

Vermont Child Poverty Council

Public Forum Roundtable Discussion
Questions and Answers
Washington County, Spaulding High School, Barre, Vermont
October 1, 2007

What is it like to live in poverty? What is it like for your children?

- Hard to get to town, to the grocery store
 - Go to the store once a month, not once a week
- Kids are worried about food all the time
- Kids have to grow up too fast
- Don't always qualify for benefits
- Headstart is a good support
- Hard to have to say no to kids about products with characters on them vs. store brands
- Housing is expensive – important issue
- Even with a Section 8 housing voucher, available housing is hard to find, prospective renters may lack the money for things such as the fuel deposit
- Have to make choices between transportation, fuel, food, medical/dental care
 - Food suffers, nutrition suffers
 - Children are in pain at school because of lack of food, medical/dental care
 - makes it hard for them to learn
- Parents cannot attend school conferences and activities because if parents leave work, they don't get paid
- Some homeless shelters won't let a family stay because the kids are too active

What is the impact of poverty on children?

- Have to make choices about clothes, activities – have fewer options
- Stigma at school about living in a trailer park, getting free/reduced-price lunches, not being able to afford to play sports
- Sometimes siblings end up separated, single parent may have to give up custody to the other parent or others because he or she can't afford to care for some or all of the children
- Schools need to adjust to avoid identifying children in any way based on what they can or cannot afford

What is the stigma around poverty?

- People don't want to be seen going to the food shelf, they feel like by going, it means they haven't done everything they could have for their children
 - But if they didn't go, that wouldn't be helping their children, either
- Children want pop culture toys, but parents can't always afford them
- Feel shame about life experience

What drives people into poverty?

- The "D"s – death, divorce, disability, disease, domestic violence, depression and mental illness, drugs, despair
 - All make it hard to fit into society
 - All make it hard to make and keep money
- Lack of opportunity
- Hard to break out of the spiral
- Expectations become lowered
- Education is the key – in schools and broader education – shouldn't be shame or blame
- Disproportionate numbers of people in poverty lack education, are in poor health, end up in the corrections system

What keeps people in poverty?

- Lack of education
- Hard to catch up when you're always behind
- Transportation issues
 - Hard to afford a reliable car, so then car breaks down
 - Only affordable cars are gas guzzlers
 - Affordable housing is far outside town, so need to drive more
 - Hard to get groceries without a car, especially with children
 - Have to pick and choose, prioritize – what if you need to get to the doctor, but you have no money for gas?
- Even if you have a job, if your child gets sick and you have to stay home, you lose your job
- Increased gas prices just make it worse
- Need to pay attention to young children (under 5)
- Agencies must go out to see their clients, because clients can't get to them – no transportation
- Choosing between lights and fuel – which bills do we pay this month?
 - Always catching up on something
 - Then, when problems arise, get even further behind
- Sometimes people don't qualify for benefits, even though they have need
- Poor credit history can compound problems

- A lot of depression among families in poverty

What programs are working?

- Headstart is a big help
- Fuel assistance
 - But greater need exists than is being met
- Food stamps
- Medicaid/Dr. Dynasaur
- Food Works – program that built gardens, teaches classes on how to preserve and cook with food from the garden
- WIC – healthy food is more expensive than junk food, but WIC covers milk, etc.
 - Delivery is very helpful

What would help people to get out of poverty?

- Education – teach children what to do to avoid staying in poverty as adults
- Be a good role model for children
- Headstart and Even Start – program support
 - Headstart gives direction and support, including emotional support for a single mother who doesn't get it from other sources
- Practical, hands-on education – cooking, wellness, physical activity
 - No child left undernourished
- Focus on transition to adulthood – transitional living programs for ages 17, 18, 19
 - Transition-aged children especially vulnerable to drugs, homeless, pregnancy
- What would be the **MOST** helpful?
 - Transportation – a reliable vehicle
 - Benefit programs – being able to qualify for benefits
 - Time to reevaluate the standards
 - E.g., one person who was \$37 over the limit for food stamps
 - Look at expenses **before** calculating eligibility
 - Look at extra expenses that occur when a person is working, instead of kicking the person off the benefits – people may actually be spending more on transportation, child care, etc., leaving less money in the pocket
 - Availability of affordable housing

From Public Comment period:

- Small raises in pay can push people over the cutoff for certain benefits
 - Can result in fewer available resources because increases expenses

- Can feel like being penalized for trying to succeed
- Planned Parenthood
 - Ability to plan and space children is key to getting and staying out of poverty
- Change child labor laws to allow some children to work at 12 years or older – cultivate work skills earlier
- Need to pay particular attention to young men – those raised in generational poverty generally stay in it
- Talk to the Barre district office of human services for some ideas
- People are being squeezed out of Section 8 housing
- Housing projects in Barre are not on bus routes
- Look at ideas from other countries
 - Germany's alternative service program
 - New Zealand's disability retraining program
- Housing – need to improve quality, affordability
 - Legislature keeps studying the issue, finding no effective mechanism for code enforcement
- Need to make rental housing affordable and accountable
- Need energy affordability – currently there is no electricity affordability program
- People need to feel like they are in control – of their process, of their lives, of the system
- When benefits are reduced because of a raise, etc., just reduce by the amount of the raise
 - Allow people to subsidize their own insurance, etc., instead of cutting off completely
- Focus on grades 4-8, allow some flexibility for educators
- Rep. Koch – age-old “cliff” problem – people lose benefits at a set point
 - Recommends looking at actual cases, talking to case workers who have had to terminate benefits
- LIHEAP and Supplemental Fuel Program
 - When someone is self-employed, they have to supply tax information, but a loss is not acknowledged
 - If someone has 2 Schedule C forms, loss on one and profit on the other, loss is ignored and profit is added to income
 - This is NOT the way the IRS does it
 - Reduces eligibility
 - Situation does not change on appeal
 - Commissioner Dale was unaware of program, would look into it