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To: President-Elect Barack Obama
CC: U.S. Congress
From: Shriver Center

In re: Antipoverty Recommendations

1. Strengthen Civil Rights
2. Reform Health Care
3. Fortify Safety Net
4. Solve Federal Fiscal Problem
5. Preserve Affordable Rental Housing
6. Exercise Executive Clemency
7. Foster Career Advancement
8. Link Economic and Workforce Development
9. Ensure Quality Child Care for Workers
10. Build and Protect Assets
11. Legalize Immigrants
12. Guarantee Leave Policies for Women



The Shriver Center's Twelve-Point National Agenda: Poverty-Fighting Ideas for a New Administration

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Through its Congressional Scorecard and other communications efforts, the Sargent Shriver National Center on Poverty Law has sought to highlight the critical role of the federal government in addressing the needs of low-income people.¹ As a nation, the United States knows a great deal about how to take action to end poverty. But in recent years the need for such action has largely been ignored. We are hopeful that in 2009 and beyond the millions in our country who live in poverty amid great wealth will receive the attention they deserve and benefit from implementation of both proven and new policies that will help them leave poverty behind.

In May–June 2006 the Shriver Center published a *CLEARINGHOUSE REVIEW* special issue entitled *What the Federal Government Must Do to End Poverty*. Encouraged by the enthusiastic response to that issue, and by recent indications that policymakers are seeking affirmative solutions to poverty, we are publishing, shortly after the 2008 elections, this special issue focusing on an antipoverty agenda for the new president and new Congress.

This issue of the *REVIEW* is built around the Shriver Center's twelve-point agenda for fighting poverty.² The Shriver Center developed the agenda as part of its effort to elevate the issue nationally and help build understanding of the multiple interrelated as-

¹See SARGENT SHRIVER NATIONAL CENTER ON POVERTY LAW, *POVERTY SCORECARD 2007: RATING MEMBERS OF CONGRESS (2008)*, www.povertylaw.org/advocacy/publications/2007-scorecard.

²See www.povertylaw.org/advocacy/state-of-poverty-congressional-project. For each point, the agenda also suggests important areas of advocacy on the federal and state levels and updates the suggestions annually.

pects of poverty and the strategies available to attack it effectively. We believe that, for our leaders to claim they have a comprehensive agenda to fight poverty, they should have major initiatives in all twelve of the issue areas of the agenda.³

Each of the twelve points could fill an issue—or series of issues—of the REVIEW. The purpose of this issue of the REVIEW is to illustrate each topic and discuss at least one major strategic initiative related to it. These articles, then, are an attempt not to treat the topics exhaustively but rather to highlight one federal policy, among the many that could be undertaken, which experience teaches would reduce poverty.

The analytical yet pragmatic articles are written by practicing attorneys and scholars, informed by their direct experience in representing low-income people. Consequently this special issue, while discussing poverty on a broad policy level, primarily focuses on tangible solutions to the problems facing low-income people. We invite and encourage advocates and the members of the new Congress and new administration to take these suggestions and run with them, and to use them as examples of even more activity within each of the twelve areas.

In brief, these are the twelve areas of our national agenda to fight poverty:

1. Strengthen the Legal Foundation for Civil Rights and Racial Justice

Americans overwhelmingly believe that everyone should have a fair and equal opportunity to live a decent life. Nevertheless, America still suffers from systemic discrimination that denies opportunity to certain groups. Overcoming discrimination and guaranteeing opportunity

are essential cornerstones of the fight against poverty.

Those most in need of protection from discrimination are likely to be poor and are disproportionately female and members of minority groups. Moreover, people who are poor are less likely to participate in the development of public policies. Civil rights laws are often the only protection poor people have against harmful and unfair treatment, and access to legal representation is essential for this protection to have meaning.

A national agenda on civil rights and racial justice must advocate vigorous public and private enforcement of the civil rights laws at the federal and state levels and strict enforcement of the right to vote. To secure equal access to the justice and public policy systems, the agenda must emphasize access to the full range of legal advice and representation in individual matters and public policy concerns.⁴

2. Establish Affordable Quality Health Care for All

Health care is crucial to individual and family opportunity and well-being; essential to employability, productivity, and the ability to learn; and central to families' sense of economic well-being and control. All Americans, those with insurance and those without, are deeply concerned about the health care system. Every year insurance costs more and covers less. Health care itself is increasingly expensive, and every family is a health care crisis away from deep financial trouble. Families feel at the mercy of entrenched interests with large profits. Everyone faces the ultimate nightmare of loss of insurance followed by permanent exile from the ranks of the insured, due to a preexisting condition.

³The Sargent Shriver National Center on Poverty Law derived its agenda from its own experienced staff's judgments and research, developed over decades of representing low-income individuals, groups, and communities. Much of the content is also owed to the Shriver Center's long-standing relationships with other leading antipoverty advocates and researchers around the country. Those relationships are exemplified by the variety of authors of the articles in this and every issue of CLEARINGHOUSE REVIEW. The Shriver Center's twelve-point agenda is our own take on a comprehensive approach to poverty. But we do not claim an exclusive legitimacy for it, and we welcome and appreciate other points of view. The Center for American progress developed a remarkably similar agenda; see CENTER FOR AMERICAN PROGRESS, FROM POVERTY TO PROSPERITY: A NATIONAL STRATEGY TO CUT POVERTY IN HALF (2007), www.americanprogress.org/issues/2007/04/pdf/poverty_report.pdf.

⁴See 36 CLEARINGHOUSE REVIEW (May–June 2002) (special issue: Pursuing Racial Justice) and *id.* (July–Aug. 2002) (special issue: Pursuing Racial Justice (Part 2)).

Moreover, forty-seven million Americans have no health care insurance. The uninsured are sicker and die sooner. They have trouble on the job because they are frequently sick at work or preoccupied with family health problems. They have crushing medical debt, which is also a leading cause of family stress and breakdown.

Quality, affordable health care choices for every person in America are essential to the fight against poverty, to opportunity for all, and to the protection of those who have made it into the middle class.

3. Guarantee Economic Safety for People with Employment Challenges

The unemployment rate boomed in the second half of 2008, increasing a full percentage point between March (5.1 percent) and August (6.1 percent)—9.4 million Americans are officially unemployed.⁵ The rate in high-risk groups—young adults in economically and racially isolated communities, individuals reentering society from prison, homeless veterans, children aging out of foster care, and others—is always especially high. And many of the longer-term or chronically unemployed are not captured in the official unemployment rate at all. Most of these individuals want to enter or reenter the workforce but need assistance in doing so. But some cannot work due to a disability, caring for a disabled family member, or other larger economic forces. A humane and reliable safety net should be in place for all who cannot work or are in need of employment assistance.⁶

4. Invest in the Public Good Through Fair Budget and Tax Policies

The national revenue system has been in the hands of “starve the beast” ideologues who have pursued a strategy to shrink revenues through tax cuts, thereby increasing the deficit and creating

the rationale for cutting necessary entitlements and programs serving human needs. This ideology subordinates public policy and problem solving to a doctrinaire devotion to small government.⁷ It allows political leaders to abdicate responsibility for making difficult choices regarding support for programs and options for dealing with pressing problems—choices that disproportionately affect low-income people.

The federal government has a crucial role in the fight against poverty, and this role sometimes requires funds. Budget priorities and revenue decisions should be driven by factors adequately supporting the strategies needed to fight poverty and create opportunity.

5. Preserve Our Nation's Rental Housing

All over the country, low-income families, seniors, and persons with disabilities face a shortage of safe, affordable rental housing. Housing is essential to stability and is the nexus for other activities necessary to escape poverty (education, employment, family, health, safety). By repealing laws that required replacement of demolished or obsolete federal housing, promoting the loss of private-market federally assisted housing, or slashing the budgets of cash-strapped housing authorities, our leaders have worsened one of our nation's most daunting crises. Substantial federal and state leadership is necessary to reverse this disinvestment that is making every kind of publicly supported low-income housing less available.

The federal government must preserve federal subsidies for more than 1.4 million private-owner units whose availability as low-income housing is threatened by a tide of contract expirations, opt-out policies, disrepair, disinvestment, and more. The government must also prevent unnecessary public housing demolition and public housing pro-

⁵See Bureau of Labor Statistics, *Economy at a Glance* (Sept. 23, 2008), www.bls.gov/eag/eag.us.htm.

⁶See, e.g., John Bouman & Joseph Antolin, *Attacking Poverty by Attacking Chronic Unemployment: A Proposal to Stabilize and Grow the Transitional Jobs Strategy*, 40 CLEARINGHOUSE REVIEW 105 (May–June 2006).

⁷Gary D. Bass et al, *Deconstructing the Argument for a Small and Passive Government*, 40 CLEARINGHOUSE REVIEW 53 (May–June 2006).

grams' gross underfunding, which leaves housing authorities with insufficient maintenance funds.⁸ Finally the government must salvage the Housing Choice Voucher Program, which enables low-income tenants to exercise choice in the private rental market.

6. Create Redemptive Opportunities for People with Criminal Records

For too long, policymakers have been “tough on crime” without being “smart on crime.” The “tough” policies have done little good and often much harm to those who are convicted and imprisoned—who are disproportionately poor, minorities, and suffering from mental illness or substance-abuse disorders—and to their communities.⁹

Crime policy intersects with antipoverty policy in that those with criminal records become an unofficial but very real underclass: barred or marginalized in employment, housing, education, family life, and many other areas of civic and personal life.¹⁰ People return to communities and families from prisons every year; their difficult circumstances cannot be ignored and affect us all.

Congress and the states need to rethink and revise what they define as crimes and what sanctions are appropriate to impose on those convicted of crimes. The government should examine the barriers that interfere with postprison life for those with convictions, limit those barriers to ones that are rational in light of the offense, and improve the accuracy of and limit access to and use of criminal records for non-law-enforcement purposes.

7. Increase Economic Mobility Through Lifelong Education

From preschool through higher education, from Adult Basic Education to Eng-

lish as a Second Language, and from pre-employment soft-skills training through vocational training at all skill levels, quality education affords one of the best routes out of poverty and the opportunity to lead an economically and socially rewarding life. For the growing population of people stuck in low-wage work, education and vocational skills are the surest way into jobs with family-sustaining wages and benefits. Postsecondary education must be redesigned to meet the needs of these low-wage workers, with “workers who study” being an equivalent college constituency to “students who work.”

Great disparities abound across the country and within states and localities in access to and the quality of education at all levels. Low-income people are generally on the losing side. Policies must change to ensure a greater investment in quality education that is integrated with labor market needs, and in financial aid policies designed for working adults, so that everyone has true equal opportunity.

8. Link Economic Development to Workforce Development Opportunities

Integrating economic development and workforce development can reach three primary goals—a strong and vibrant economy that is globally competitive, economic security for workers, and an end to poverty.¹¹ Poverty affects not only individuals but also the U.S. economy as a whole.¹² Integrating economic development and workforce development will work for everyone if it produces skilled workers with good jobs in strong businesses that foster thriving communities.

Realizing this vision will require policies ensuring that individuals develop the skills that businesses demand in a mod-

⁸William P. Wilen, *Successfully Redeveloping Public Housing*, 40 CLEARINGHOUSE REVIEW 113 (May–June 2006).

⁹Maria Foscarinis & Rebecca K. Troth, *Reentry and Homelessness: Alternatives to Recidivism*, 39 CLEARINGHOUSE REVIEW 440 (Nov.–Dec. 2005). See also 41 CLEARINGHOUSE REVIEW 115–258 (July–August 2007) (Special Issue: The Shadow of Criminal Records—What's a Civil Lawyer to Do?).

¹⁰Anthony C. Thompson & Debbie A. Mukamal, *Permitting a New Start for People with Criminal Records*, 40 CLEARINGHOUSE REVIEW 124 (May–June 2006). See also 41 CLEARINGHOUSE REVIEW 115–258, *supra* note 10.

¹¹See 37 CLEARINGHOUSE REVIEW (July–Aug. 2003) (special issue: Economic Development Strategies for Individuals and Communities).

¹²U.S. GOVERNMENT ACCOUNTABILITY OFFICE, GAO-07-344, POVERTY IN AMERICA: ECONOMIC RESEARCH SHOWS ADVERSE IMPACTS ON HEALTH STATUS AND OTHER SOCIAL CONDITIONS AS WELL AS THE ECONOMIC GROWTH (2007).

ern economy; creating career paths and job opportunities for all working-age individuals, from the least skilled and most disadvantaged to middle-income workers whose skills have become obsolete; investing resources in the capital and human infrastructure needed to attract and retain “high road” employers that provide quality jobs, wages, and benefits; encouraging entrepreneurship, small-business growth, and other economic or workforce development innovation in all communities in order to foster competitive businesses; and supporting economic and workforce development that is environmentally, socially, and economically sustainable.

9. Advance Low-Wage Workers by Making Work Pay

Too many families with full-time workers are falling deeper into poverty in the United States, where the income gap is unhealthy and growing. A national agenda to end poverty must improve economic stability and upward mobility for low-income workers and their families. Minimum-wage laws, supplemented with earned income and other low-income tax credits, can increase earnings. Low-income workers need work-enabling supports such as quality, affordable child care, food stamps, health insurance, and transportation assistance.¹³ These work supports must phase out gradually as family income increases, avoiding eligibility “cliffs” and ending entirely only when families reach an income level at which supports are no longer needed.¹⁴ People on welfare who go to work should experience increased net income through a generous earnings disregard.¹⁵ And low-wage workers should be able to balance work and family responsibilities.¹⁶ Paid sick leave

that fulfills caregiving responsibilities to an ill family member would benefit both workers and employers by enhancing job stability.

10. Build and Protect Assets for Financial Stability and Growth

Nearly one in every five American households owes more than it owns. Tax policies favor those who already have the most assets. Predatory lending drains billions of dollars from low-income families and communities. We are seeing the results of this drain in the current mortgage foreclosure crisis, which harms homeowners, tenants who live in foreclosed properties, and entire communities. Promoting the availability of loan modification—for example, as an option under court supervision in bankruptcy proceedings—could help mitigate these harms.

Asset building is a key component of an antipoverty agenda because each of us needs financial security to weather today’s challenges and plan for tomorrow, for our children and ourselves. We need policies that expand asset-building opportunities to complement traditional income-support programs, policies that encourage investment in unbanked and underserved communities, homeownership, retirement security, and consumer protections against abusive consumer and mortgage lending. Asset limits should be removed from the eligibility criteria for public benefits—to encourage savings.

11. Protect Access to the American Dream for Immigrants and Refugees

The United States, a nation of immigrants whose diverse contributions are

¹³Sujatha Jagadeesh Branch et al., *Child Care for Families Leaving Temporary Assistance for Needy Families*, 34 CLEARINGHOUSE REVIEW 527 (Jan.–Feb. 2001); Jocelyn Guyer, *Health Care for Low-Income Working Families After Welfare Reform*, *id.* at 563 (Jan.–Feb. 2001).

¹⁴See John Bouman et al., *Improving Work Supports: Using the Family Resource Simulator to Identify Problems and Test Solutions*, 41 CLEARINGHOUSE REVIEW 582 (March–April 2008), which graphs the impact of cliffs and describes policy solutions.

¹⁵Maurice Emsellem et al., *Income Supports Can Dramatically Increase Resources Available for Lower-Income Working Families*, 34 CLEARINGHOUSE REVIEW 509 (Jan.–Feb. 2001).

¹⁶John M. Bouman, Margaret Stapleton & Deb McKee, *Time Limits, Employment, and State Flexibility in TANF Programming: How States Can Use Time Limits and Earnings Disregards to Support Employment Goals, Preserve Flexibility, and Meet Stricter Federal Participation Requirements*, 37 CLEARINGHOUSE REVIEW 289 (Sept.–Oct. 2003).

a source of strength, should adopt policies that allow newcomers to integrate into U.S. society smoothly and expeditiously. More than one of every four low-income children in the United States has an immigrant parent, and noncitizens are almost twice as likely to live in poverty as citizens. Thus antipoverty policy must consider the particular needs and circumstances of immigrants.¹⁷ Barriers that prevent immigrants from accessing public benefits must be removed.¹⁸ Comprehensive immigration reform must extend full labor protections to all workers regardless of their immigration status, promote family reunification, and blaze a path to legalization for hardworking undocumented immigrants. Such reform would enhance the rights of all low-income workers by enabling vulnerable immigrants to emerge from the shadows.

12. Ensure Economic Opportunity and Safety for Women and Girls

The most prominent faces of the poor in the United States are those of women and children. In 2006 adult women were 41 percent more likely to be poor than adult men. The poverty gap between women and men persists even when factors such as age, work experience, education, or family structure are taken into account. And children under 18 represented 35.2 percent of all people living in poverty. Women and their children bear a disproportionate share of the cost of poverty.

Despite widespread attention and public outcry, women still earn only 77 cents for every dollar earned by men. The fundamentally unequal ways in which work and family are perceived and practiced necessitate targeted advocacy for women and girls. Congress should strengthen women's ability to challenge pay discrimination in federal court and guarantee paid leave for employees attending to family responsibilities.

¹⁷See 38 CLEARINGHOUSE REVIEW (Sept.–Oct. 2004) (special issue: Representing Immigrant Families).

¹⁸See, e.g., Dan Lesser, *Illinois's New SSI Replacement Program for Refugees and Asylees: An Advocacy Success Story*, 38 CLEARINGHOUSE REVIEW 402 (Sept.–Oct. 2004).

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