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for Inclusion

Poverty

HS MANAGERS URGED TO RETHINK PROBLEMS, REFOCUS ON PERSON

The problem is not poverty but the lack of a shared prosperity, according to a trio of panelists addressing human service professionals. Or, as one administrator put it, the lack of focus on the whole person, rather than particular needs through a variety of separate programs.

This was the message at a session exploring the state of the public conversation on social investments to reduce poverty held at the American Public Human Services Association's fall conference held in Crystal City, Va.

The nation needs a real economic debate that arrives at solutions scaled to the problems, argued Mark Levinson, senior fellow at the Economic Policy Institute. Citing income disparities (ETR 9/10/07, p. 7), Levinson riffed on the slogan on the Trenton Makes Bridge, which that connects Trenton, N.J., and Morrisville, Pa., over the Delaware River, as he described the relationship between worker productivity and wages: "we make it, they take it."

As Levinson explained it, workers have been "boxed" in the corporate agenda of globalization, small government and economic stability. In the name of labor market flexibility, he added, these notions translate into subminimum wages, union busting and the message to workers that EPI economist Jared Bernstein acronymizes as YOYO ("you're on your own").

In such a context, globalization becomes the excuse to offshore jobs to promote free trade, small government becomes the lynchpin for privatization, deregulation and tax cuts for the wealthy. The resulting stability for some relies on slow growth and unemployment.

Instead, Levinson offered the elements of EPI's Agenda for Shared Prosperity, which would involve empowering workers, growth and full employment,

public investment, "pro-worker" globalization, the elimination of poverty through education, a strong public sector and industrial policy.

Social Inclusion

To Margy Waller, director of the Mobility Agenda, the pivotal question in beginning to shift policy toward social investments is to learn to talk about poverty in a new way. Including avoiding the word "poverty," a term she replaces by referring to relative levels of "social inclusion."

Rather than ask whether some people "have enough to eat," Waller argued, society ought to measure "how people are doing in comparison to everyone else."

In the general U.S. perception, she explained, each individual is responsible for his or her own success or failure: with hard work comes reward. Most people believe the prevailing social goal should be equal opportunity rather than equal outcomes, she said. This is undergirded by the belief that "anyone can achieve the 'American Dream.'"

Drawing on research by public opinion analyst Meg Bostrom, Waller indicated that the U.S. public tends to think of the economy as "a force of nature, beyond anyone's control," that "should be unconstrained and free of government intervention."

The public sector, she said, is seen as "largely incompetent, not the solution to poverty. Government solutions are seen as intervening inappropriately in business or as providing charity." "Poverty is an individual, not a systemic, problem" in the American public's view, or else it is seen as a condition attributable to "bad choices, moral weakness, or character flaws," Waller said.

"Note that people can hold contradictory beliefs simultaneously, such as that 'people are poor because jobs 'suck' or because 'they made bad decisions,'" she pointed out.

Talking about poverty as a matter of sympathy for the poor deprives the public of the opportunity to see how everyone is connected in the economy. "We all

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fare better when no one is let fall too far behind and the economy works for everyone,” she said.

Dysfunction

“Dysfunction” was the key to Clarence Carter, acting director of the District of Columbia Department of Human Services, in referring to the national system to assist the poor. “The system is government-centric, operates in silos, lacking in a shared vision, technologically immature, maintenance-based and program-centric.”

The solution is to become “person-centric.”

“Our objective ought to be able to grow the capacity of families that present to us their need,” Carter said.

Explaining that he came from a background of administering food stamps, Carter recalled that in that work he had been only been required to get the stamps to the right people in the right amount and in a timely manner.

“This goes beyond politics,” he said. “The Right says, ‘Do it yourself’ and the Left says, ‘You don’t have to do it, we’ll do it for you.’ They’re both wrong. We need mutual responsibility. We need a compassionate society that creates the enabling conditions for everyone to walk in their own path.”

Asked for specifics from colleagues in the room, Carter explained that his agency has been asked to plan a way to end homelessness in Washington, D.C. His staff is considering every element, from shelter, to education, to employment and beyond.

“The way the programs are organized, I can’t do it,” he said. “That’s why, when we have a plan, we’ll be able to go to the feds and tell them what rules are obstacles to the goal.”

—Cecilio Morales