supposed to be the organization of poor people in each area, that would function within the United Community Corporation (UCC). The UCC is the independent group organized to carry out the Anti-poverty Program under the Anti-poverty Act. The Board of Trustees of UCC, at this time, runs the Anti-poverty Program here. As each Area Board is established, they draw up their own constitution, and list their membership of they want to have a limitation on their membership. Each Area Board has the right to decide whether they want to have limited or unlimited membership. Any programs they come up with would have to be approved by the Board of Trustees of UCC. The trustees of UCC include the Head of NAACP, the Housing Director of the City of Newark, the Mayor, Irvine Turner, Councilman from the Central Ward, Willard Heckel, Dean of Rutgers Law School, Rabbi Jonathan Prinz, George C. Richardson, candidate for Assemblyman, and other people who are in this category.

At the first Area Board meeting of Area #3 there had been some notices sent out, some people were informed, and it was in the newspaper. Some 200 people attended. They were mostly people that worked at City Hall, representatives from various organizations: the Housing Authority, etc. The Clinton Hill Neighborhood Council was there, and NCUP. The fact that NCUP was there meant that there were poor people involved, and some were elected as temporary officers of this area board. Nominations for temporary chairman were held. Two people were elected--myself and Clyde Mitchell, who works for the Sheriff's Department. The fact that I belonged to NCUP and worked with community people helped to elect me chairman. Mr. Mitchell was elected as chairman by the people who were there representing

City Hall and the other groups such as NAACP, and the higher-ups of this area.

Another thing is the Nominating Committee for the Board of Trustees of the UCC--I'm a member of that committee. (16 members of the Board are to be replaced this month in a general membership election. The job of the nominating committee is to choose a slate.) It was the feeling of the members there that you had to be in a key position in order to make the (Anti-poverty) program work. They didn't think the very poor should be members of the Trustee Board. So there aren't any poor that's to be recommended by this committee to UCC. There were seven members of this committee. And it was the general feeling of everyone present that poor people should be involved. But they did not feel that a person working in the community with a community organization, who is on Welfare, and is just an ordinary person--they didn't feel that she should be on the Board of Trustees of the Anti-poverty Program. They felt that people like someone from the Housing Authority, or that represents the Welfare Department, and the Manager of Scudder Homes Projects, and key people like this would be more influential on the Board of Trustees than a person from the community who has worked very hard to organize poor people, without any pay whatsoever. I wanted this person to be on, because of the type of person that she is, but she was voted out because they didn't think she would be able to contribute as much to the Board of Trustees as someone like a lawyer or the type of people I have been talking about, who make up the Board of Trustees.

It's hard for poor people at these meetings of the Area Board to express themselves and get their ideas across. One example of this: at our second Area Board meeting, some of the big ministers and people that generally run all the programs of importance here in the city, they wanted to use parliamentary procedure. Most of the people are not familiar with this; if they have something to say, they want to be able to raise their hand and say it, and not be called on point of order, and Robert's Rules. It was at this meeting the issue of parliamentary procedure was brought out and discussed, and it was the general feeling of the people, because there were community people that had come into the poverty program through NCUP, they felt very strongly that the meeting should be conducted by the people and the way they felt it should be conducted. This is how we have conducted the meetings since that particular evening.

I don't believe that there's been any real effort made by any individual, or even organization other than NCUP, to involve poor people in the Anti-poverty Program. Due to this fact, and the fact that the upper crust were not able to control this Area Board, the attendance have dropped off from what it was in the beginning. I feel that this is because the poor people in the community have not been contacted and don't know of the Area Board here, that they can become part of it and set up the program as poor people.

As far as Mr. Tyson is concerned, my personal feeling is that he wants the poor people to be involved. I also feel that he's handicapped somewhat because of the structure we do have here in the city of Newark. Unless you're in with the wheels, then everybody else is overlooked. This organization has to put forth the biggest part of their effort to involve poor people. I think that all the good jobs in the anti-poverty program in Newark would go to the people who are in with the wheels if there wasn't an organization like NCUP that feels very strongly that the Anti-poverty program should be worked by the poor people. We truly believe that this is the only way we can get to the bottom of poverty. If any other organization or individual don't know or realize or feel that this is the way to get to it--having the poor people involved and really spearhead and run the program--then we're not going to get to the bottom of it. This is what would happen here, the same thing Mr. Powell said is happening in New York.

Statement by Mrs. Joanne Robinson, 193
Milford Ave., Newark, New Jersey, April
27, 1965

I first heard about the Poverty Program on the radio, but I really didn't pay too much attention to it. Then some of the members of NCUP started coming by and talking to me about it, and then I got slightly interested, and decided to go to a meeting. I thought there was a slight possibility that something would come out of it, but after I went to the meeting, I found that nothing at all was going to happen. The meeting was run wrong. It was like they were making up a new language, nobody understood what they were talking about. They were speaking strictly for college graduates, and the average poor person didn't even finish high school. I'm quite sure nobody understood what they were talking about.

It seemed to me that the meeting was being run by the politicians, whereas I thought it should be run by the poor people themselves. I didn't feel free to stand up and say anything, really. Because the people there were divided into groups, and everything that was said by any members of NCUP was immediately overruled by somebody else. It was as if everybody wanted who they knew in, and no strangers. And if you said anything, they disagreed with you even if they had to say the same thing and rephrase it.

I don't think the poverty board made any attempt to get to people in this area. I think the only ones who ever did anything were the NCUP members. I think that anybody who goes to one meeting, unless they change things, he won't return again. The meetings are too long and very boring. They should start at a certain time and end at a certain time, and they should take one matter up at a time. They should involve the poor people more. Because nobody wants to get involved in something where they don't feel they're part of it. If you join something, you want to feel part of it, and the people at the poverty meeting just didn't give you a chance to feel part of it. It was like you're an outsider looking in. So I don't intend to go back.

Statement by Mrs. Louise Patterson, 721
Hunterdon St., Newark, New Jersey, April
28, 1965

I find myself not wanting to criticize this Anti-Poverty program because it is so wonderful, on paper. As a trustee on the Newark Board (United Community Corporation). I find the poor is not represented, truly, I am poor, but not deprived. I had the hope that deprived people--welfare and people who would not have the opportunity of being a trustee--would be allowed to have the initial O.K. on what was to be for them.

The Trustee Board is set up with the same people, "Heads of": When there is an opening on the Board, duplicates of the rest of the Board are chosen.

Newark is fortunate in having Cyril Tyson, executive director. He speaks as a person concerned and the program he presents is for the poor grass root people. It is impossible for Mr. Tyson to be everywhere, at all times. So the Area Boards are being taken over by Ward Leaders and speeches by politicians and candidates for political office.

The Youth Group, has competent young people to head it. But their meetings are taken over by adults with "brassy personalities". The size of attendance gets smaller and smaller. One young person said "I don't know how to talk with them around."

Statement by Mrs. Dora Holder, 182 Hillside Ave., Newark New Jersey, April 26, 1965

I met this lady after one of the Area Board meetings, and she got me so mad I walked away, the way she was talking. She owned a house I guess she was kind of wealthy in her own way. She felt that the meetings should be run by wealthy people and people who understand what were going on. All the people that didn't understand, I think that if they went to enough meetings that was run by trying to help the people understand, people would be more interested, and gradually understand. Because I wasn't interested at all, that's why I never did go back. That time, I had to make an effort, a very big one, to go, I had to find a baby-sitter, and that's a hard problem for me. But that's the only meeting I went to. Confusing! Lots of people jumping up, shouting "You're out of order". when you said something. My mother had something she wanted to say, and I kept hunching her to say it. But she said, "No, I'm not going to stand up." One time we had a vote on whether poor people should be the majority. My mother didn't even want to stand up and vote. Neither did I; she had to make me stand up, because I wasn't going to vote. Neither did I; she had to make me stand up, because I wasn't going to vote. I felt it wouldn't do any good, because the only people that were talking there were people on the board, or committees, or something like that.

Everytime you looked, they was talking. The other people, the people from the area, they didn't talk. They just sat there. And I'm quite sure a few of them did just like I did--they never did come back. The meetings are going to get smaller and smaller, unless things start changing.

I think that parliamentary procedure should be cut out and there should be less hollering, because nobody likes anybody to holler at them. If you can't express what you want to express in your own way and in your own language--you don't want anyone to interrupt you--you want to say it like you want to.

This one man got mad and started hollering at people. He said he was there to help the meetings run smoothly. But, to me, it was running pretty smoothly until every time you turn around, someone say, "You're out of order," when you try to say something. The people there didn't know anything about parliamentary procedure--I know I don't! So I know quite a few of the people there were just like me. They didn't understand what was going on, they didn't know what people were talking about, they didn't know when to say the right thing at the right time! When is the right time? You don't know, so you don't say anything. You don't go back, because what's the use of sitting there at a meeting, if you want to say something, but you're afraid to say it because you may be out of order?

If only poor people were there it would be more comfortable. Because those people there, they knew how to run a meeting, they knew about parliamentary procedure, or when you're in order if you want to say something. Maybe if more poor people were there, it doesn't have to be all poor people, but more of them, where we could understand each other, it wouldn't be so complicated, and more comfortable.

I'm going to try one more meeting, but if I don't like it I probably won't go back anymore. Lot's of people never heard of the poverty meetings, or aren't fully sure what the meetings are about, or what good they could do. I'm quite sure if they found out about it, if it was explained to them carefully, they would go. But nobody tried to do that. No one explained it to me. I just went that night with my mother. I didn't know exactly where or why I was going. Most of the people who went to that meeting and never came back probably still don't know what was going on. Because they didn't explain anything to anyone. They wanted to go

through the Constitution--people didn't understand! I thought that if they went through the Constitution piece by piece, that people would understand it. Because that constitution was written so that not anyone could understand it. You had to know all about parliamentary procedure, and very few people knew about it. That's why they didn't understand it. I thought they could do part by part--part this meeting, part the next one, just so's they were sure people would understand it. But some of these people were worried they were behind the other area boards--the others would get a program going first, and we would still be on the constitution. But so what?? Long as you understand what's going on, don't care how long it takes.

Statement by Mrs. Billie Lassiter, 721
Hunterdon St. Newark, New Jersey, April
27, 1965

I've only been to two Area Board meetings out of the four. And the two that I went to, I was very displeased with them. At the first one I was at, they brought up a Constitution. To really be truthful, I didn't understand any of it at all, from the preamble on. A hassle came up about whether they should go through it or not, the whole thing. I felt like they should have gone through it. Because after all, if you just don't understand something, you don't understand it. And I don't think they should have just drew up a Constitution and threw it at us, and then get mad because we didn't understand it. I just didn't think that was right.

That first meeting was the first one I'd ever been to, and it was altogether different from what I expected. I thought that we all would be there and we'd all have the same thing on our minds, and we all wanted the same things. But it's different! The people that were up there, dressed in their suits, pressed and creased! They only talked about how far behind we would be from the other area boards that already had programs and were on their way. I really think their main concern is the money. I don't think they really care about the people in this area, or how poor they are. All they care about is the money they're supposed to be getting. And before they'll go out of their way to explain this thing to the people or what they're doing at the meetings, they'll skip over things. They make you feel like a fool for even thinking things. And me--I wouldn't get up in front of a meeting and say something even if I wanted to, because I just don't stand up and say things in front of people. But they made me feel stupid just sitting there not knowing what the Constitution was. They made me feel like I should understand it. Maybe they're right. But I really know they were wrong. I just think the whole thing is, that they're concerned about the money, how they're going to get the money, what they're going to do with it. I don't think they're really concerned with the people.

The Area Board, they haven't done, to my knowledge, one thing to go out and get people to come to these meetings. The only thing I know going around to get people to come to these meetings is the Newark Community Union Project (NCUP). We're the ones who issue leaflets, and knock on doors, and ask people, if you don't have a way, we'll provide transportation. They haven't come out once and asked anybody. If they have, they haven't come in this area.

There are some people that don't know about the poverty program, right on this block. I think I went to see four people on this block, to ask them would they come to the poverty meeting. They didn't know anything about it. Only thing they knew was what they read in the papers, and they didn't read that, except it was headlines. Their reaction was the same as mine. They asked me what was the poverty program, and I didn't know, so I couldn't tell them. I told them

what I thought it was. All I knew was, come to the meetings; it's important for the poor people of Newark. But that's not telling them anything--it didn't tell me anything.

And that second meeting, that one just really took the cake. I just swore then and there to myself that I wouldn't go to another one. Jenny Lemmon, she was there. Now she's supposed to be so concerned for Newark, passing around this can collecting nickels and dimes for Martin Luther King. But she's only concerned about we should get this program together because all the other area boards are way ahead of us, and if we're going to stand here and bicker, we'll be left way behind. I feel like they think the quicker they get this area board organized--and they're always thinking of quicker ways to do it rather than go directly to the people--they're just trying to think up ways to get this program going without going to the people. Get this program going, they don't care how and get this money. If not, everybody else is going to get theirs, and we're going to get what's left. To me, they're just concerned about getting their share. I don't think they're at all concerned about the people--none of them. That's the way I see it. I could be wrong, but out of the two meetings I went to, I couldn't care less about the people who run the anti-poverty program.

I think the program should be investigated, I really think it should. Somebody other than the people in Newark who are running it now, people from communities such as ours, should be allowed to run this program. I think we'd get better results out of it, because you don't have to be educated, to my knowledge, you don't have to have a college degree to know what poverty means. I think the less education you have, the poorer you are, the better chance you have of running a good poverty program. Because after all, nobody knows the poor but the poor.