

Testimony of Jonathan M. Smith
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Before the Council of the District of Columbia
Committee on Housing and Urban Affairs

Public Roundtable Sense of the Council Resolution on
Priorities to Reduce Poverty in the District of Columbia

December 11, 2008

We are grateful for the leadership of Councilmember Barry and others on this initiative to address income inequality and poverty in the District of Columbia. Persistent, often generational and highly concentrated poverty damages the lives and aspirations of tens of thousands of District residents and it diminishes the quality of life of the rest of the City. Now is the time for the District to begin serious measures to reduce and to eventually eliminate poverty.

Many will argue that the economic crisis counsels against taking on a poverty reduction agenda at this time. I suggest quite the contrary: now is the time to put in place the programs that will end the cycle of poverty and will help communities prosper as the economy turns around. If we wait to address these issues until the economy is good, inequality will grow. What we have seen from past periods of economic growth, persons with means get richer and persons without are left behind. All boats do not rise.²

The Sense of the Council Resolution that has been proposed is a powerful statement, however, it is incomplete and it is flawed. The resolution seeks to protect and expand important funding for certain government programs. These programs must be part of any initiative to address poverty, but are only a part. We urge the Council to take a more comprehensive approach, which includes some no-cost, but essential measures together with the program expenditures outlined in the Resolution.

¹ Legal Aid was formed in 1932 to provide legal assistance to families and individuals living in poverty. Legal Aid staff handle cases involving domestic violence, custody, child support, housing, consumer law, and public benefits.

² According to the United States Census Bureau, between 1990 and 2006, during periods of incredible prosperity and economic growth in the District, the rate of poverty increased and the incomes in low-income communities declined. DC Fiscal Policy Institute, "New Census Figures Show Poverty is on the Rise in the District of Columbia," (2006), available at <http://www.dcfpi.org>. The Census Bureau recommends using two-year averages due to the small sample size for the District; DC Fiscal Policy Institute, "Poverty in DC Remains at Very High Level Despite Economic Growth," Press Release, (August 2007); DC Fiscal Policy Institute, "DC's Two Economies: Many Residents Are Falling Behind, 1 (Oct. 24, 2007).

First, set a target

Several states and localities have adopted the formulation of reducing poverty by 50% in ten years.³ In Illinois, the target is to cut in half extreme poverty – those living at 50% of the federal poverty line or below. In Connecticut and Louisiana they have set a target of reducing child poverty by 50%. Whether the target is poverty, extreme poverty or child poverty, a benchmark is important. It allows the Council and the executive to measure progress and to change course if efforts are not working.

Second, require government agencies to develop plans to meet the benchmark

Each agency of government, schools, prisons, recreation, courts, medical services, police, etc., should develop poverty reduction strategies that contribute to the Council set target. The agencies should be required to report on progress and to update their plans frequently.

Third, reward work

The ability to earn meaningful income through work is important to an anti-poverty agenda. We must support those who cannot work, train those who need assistance to work and provide decent pay to those who are working. Without adequate wages and benefits, those entering the workforce can never escape poverty.

I support the initiatives in the resolution to provide training and workforce support. They are critical. However, more is needed. To ensure that work can support a family, the minimum wage should be increased to a living wage, medical benefits must be mandatory or supplied by the government and the Safe and Sick Days legislation should be expanded. The political culture of this country exalts the “working man” and the “working woman,” but fails to ensure that the nobility of work is rewarded or valued. We cannot have it both ways. If the ladder out of poverty is a job, the job must pay enough to provide for the necessities of a family.

Fourth, mitigate the harm of the criminal justice system

The District overuses the criminal justice system to address social issues. We have an alarming rate of incarceration that disproportionately negatively impacts African American, persons living with mental illness and communities living in poverty. As a result, the criminal justice system deprives individuals and communities of the opportunities to move out of poverty largely because of race and class.

I support the re-entry program initiatives in the resolution. However, they will only have a limited impact until the Council changes the laws to stop incarcerating minor

³ <http://www.spotlightonpoverty.org/statewide.aspx>.

non-violent drug offenders, reduces the sentences for other non-violent crime and enacts human rights protections for offenders returning to the community.

Fifth, recognize that poverty is a women’s issue and target programs to meet the specific needs of women

The overwhelming majority of persons living in poverty are single women and their children. Programs to reduce poverty should be targeted at the unique barriers women and their children experience. For example, the Council should ensure that all working women have access to quality and affordable child care. Coupled with care, these programs should focus on early childhood educational development, including reading readiness. Greater support is needed for efforts to protect women from domestic violence and to create options to leave an abusive relationship and not lose their financial support. The child support enforcement system needs to be fixed and the District should pass-through increased amounts of child support to families receiving Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) benefits.

Significantly, the Sense of the Council Resolution omits the most important income support for women with children -- TANF. Families whose sole income is TANF live at 29 percent of the federal poverty level. This unacceptably low level of support makes it impossible for families to provide for their essential needs. We strongly encourage the Council to restore the TANF payment cut it recently introduced and to further increase the payment to a level that will allow TANF families to live with dignity.

Finally, the District should make economic integration a priority

De-concentration of poverty should be a high priority of the plan. Poverty has become more concentrated in the District over the last decade. The number of high poverty neighborhoods has increased dramatically. According to a report by Fannie Mae, “the number of high-poverty census tracts in the city rose from 36 in 1990 to 43 in 2000 and the number of extreme-poverty tracts more than doubled, rising from 10 to 23.”⁴ As the number of high poverty census tracts rise, the rate of poverty remains relatively stable. The result is that fewer poor families live in mixed income neighborhoods.⁵

The concentration of poverty magnifies its impact on families and children. While being poor has many negative consequences, living in a poor neighborhood increases the changes that children will have poor educational outcomes, individuals will

⁴ Fannie Mae Foundation, “The Poor Become Poorer: A Report on Patterns of Concentrated Neighborhood Poverty in Washington, D.C.”

⁵ <http://www.washingtonpost.com/ac2/wp-dyn?pagename=article&contentId=A4354-2003May17¬Found=true>.

be victims of crime or involved in the criminal justice system, be a teen mother or have limited access to health services.⁶

Just as the District took deliberate policy steps to encourage high income development, it can create a policy of economic integration.⁷ One important strategy is to involve residents in the planning of their communities. This is especially true for large publicly-funded projects like the Poplar Point Development or the changes underway at the St. Elizabeth's campus. Before building projects, legally binding and easily enforceable community benefits agreements should be negotiated and communities compensated with services, housing and other benefits to compensate them for displacement.

Conclusion

Tragically, poverty in the District and across the country is passed from one generation to the next. This is not a Country or a City of equal opportunity. Success or failure depends more on the accident of birth, on race and on gender than on personal effort or character.

Rosita Stanley is a client member of the Board of the National Legal Aid and Defender Association. Rosita is fond of saying, "The Bible says that the poor will always be with us, but why does it always have to be the same people." It should not be that way.

⁶ Disparities in the District of Columbia: Poverty Is Major Cause, <http://www.dcfpi.org/11-2-06pov.pdf>; WHERE WE ARE, WHERE WE NEED TO GO: The Primary Care Safety Net in DC (DCPCA, January 2005 Update) <http://www.dcpca.org/images/documents/executivesummarydcpca2005report.pdf>

⁷ See "Ending Concentrated Poverty: New Directions After Hurricane Katrina," The Enterprise Foundation, (October 12, 2005)