

Clearinghouse REVIEW

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Antipoverty Momentum Growing

With several states leading the way, political momentum is growing in favor of a concerted effort to reduce poverty in the United States, according to the Center for Law and Social Policy's April 2008 report, *State Governments and the New Commitment to Reduce Poverty in America*. The report details fourteen states' and the District of Columbia's antipoverty initiatives that reflect shifting attitudes about the role of government in dealing with poverty.

This renewed attention to poverty is attributed to a widening income gap, fear of economic recession, and a general sense that the American Dream of upward mobility is no longer a reality. While the national poverty rate declined from 22 percent in 1959 to 12 percent in 2006, most of the decline had occurred by the 1970s. Many experts believe that the poverty measure is out-of-date and should be updated to include expenses such as child care or housing and income streams such as the earned income tax credit. The report cites strong support for antipoverty policies in opinion polls and increases in bipartisan antipoverty support, media coverage of poverty issues, and activity by national organizations and regional nonprofit entities as evidence of a growing antipoverty consensus.

States (Alabama, Connecticut, Delaware, Minnesota, Rhode Island, Vermont, and Washington) and the District of Columbia have established commissions or task forces on poverty reduction. The Alabama task force consisted of a bipartisan group of legislators who developed legislative priorities for poverty alleviation—requiring businesses that receive economic incentives to pay higher wages, providing additional funding for Head Start, eliminating the sales tax on food and groceries, and raising the income-tax threshold to the poverty level.

Six states have set specific poverty-reduction targets. Connecticut became the first in 2004, when it set a target of cutting child poverty in half by 2014. A council was formed to issue annual progress reports and offer policy recommendations. Vermont and Delaware adopted similar plans in 2007, with targets of cutting child poverty in half by 2017. An Oregon benchmark calls for bringing the state poverty rate below 10 percent by 2010. Minnesota has targeted eliminating poverty by 2020, and a pending bill in Illinois would set a target to cut extreme poverty in half by 2015.

The huge costs of maintaining the current economic system make antipoverty reforms cost-effective. Increasing wages and expanding tax credits and subsidies could cut national poverty by more than 25 percent. The report expects that the federal government and the next presidential administration will begin to assume a larger role in tackling poverty.

The report is available at www.clasp.org/publications/clasp_report_0418.pdf.

States Leading Health Care Expansion Charge

Several states have begun implementing plans to expand health care access and move toward universal coverage over the last two years, but more must be done to improve access to—and quality of—care, according to the Commonwealth Fund's April 2008 report, *Identifying and Evaluating Equity Provisions in State Health Care Reform*. Researchers evaluated the effectiveness of recent health care initiatives in Massachusetts, Washington, Illinois, Pennsylvania, and California.

While the report highlights gains in reducing health care inequities, it laments that none of the state plans would result in truly universal coverage. It concludes that while health insurance coverage

is necessary to improve health care equity, it is not sufficient. The report urges states to resolve issues related to quality of care, particularly for minority and low-income individuals. Research shows that, even when insured, those groups tend to receive low-quality care. States must invest more in health care infrastructure in underserved communities and create incentives for medical professionals to practice in those areas. The report advocates increased health care data collection that factors in race, ethnicity, language status, and income.

The Massachusetts legislature passed in 2006 a health care bill which expanded eligibility for Medicaid and the State Children's Health Insurance Program (SCHIP) and created a state-funded program, Commonwealth Care Health Insurance Program, which subsidizes premiums for individuals

with incomes under 300 percent of the federal poverty level. Only U.S. citizens are eligible for these programs. The law requires businesses with ten or more employees to provide health care to employees or pay a fee of \$295 per employee per year. Residents who can afford health insurance must purchase it or pay a tax penalty.

Washington passed three health care bills in 2007. Income eligibility limits for SCHIP were raised to 250 percent of the federal poverty level in 2007 and will increase to 300 percent in 2009. Families with children and incomes above that level may buy into the program. The newly created Washington Health Insurance Partnership will offer small employers a variety of private plans and will provide premium subsidies for low-income employees.

Major health care expansion bills were proposed in Illinois, Pennsylvania, and California in 2007, but, to date, all have been stalled. The Illinois Covered Act would expand coverage for parents and caretakers of children with incomes up to 400 percent of the federal poverty level. A tax would be imposed on businesses that do not provide health insurance for employees. Under the Pennsylvania plan, the state would partner with private insurance carriers to offer uninsured adults and small businesses subsidized coverage options. The California bill would expand public coverage and set up a state purchasing program to administer health care plans through employers and individuals.

The report recognizes that many obstacles still stand in the way of achieving more equitable health coverage. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services guidelines deny federal matching funds to states that expand SCHIP eligibility beyond certain limits; many groups are left out of the state plans, particularly some childless adults and many legal and undocumented immigrants; and outreach efforts to eligible populations must be improved. States are urged to take advantage of the health care reform momentum, make universal health care a core goal of any plan, and closely monitor progress. The report is available at www.commonwealthfund.org/publications/publications_show.htm?doc_id=679040.

Child Poverty Stifles Brain Development

Children who grow up in poverty may suffer from stifled brain development and high levels of stress

that are toxic to the brain, according to an April 2008 report, *Child Poverty: A Preventable Epidemic*, from Action for Children North Carolina. The report analyzes national poverty research and North Carolina data and offers solutions to the child poverty epidemic.

Recent children's development research indicates that young brains develop primarily through relationships and mutual and reciprocal interactions with others. In low-income, high-stress households and communities, there may be less time and resources devoted to this development. In children poverty can create a constant and high level of stress that impairs the brain and can lead to learning disabilities and health problems, such as cardiovascular disease, diabetes, depression, anxiety, and substance abuse. Poverty becomes a self-perpetuating cycle since poor children are more likely than higher-income children to struggle in school, develop health problems, and rear their own children in poverty.

Nationally, of children born into the bottom fifth of income distribution, 42 percent will stay there. The child poverty rate in North Carolina is 20 percent, slightly higher than the U.S. rate. The rate for black children in North Carolina is 37 percent, compared to 10 percent for white children. While the highest rates of child poverty are found in rural counties, the highest numbers of poor children are found in cities, where there are more jobs but the cost of living is higher.

Employment does not necessarily provide a way out of poverty. In North Carolina 45 percent of children in poverty live with at least one full-time worker and 21 percent live with at least one part-time worker. The number of well-paying manufacturing jobs in the state declined 27 percent from 2000 to 2007. The new jobs that have been created are primarily in the low-wage, low-benefit service industry. From 2000 to 2007, wages for the lowest-paid 20 percent of workers declined.

The report recommends increased support for low-income families through higher wages and access to child care, housing, tax credits, and health insurance. Low-income communities must be strengthened, with investments in education and infrastructure such as banks. Saving and asset building should be encouraged; children's savings accounts can combat endemic poverty.

Fighting child poverty not only is a moral imperative but also represents sensible economic policy.

The report cites two recent government studies showing that high-poverty areas are associated with slow economic growth and that child poverty costs the United States \$500 billion a year in lost productivity and crime and health care costs.

The report is available at www.ncchild.org/action/images/stories/Poverty_Brief_final.pdf.

Domestic Violence Victims in D.C. Suffer Continued Housing Discrimination

Housing discrimination against domestic violence victims in the District of Columbia persists despite new legislation barring it, according to a 2008 study by the Equal Rights Center. Domestic violence victims seeking housing were denied housing or discriminated against 65 percent of the time. The findings were published in the center's report entitled *No Vacancy: Housing Discrimination Against Survivors of Domestic Violence in the District of Columbia*.

In May 2007 a D.C. city council law went into effect increasing legal protection for domestic violence victims faced with eviction or in need of new housing. The D.C. Human Rights Act added domestic violence victims to the list of classes protected from housing discrimination. The Act allows domestic violence victims to terminate their lease early in order to flee abuse or to use their victim status as a defense in eviction court.

The study, begun last January, tested compliance with this new law among housing providers. Using a "matched pair" system in which two testers—one representing a domestic violence victim, the other with no connection to domestic violence—placed phone calls to ninety-three rental properties, the study compared the treatment and rental terms and conditions offered to each.

In 9 percent of the rental properties, while housing was made available to testers with no connection to domestic violence, domestic violence applicants were told that no housing was available. In 56 percent of the rental properties, testers with no domestic violence connections were offered favorable treatment. This meant better rental prices, more available units, move-in incentives, appointments, return phone calls or e-mail, and more and better information. The most common form of discrimination was in the offering of appointments to see apartments. Testers with no domestic violence

connections were offered appointments 92 percent of the time, compared to 26 percent for domestic violence applicants. There were discrepancies in the number of apartment listings and callback opportunities given to testers. Domestic violence applicants were offered fewer listings in 22 percent and fewer callback opportunities in 84 percent of the rental properties.

The study draws alarming connections between domestic violence and homelessness. The District of Columbia has the highest rate of homelessness in the country. Half of its 12,000 to 16,000 homeless people are women and children. Domestic violence is the leading cause of homelessness for women. Many domestic violence victims leave housing to escape abuse. Others are evicted by landlords who are worried that abusers will cause disruptions or destroy property. New housing is difficult to obtain because prospective landlords worry that abusers will seek out victims at their new location.

The ninety-three rental properties were selected by ward, in percentages corresponding to reported domestic violence incidents. The report is available at www.equalrightscenter.org/publications/novacancy.php.

NELP Relaunches Unemployed Workers' Website

With the prospects of an economic recession threatening hardworking families, the National Employment Law Project (NELP) has relaunched an online forum to help the nation's jobless and underemployed workers better communicate with one another. The "Laid Off & Left Out" website, created after the 2001 recession, serves as a resource on programs and benefits available to the unemployed. A worker forum allows people to share their stories. The site helps mobilize jobless workers in support of extending unemployment insurance benefits. Access the website at www.unemployedworkers.org/.

Fair-Housing Advocacy Group Formed

Fair Housing for All, a national advocacy organization for affordable- and fair-housing attorneys, was formed in April on the fortieth anniversary of the Fair Housing Act. The group will push for legislative action on fair-housing issues, develop new strategies for fair-housing advocacy, work to ex-

pand the number of fair-housing attorneys, and facilitate communication among advocates, clients, and allies. The group is on the Web at www.fairhousingforall.org/.

New Medicaid Guide Available

The newly published *A Medicaid Advocate's Guide to Deference* is available from the National Health Law Program. A 78-page guide on deference to guidance from the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS), it contains an extensive listing of cases from each circuit addressing what degree of deference courts must give to written guidance from CMS. Public interest lawyers and legal aid advocates may request a copy; contact Sarah Somers at somers@healthlaw.org or 919.968.6771 ext. 103.

Online Discussion to Start in August on How to Deal with Section 8 Voucher Termination Hearings

CLEARINGHOUSE REVIEW will start an online discussion group in August on an article setting forth a wide range of best practices, culled from public housing authorities across the country, for use in Section 8 voucher termination hearings. The July–August 2008 REVIEW article by Eric Dunn, Ashley H. Fluhner, and Anisha Sundarraj describes ways that advocates can help foster similar practices by their own local housing authorities. Featuring additional resources prepared by the authors, the online discussion offers the opportunity to exchange ideas with the authors and other housing advocates from around the country. Anyone interested in this top-

ic is encouraged to register—a subscription to the REVIEW is not required. Visit http://groups.google.com/group/clearinghouserverview_phabestpractices to sign up today.

Online Discussion in Progress: Practitioners and Experts Comment on Affirmative Advocacy and Leadership Development

The online discussion that CLEARINGHOUSE REVIEW opened in April on affirmative advocacy and leadership development is in progress. More than a hundred discussants are registered.

The discussion focuses on two articles in the March–April 2008 REVIEW. In one article, Ross Dolloff, national training director of the Center for Legal Aid Education, argues that legal aid programs need to do more to engage in affirmative advocacy on behalf of their clients. In the other article, fellows of the Center for Legal Aid Education's leadership institute report that younger advocates may encounter barriers when seeking to develop themselves as leaders within their programs.

Practitioners and experts in poverty law from around the country are now sharing interesting questions and perspectives. The discussion is ongoing, and you are invited to participate. Registration is open-ended. Visit http://groups.google.com/group/clearinghouserverview_affirmativeadvocacy to sign up and encourage your colleagues to do the same—participants need not be subscribers to the REVIEW. Your views on the challenges facing the future of legal aid are welcome.

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