



Seizing the Moment

STATE GOVERNMENTS and THE NEW COMMITMENT TO REDUCE POVERTY IN AMERICA

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The Center for Law and Social Policy (CLASP) is a national nonprofit that works to improve the lives of low-income people. CLASP's mission is to improve the economic security, educational and workforce prospects, and family stability of low-income parents, children, and youth and to secure equal justice for all.

CLASP has played a key role in the re-emergence of poverty and opportunity in recent public discourse. In 2006 CLASP published "Targeting Poverty: Taking Aim at A Bull's Eye" which telescoped the potential for a new political climate toward those struggling to make ends meet. In addition to tracking developments around the nation, CLASP provides technical assistance related to raising the political profile of poverty and opportunity. Look for CLASP audio conferences and issue briefs on a range of topics such as: Poverty-Reduction Targets: What State Legislators Aim to Do; Poverty Ruler: Toward a Better Measurement Tool; Target Practice: Lessons from Targets that Hit at Air Quality and Homelessness; Developed Nation: What and Why Poverty Targets are Policy in Ireland, Canada, France, the UK and More.

Please contact Jodie Levin-Epstein at jodie@clasp.org for the schedule of audio conferences and to share developments in your community or state.

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Spotlight on Poverty and Opportunity: Foundations Ask Presidential Candidates What They'll Do for America is a new initiative supported by American foundations to develop sustained political will on the pressing issues of poverty and opportunity. *Spotlight* starts by engaging candidates in substantive discussions about poverty in our country and eliciting ideas and perspectives about what must be done. The *Spotlight* Web site offers the latest research and news from around the country and features compelling commentary from leading public figures and experts. Through ongoing forums, discussions, and outreach, *Spotlight* will seek to ensure that poverty and opportunity are on the national agenda long after the elections are over. For more information, visit www.spotlightonpoverty.org.

State Governments and the New Commitment to Reduce Poverty in America

Overview

BY THIS TIME NEXT YEAR, THE COUNTRY WILL HAVE A NEW PRESIDENT. Whether our next leader is a Republican, Democrat, or Independent, the change in leadership is an opportunity for us to reconsider the kind of nation we hope to be.

The next administration will determine whether, and to what extent, to make visible those who struggle to make ends meet in our changing economy. It is encouraging that candidates are offering policy proposals on how to tackle poverty. And it is helpful that these proposals are gaining attention and being tracked through efforts such as the foundation-led Spotlight on Poverty and Opportunity (www.spotlightonpoverty.org), the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life¹ and The Sargent Shriver National Center on Poverty Law.²

Yet policy proposals, while essential, are not sufficient. Too often they get stuck on the page, achieving little. Fortunately, policymakers in a growing number of states have raised the political profile of economic opportunity for all. The trend has been fast-paced—most of the political attention has emerged in just the last two years. The new president should build upon this fresh political landscape.

State governments are bringing political attention to poverty and opportunity in many ways, including poverty-reduction targets that set a specific goal and timeline; commissions that conclude with recommendations for action; legislative caucuses that seek to foster both legislators' expertise and bipartisan solutions; and government-sponsored summits.

The trend includes city governments, too. A recent analysis of city efforts from the National League of Cities' Institute for Youth, Education, and Families is a helpful guide for others looking to raise the profile of poverty and opportunity.³ Last year, the U.S. Conference of Mayors' Task Force on Poverty issued a strategic set of priority recommendations.⁴ And CLASP will soon issue a summary of recommendations from the three cities (New York, Providence, and Milwaukee) that most recently released task force reports.

State governments' political attention to poverty and opportunity is substantial, fast-paced, and growing:

- ◆ 12 states—nearly one in four—have established initiatives⁵
- ◆ 10 states—one in five—established their initiatives in 2006 or 2007
- ◆ 4 states already have initiative proposals pending this year⁶

These state initiatives provide evidence of a political sea-change toward poverty and opportunity. States are seizing the moment and creating a new political climate. A concerted federal focus should follow. Our next president should give leadership, political capital, and priority attention to policies and programs that effectively help provide opportunity for all.

Reasons for the renewed attention to poverty and opportunity vary. They include:

- ◆ *Upward mobility, the theme of the American Dream, may be mere myth:* “Contrary to American beliefs about equality of opportunity, a child’s economic position is heavily influenced by that of his or her parents. Forty-two percent of children born to parents in the bottom fifth of the income distribution remain in the bottom, while 39 percent born to parents in the top fifth remain at the top,” according to the Economic Mobility Project.⁷
- ◆ *The dramatic gap between rich and poor has grown worrisome to the federal government:* Federal Reserve Board Chairman Ben Bernanke notes that unchecked growth in income inequality could threaten the nation’s “dynamism” and that “the challenge for policy is... to spread economic opportunity as widely as possible” by promoting “policies that focus on education, job training, and skills and that facilitate job search and job mobility.”⁸
- ◆ *A recession, a time when economic insecurity touches more lives, also increases the number who live in poverty:* Depending on its severity, that number would increase by between 4.7 and 10.4 million people by 2010. A recession would also increase the national poverty rate, now 12.3 percent, by an estimated 1.6 to 3.5 percentage points.⁹

If our nation’s past is prologue, we can make great strides toward providing opportunity and reducing poverty. In recent decades, the national poverty rate has declined substantially: from 22.4 percent in 1959 to 12.3 percent in 2006.¹⁰ So there has been much progress to celebrate.

But most of this was achieved by the 1970s; the country has been in basically the same place ever since.¹¹ Significantly, the U.S. stands second only to Mexico¹² as having the worst rate of relative poverty among the world’s developed nations.¹³ And many living above the federal poverty guideline—\$21,200 a year for a family of four—also struggle.¹⁴ Most experts agree that our poverty measure should be updated to more realistically account for new income streams (*e.g.*, the Earned Income Tax Credit) and common expenses (*e.g.*, child care).¹⁵ Indeed, a number of the task forces giving political attention to poverty are also attuned to the value of revisiting how we measure it. By whatever measure, it is clear that too many in our rich nation are not thriving.

It is time to re-examine the kind of nation we want to be. In America today:

- ◆ *Medical costs, often hard to absorb, propel some children into foster care:* A state study found that one-quarter of its foster-care caseload was made up of children whose parents,

faced with unaffordable bills for child mental-health services, got the needed care by putting their child into the foster-care system, which provides Medicaid.¹⁶

- ◆ *Hunger, even with emergency response systems, persists:* Seventeen percent of people in need of emergency food assistance are not receiving the necessary help, according to a 2007 U.S. Conference of Mayors survey of cities.¹⁷
- ◆ *Shelter, when it is available, often consumes more than half a family's income:* Six million low-income households either pay more than half of their income for rent and utilities or live in severely substandard housing.¹⁸
- ◆ *Work, even full-time year-round work, can leave people in poverty:* A third of poor families with children include a *full-time, year-round worker*.¹⁹ Three million *full-time* workers live below the poverty line; in the last several decades, the share of poor adults and youth who work full-time has grown by 50 percent.²⁰ Nearly 60 percent of families below 200 percent of poverty have a full-time, year-round worker.²¹

There are solutions. We can afford them. According to the Center for American Progress (CAP) report “From Poverty to Prosperity,” poverty could be cut by more than 25 percent just by increasing the minimum wage, Earned Income Tax Credits, Child Tax Credits, and child care subsidies. CAP also urges additional steps that would cut poverty by 50 percent within a decade.

While reducing poverty costs money, *sustaining* it is very expensive. CAP estimates it costs the nation about half a *trillion* dollars each year to allow persistent childhood poverty to continue. There may be literal gates between today's poor and prosperous communities, but there is no way to lock out poverty from our national economy or our future.

Seizing the Moment provides new information in three areas:

Will: evidence of growing political and public will

Targets: rationale for setting numerical goals and timelines

State Initiatives: snapshot of government developments

This report details the state-government initiatives through a snapshot, narratives, and charts.

WILL

Political and public will to tackle poverty and opportunity has turned a new corner

For at least the last decade, most politicians have been content to keep their distance from issues around poverty, inequality, and mobility. Senator Tom Daschle tells a story about the late Senator Paul Wellstone's 1997 decision to tour the same poor communities Robert Kennedy visited 30 years earlier. One of Wellstone's staffers told him, "We don't talk about poverty."²² The senator, a rare political figure, disregarded this advice and went forward with his tour.

The recent political rise of poverty and opportunity in states and cities demonstrates a dramatic shift. Other developments also signal that we've turned a corner.

Presidential candidates in both parties have made statements on poverty and opportunity.

- ◆ Republican John McCain stated that he "will make the eradication of poverty a top priority of the McCain Administration. A strong and vibrant America, one in which people can move up into the middle-class, put their kids through college, work hard and one day retire in dignity, is critical not only to our economic future but to the very security of our nation. As president, I will set aside the needs of the special interests to advance the interests of the American people, especially those 12 million children who deserve every opportunity to achieve the American Dream."²³
- ◆ Democrats Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama have poverty platforms. Clinton calls for a new Cabinet-level post focused on poverty and sets a goal of cutting child poverty in half by 2020 and ending child hunger by 2012.²⁴ Obama's includes a focus on concentrated urban poverty and calls for a White House Office on Urban Policy.²⁵ Both wrote articles for "War on Poverty," the inaugural issue of Stanford University's *Pathways* magazine.

A variety of opinion polls indicate majority support for tackling poverty in the campaign and for electing candidates who will do so. This extends to local elections.

- ◆ Fifty-eight percent of likely voters are more likely to vote for a presidential candidate who set a goal of cutting poverty in half within a decade. Of those, 69 percent would back such a candidate even if the poverty cut required significantly higher federal spending.²⁶
- ◆ Fifty-four percent of Americans do not believe that "political candidates have spent an adequate amount of time discussing hunger and poverty issues."²⁷
- ◆ Seventy-one percent of those polled about child poverty in four early primary states are more likely to vote for a presidential candidate whose "agenda on children included provid-

ing greater economic opportunities and resources to help lift...children and families out of poverty.”²⁸

- ◆ Seventy-six percent of those polled about *local* community issues said that when they are voting they “think about how well a candidate would help those struggling to make ends meet.”²⁹

Technical assistance and poverty campaigns by national organizations are multiplying.

- ◆ In 2007, the National Governors Association Center for Best Practices and the National Conference of State Legislatures hosted a three-day institute to help state policymakers develop strategies to reduce child and family poverty. Teams, comprised of both executive and legislative branch officials, worked together to develop action plans for their state. Ten states—Arizona, Colorado, Connecticut, Iowa, Illinois, Kansas, Michigan, Minnesota, Vermont, and Washington—participated.
- ◆ Poverty-reduction targets, promoted by CLASP and others, are central to advocacy campaigns by a range of national organizations. (*See Targets.*)
- ◆ The Food Research and Action Center’s *Campaign to End Childhood Hunger*, The Center for Community Change’s *Campaign for Community Values*, The Sargent Shriver National Center on Poverty Law’s *The State of Poverty Campaign*, the U.S. Catholic Conference of Bishops’ *Catholic Campaign for Human Development*, and the Community Action Network’s *Rooting Out Poverty* are among a growing number of re-energized advocacy efforts.

Regional non-profit efforts that promote collaboration are developing.

- ◆ The Northwest Area Foundation funds Horizons, an 18-month community leadership development program delivered into small rural and Indian reservation communities by university extension and tribal colleges. The program aims to reduce poverty in eight mostly northwestern states (OR, WA, ID, MT, ND, SD, IA, and MN) through strengthened civic engagement and a collective decision to take action. Approximately 200 communities have participated since the program’s full launch in 2006.
- ◆ A New England Region Poverty Consortium of child advocacy organizations in six states (CT, RI, MA, NH, VT, and ME) was launched in 2007. The consortium, which has support from Voices for America’s Children, expects to identify common issues and to swap policy ideas and winning strategies.
- ◆ The YWCA Great Lakes Alliance Region has established anti-poverty policy advocacy as the primary focus for its 2008–2011 agenda. Nearly 60 YWCAs in the six-state region

(IL, IN, MI, MO, OH, and WI) will receive advocacy training and technical assistance and will participate in targeted issue campaigns that foster the reduction of poverty and increase economic justice, particularly for women and girls.

Media coverage of poverty and opportunity is increasing and may have political implications.

- ◆ In this presidential campaign cycle, print articles that touch on both domestic poverty and the election are 145 percent more frequent than in the last cycle.³⁰
- ◆ Poverty coverage includes a range of themes, as illustrated by these Midwest papers in December 2007:
 - *Paradox exists between poverty, plenty*, Fond du Lac Reporter (WI)³¹
 - *Special report: Our hidden poor*, Chicago Tribune (IL)³²
 - *We all lose when poverty grows*, Cincinnati Enquirer (OH)³³
 - *Poverty is biggest threat to state children*, Detroit News (MI)³⁴
 - *Poverty, taxes and community*, Fort Wayne Journal Gazette (IN)³⁵

A call for increased attention to U.S. poverty and opportunity has moved inside a broader tent. Action is now urged by prominent conservatives.

- ◆ Bill Hybels, a national evangelical leader, asserts that many in his movement want to get beyond two or three traditional issues and “are interested in the poor, in racial reconciliation, in global poverty and AIDS, in the plight of women in the developing world.”³⁶
- ◆ Michael Gerson, a former speechwriter for President Bush, argues forcefully that “if Republicans run in future elections with a simplistic antigovernment message, ignoring the poor, the addicted, and children at risk, they will lose, and they will deserve to lose.”³⁷
- ◆ Douglas MacKinnon, a writer for Presidents Reagan and George H.W. Bush, argues that both parties should give the poor more respect and a “place at the table,” most notably a direct voice at Congressional hearings.³⁸

TARGETS

*Poverty-reduction targets—numerical goals and timelines—
are important policy tools*

A target consists of a set of choices, including: population (*e.g.*, all individuals, only children, only the persistently poor), area (*e.g.*, the state, a city, some wards), numerical goal (*e.g.*, cut poverty by 25 percent, 50 percent, or more), and timeline (*e.g.*, 10, 20, or 30 years). Further, the measure of poverty should be

selected (e.g., the current federal poverty line, some adaptation), as should the agency responsible for oversight and reporting. These decisions can make the target an invaluable policy tool.

To be useful, however, a poverty target needs to be taken out of the policy toolbox and sharpened through ongoing attention. Periodic progress reports are key. In addition, neither policy leaders nor the public should shy away from the possibility that targets may not always be met. There is value in a mid-course correction when something is not working or when a better policy idea becomes evident.

Targets offer four broad advantages. They are:

- ◆ **Shared.** Targets establish a shared acknowledgement that current poverty rates are unacceptable and a shared vision around the need for solutions. They create both an explicit goal and a timeline to give this vision shared urgency and priority.
- ◆ **Simple.** Targets are simple to understand, allowing the vision to be readily grasped, not just by the policymakers who create it but also by the agency officials who implement it, the media that cover it, and the community that wants something done. A target's simplicity also means that everyone can appreciate reports on how much progress is or is not being made.
- ◆ **Silo-busting.** “Shared” and “simple” targets foster interagency cooperation and break down program “silos”—because a target is not directed at a single program but instead challenges the whole government to consider what can be done. In the U.K., officials assert that this has been an unexpected benefit of their target to eliminate child poverty by 2020. The target's ability to bust silos was also noted by the then-commissioner of Connecticut's Department of Social Services (DSS) when it adopted a specific poverty target—because DSS was no longer tackling child poverty alone.
- ◆ **Solution-building.** Targets provide a shared vision; they do not delineate how the targets should be met. Prioritizing, funding, implementing, and adapting solutions over time requires thoughtful and ongoing deliberations. If a policy proposal is rejected when a target is in place, those rejecting it have to generate another of equal anticipated benefit. A target propels a focus on ways to achieve the goal.

In Congress and in a growing number of national organizations, a national poverty-reduction target is on the agenda.

As the campaign theme of Catholic Charities USA notes, an effective target could “Cut Poverty in Half; Make the Nation Whole.”

Some of the national organizations calling for a poverty-reduction target focus on child poverty, while others focus on overall poverty. Each calls for cutting poverty at least in half, and most have a 10-year time frame.

The organizations that promote a target that would cut *child* poverty in half include:

- ◆ Congressional Black Caucus Foundation
- ◆ Christian Churches Together
- ◆ Sojourners

National groups that support a target that would cut *overall* poverty in half include:

- ◆ Catholic Charities USA
- ◆ Bread for the World
- ◆ Center for American Progress
- ◆ Coalition on Human Needs
- ◆ Leadership Conference on Civil Rights
- ◆ Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now

In the U.S. House of Representatives, a Sense of Congress resolution passed on January 22, 2008; which called for a national goal to cut poverty in half over the next 10 years. By communicating the “sense” of Congress, this measure represents an initial Congressional step toward a target set through law.

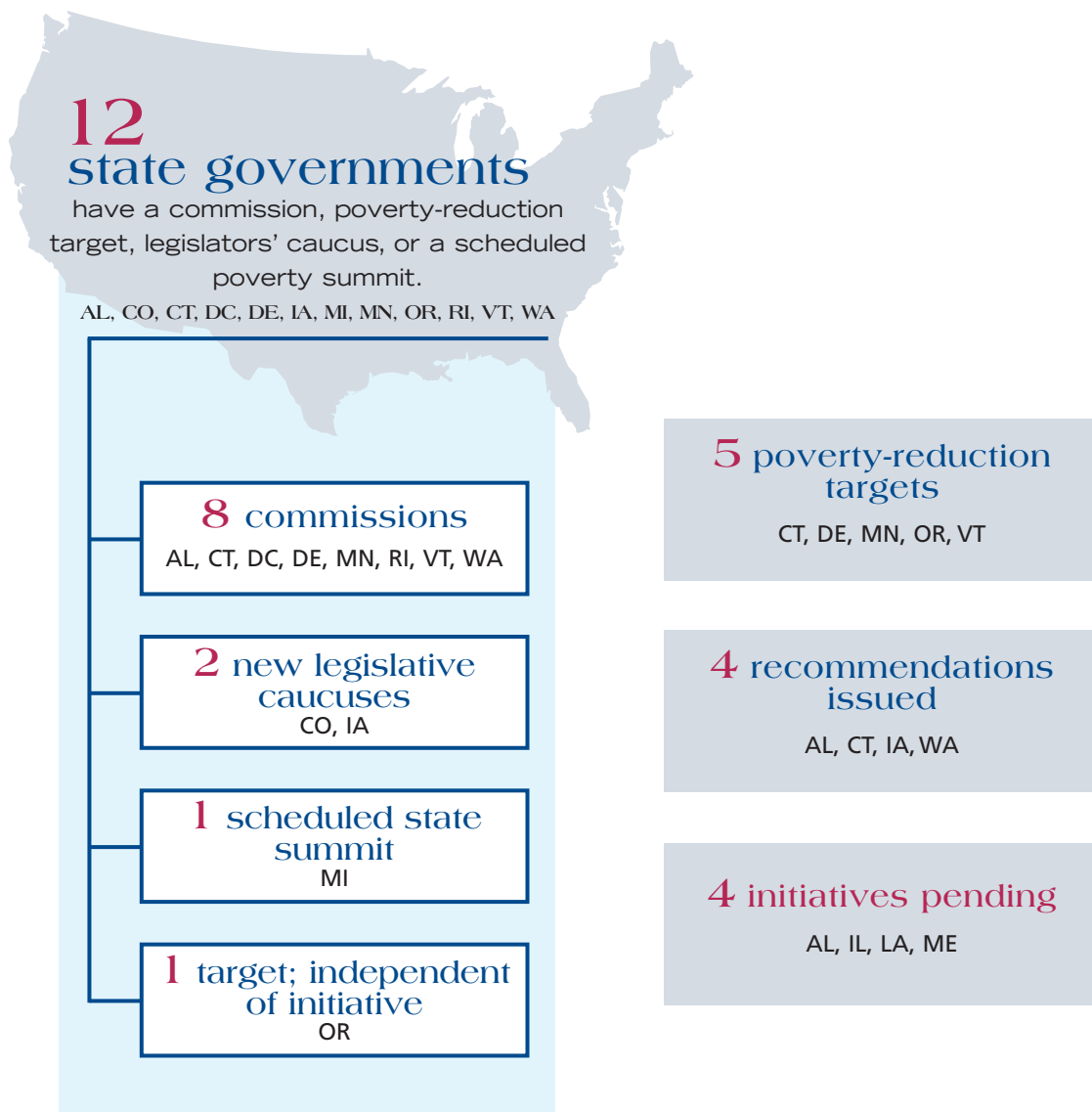
In March, the Progressive Caucus in the House introduced an alternative budget for 2009–2018 that would renew the federal commitment to fully redress the consequences of Hurricane Katrina and would provide funds to cut the poverty rate in America by 50 percent during the next decade. To meet the target, the “Anti-Poverty and Opportunity Initiative” would provide \$73.5 billion in its first year for a variety of efforts, including increases in funding for decent affordable housing, anti-hunger programs, and quality child care. In addition, a block grant would be available to states to eliminate deep poverty among children; targeted funding would be available to address disability. The alternative budget was never expected to pass the House; nevertheless, on March 13, it secured nearly 100 votes.³⁹

STATE INITIATIVES SNAPSHOT

“Poverty has quietly become the most important question of our time.”

*Ismael Ahmed, Director
Michigan Department of Human Services⁴⁰*

The political profile of poverty and opportunity is rising quickly in state governments. These highlights and the subsequent state-by-state narratives and charts seek to capture a variety of ways that the issue of those struggling to survive is gaining attention in the states.



Endnotes

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