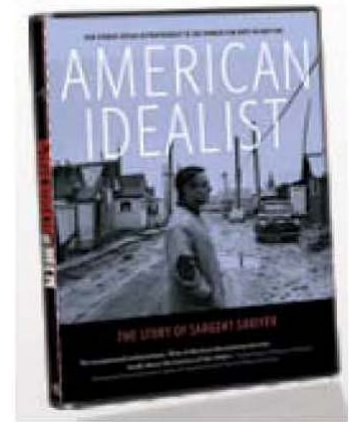


## The Use of the Shriver Video

In our courses, we like to show a 14-minute clip from the documentary *American Idealist: The Story of Sargent Shriver*. The clip, which covers Sargent Shriver's time as director of Lyndon Johnson's War on Poverty program, and Shriver's expansion of legal services to the poor, is one of the most effective teaching tools we have yet found. You can access the video clip [here on CLAE's website](#).



The Shriver documentary, while interesting for any general audience, is particularly useful in training those who work in legal services. Too often, after several years, advocates who began with a sense of idealism and purpose forget what truly inspired them about their work, and become mired in the day-to-day tedium of office life while losing sight of the grand historical narrative they are a part of. The Shriver video rejuvenates and refreshes them by showing the background and the importance of the work they do.

### Discussion Points

We show the Shriver video not just as a history lesson, but as a way of stimulating discussion on the past, present, and future of legal services, and the contemporary insights that can be drawn from the Johnson-era struggle. Below are some of the points which seem to resonate with our course participants, and which come up frequently in discussion:

- **Leadership** – Shriver did not ask to be a leader, but when given the challenge by Johnson, he rises to it. The video shows an example of someone who wields power with modesty, care, and a keen understanding of right and wrong.
- **Sense of purpose** – Sargent Shriver does not wish to be a leader for the sake of being a leader, but because it is a necessary step in pursuit of a just end. Leaders must be constantly reflecting on how their actions help or hinder their ultimate goal; Shriver's mission was ultimately to render himself obsolete, to eliminate the necessity for a War on Poverty by eliminating poverty. Leaders should keep power only until their mission is complete.
- **Community action** – Shriver's vision was for a bottom-up rather than top-down form of legal assistance. Accepting leadership reluctantly, Shriver aimed to use his position to decentralize power, giving it directly to those who it would affect. Disliking the idea of "handouts," Shriver stresses measures that empower the poor to take control of their lives, and encourage movement and debate on the community level.
- **Courage** – In the video, Shriver takes on big city mayors and wins. He puts all of his carefully-established political capital on the line in order to pursue what is fair and just.

By giving communities the power to take on local and state governments in court, Shriver was giving up any future favor he could have hoped to win from mayors and governors. The video is a remarkable example of a person showing the audacity to seek justice without regard to the possible detrimental effects it may have on his career.

- **The more things change, the more they stay the same** – While the video is historical, it has striking contemporary relevance. The problems Shriver aimed to fix are still with us, and his mission was left incomplete. In some ways, this is disheartening, since it suggests that poverty and suffering are timeless, and that the needy will always. But we have found that the video generally inspires optimism, since it shows an example of how these problems can be confronted by those with drive and conviction.
- **Passion** – As legal services have become institutionalized, and are no longer the tentative experiment they were in Shriver’s day, some course participants have commented that they see a loss of the passion witnessed in the video. For Shriver, the aim was not just to provide a service, but to create “life and action at the community level.” In some ways, the sense of excitement that accompanies Shriver’s quest to bring justice to the needy has been lost as our work has become the status quo. Participants have noticed a sense of urgency in the video that may now have dried up, despite the continued existence of the problems.
- **Anything is possible** – The video shows a time in which vast transformations are seen as within the realm of possibility. When Shriver assumed control of the War on Poverty, legal services for the poor were uncommon and unfunded, yet he believed he could bring about an age in which all people would have access to the courts, regardless of their financial situation. Such expansive views of our potential for social change are increasingly rare, as we confine our efforts to modest reforms and incremental adjustments. The Shriver video encourages us to think big, and to see even enormous structural shifts as within our reach.

We believe that it is immensely valuable for any skills training offered to legal services professionals to include a look back into the history of the field, particularly in the context of the War on Poverty. Of course, we do not show the Shriver video in order to venerate one particular man, or to hold the Johnson program up as a definitive model for future use. But we do believe it is useful as a motivator and an example of moral leadership in action.

*“Like Peace Corps volunteers who go abroad to share the housing, the transportation, the food, the life of foreign peoples, these able and dedicated members of our profession - this new breed of lawyers has volunteered to sacrifice the assured security of traditional career lines, to forsake the well-trod path that leads step by step from law clerk to senior partner -- and instead, to venture forth into the rural pockets of poverty, the Native American reservations and migrant worker camps. These lawyers are not going out giving medical inoculations. They're not distributing surplus food or clothing, or medicine. They are bringing justice to the poor... I had often thought of legal aid as the 'lawyer's Red Cross.' But it is far more than that. Indeed, the*

*achievement of justice between human beings transcends in importance virtually every other value we have. 'Justice,' said Daniel Webster 'is the greatest interest of man on earth.'"* – Sargent Shriver on Legal Aid attorneys