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New campaign seeks to end child poverty in Wisconsin

Poverty numbers trending up in state as Vision 2020 seeks policy solutions

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In 1963, Michael Harrington's "The Other America" inspired a national war on poverty that awakened the nation to the plight of the poor - not to mention to their existence - and helped win important legislative gains ranging from food stamps to housing vouchers.

Forty-four years later, long after that war ended, the poor are still with us, in record numbers no less, and now a coalition of Wisconsin groups is engaging in yet another war, this time to stamp out one particular aspect of economic deprivation: child poverty.

Launched this past summer, Vision 2020 is a collaborative project of the Wisconsin Council on Children and Families, the Wisconsin Head Start Association and the Wisconsin Community Action Program Association.

Their goal is, simply put, to end child poverty in the state by the year 2020.

This past Monday, Vicky Selkove of the WCCF brought the fledgling campaign north to help establish a Northwoods effort and bring the problem into specific focus for the Forest, Oneida and Vilas tri-county area.

More than 60 people responded to the call, 22 at a luncheon and then 40 more at an evening presentation in Rhinelander, which was sponsored by the Northwoods Regional Solutions Network, a regional group of Wisconsin Women Equal Prosperity (WW=P), a nonpartisan, nonprofit economic development initiative.

Poverty matters, not only to the poor, but to entire communities because of the social costs involved, says Vicky Selkove of the Vision 2020. What those attending the presentations heard was a pitch that poverty matters.

It matters certainly to poor children, Selkove says: "Poverty is at the root of so many problems facing children and families. It impacts a child's health and readiness to learn at school. It leads to unstable, dangerous housing situations. It affects a child's prospects for a successful future in a huge number of ways."

But, she said, poverty takes its toll not only on the poor but on entire communities, and, as such, Vision 2020's primary goals include not just increasing awareness of poverty but advocating for solutions and convincing lawmakers that eliminating child poverty should be their top priority.

"Child poverty has real economic impacts on the whole community," Selkove said. "Whether or not you live in poverty, it has impacts on our health-care costs, it has impacts on our schools and on how our teachers function in schools. Kids who grow up in poverty are the kids who have developmental problems in school. They don't go on to higher education, meaning they don't get as good jobs, so they don't pay as much in taxes, they are more likely to become teen parents, and they are more likely to come in contact with the criminal justice system - all of that has costs for everybody else, whether or not you are personally living it."

The facts about poverty

If Selkove's point is taken at face value, the social and community-wide costs of poverty are rising because poverty itself is on the uptick, both in the state and in the Northwoods.

Data from the U.S. Census Bureau shows that the poverty rate for Wisconsin residents rose from 10.2 percent in 2005 to 11 percent in 2006 and that the child poverty rate increased from 13.9 percent to 14.9 percent. Overall, more than 581,000 residents, including 192,000 children, lived in poverty in 2006.

While a formal census count of the number of Northwoods residents living in poverty has not been updated since 2000 (the child poverty rate then ranged from 8.6 percent in Oneida County to 18.7 percent in Forest County), more recent indicators paint a bleak and worsening picture.

In Oneida County in 2006, for example, the number of Medicaid/BadgerCare recipients per 1,000 people totaled 281 compared to the state average of 263, up from 201 in 2000. The number of children qualifying for free or reduced school lunches has jumped from 26 percent in 2000 to 32 percent in 2006.

In Vilas County, the number of Medicaid/BadgerCare recipients per 1,000 population grew from 250 to 345 between 2000 and 2006. The number of children eligible for free or reduced school lunches jumped from 34 percent to 40 percent.

"Those numbers are all trending up, and poverty as a whole for the whole state is up," Selkove said. "It's up a full percentage point in one year, from 2005 to 2006, so there is no reason to think that these local numbers have gone down at all. It's clear they have gone up."

A different approach

The Vision 2020 strategy is different from that of the "War on Poverty" in the 1960's and early 1970's. While that effort sought to mobilize the masses by making them aware, this campaign aims to reach out to a much smaller population group, to those who are already aware of the problem, and to convince them they can make a difference.

"There's a couple of groups of folks," she said. "There's one camp of people who don't believe this really matters to them at all, who don't see it at all, and so a piece of this is to start making them aware of how prevalent poverty is in the community. But then the bigger camp that we are really trying to reach are people who get it."

Selkove said many people, such as front-line service professionals, see poverty every day and know how widespread it is, but frame the issue in terms of helping individuals rather than pursuing broader policy initiatives.

"These people are often real focused on one family at a time, one car voucher at a time, one bus ticket at a time, one Thanksgiving voucher at a time," she said. "We're trying to get those folks who already get it to open up to a broader way of looking at these issues."

Selkove said the campaign wants those who are already aware of child poverty to take action by contacting and meeting with their legislators and by making child poverty an issue in elections ranging from school boards to county boards to town boards, as well as in legislative races.

"And what if they got two people to do that, too?" she asked. "What if we have this groundswell of attention and interest on this issue from people at the local level? What could we accomplish? We're trying to get people to think about policy solutions, not just one family at a time."

While it's comfortable for people to focus on the one-family-at-a-time approach - to volunteer their time at the homeless shelter, for instance - Selkove says the coalition wants such volunteers to ask why people are in the shelter in the first place and what policy solutions might address the problem.

Issue priorities

As far as specific policies, the Vision 2020 effort is focusing in four areas: family-supporting wages, safe and affordable housing, access to health care, and nutrition and early childhood learning.

Among other things, the coalition believes it is important to pass legislation indexing the minimum wage to the rate of inflation, as well as laws to ensure that taxpayer investments are used to create family-supporting jobs, including making investments in worker training and directing the state's business subsidies to firms that meet certain wage standards and job creation requirements.

The campaign argues that the state also needs to do a better job of preparing adults for post-secondary education, of making adult basic education more relevant to specific occupations and industries, and of providing more services to those juggling work, school, and family.

It also calls for creating a statewide housing trust fund, a distinct fund to provide a dedicated source of revenue to support affordable housing. Finally, the campaign seeks to expand access to dental and mental health services and to ensure that all children have access to health insurance.

A local emphasis

Those broad goals notwithstanding, Selkove says it's up to local groups to come up with a specific agenda for ending child poverty in their own communities and to connect the local agenda to the statewide campaign.

To accomplish that, she said, local groups will utilize a variety of methods to put their agendas on the radar screen of policymakers. The state group is there to provide resources and training and data, plus best practices and policy solutions, Selkove said.

"The local groups are going to start doing that work and building a campaign and a group of trained advocates," she said.

Over the next year, Vision 2020 campaign hopes to sign up at least 2,000 people.

"We want to have local groups in five or six communities across the state that are really functioning and have gone through advocacy training and that are thinking strategically about what the issues are locally and how they connect to the statewide campaign," Selkove said. "We want to have 100 organizations sign on to the campaign - we have 50 already - and we want to have a policy agenda that raises some of these issues heading into the next budget session."

Vision 2020 already has groups building support in the Fox Cities, Milwaukee, La Crosse, Rock County, and Eau Claire.

And Selkove says she sees great potential for a Northwoods Vision 2020 effort, based on the number of people attending her presentations this week.

What she wants people to know, when they consider whether it's worth it to become involved, is that the previous War on Poverty was far more successful than people imagine.

"I give people a quiz on how successful it was," she said. "I give them a range of percentages about how much poverty was reduced between 1964 and 1973, from 2 percent to 44 percent. Most people actually say 2 percent, but it was really 44 percent."

"If they could reduce poverty by that much, imagine what we can do by getting people involved," Selkove said.

To join the campaign either on the local level or statewide, contact Selkove at www.2020wi.org or call 608-284-0580, ext. 326.

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