



State poverty level for children has gone up

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Wisconsin has received some low grades in social issues in recent years. A "Status of Women in Wisconsin" report in 2003 gave the state a C- on women's issues, and it led to Gov. Barbara Lawton's initiative, Wisconsin Women = Prosperity. The idea is to provide educational opportunities, higher-wage jobs, address health and safety issues and foster involvement in the political policy-making process.

On another report card, issued this year by an initiative called Vision 2020, the state is graded on how it treats its children, and again is found wanting, especially in the area of poverty levels. "We're not the worst state, but there is a lot of room for improvement. Wisconsin has increased a percentage point in poverty since 2000," said Vicky Selkove, a strategies manager for the Madison-based Wisconsin Council on Children and Families (WCCF).

Selkove visited Rhinelander last Monday to talk to local groups and give a public presentation about child poverty and its effect on the community, and to explain the Vision 2020 initiative started by WCCF.

According to WCCF, Wisconsin receives a grade of C in safe and affordable housing for children, a C+ in household wage level, a B- in access to health insurance and a B- in access to early care and education. "The Vision2020 is to raise each of these grades to an A by the year 2020," explained Selkove.

WCCF prepared statistics on Oneida County. Out of a population of 36,779, 7.4 percent live in poverty (this is better than the state average of 11 percent). Children are at the 8.6 percent level here (again better than the state level of 14.9 percent). Children living in single-parent households are 19.5 percent of the county's population, and female-headed households account for 25.7 percent of all households. (The federal guideline for poverty, for a family of four, is an annual income of \$20,650.)

Moving one step up the economic rung, 29.5 percent of all children in Oneida County live at 200 percent of the poverty level (annual income of \$41,300 for a family of four). Thirty-two percent of students qualify for a free or reduced school lunch.

"We did an analysis of housing costs for Oneida County," Selkove said. "The fair market rent for an average, no-frills two-bedroom apartment in this county rents at \$567 per month. "Allowing for 30 percent of a family's income to go for rent, 41 percent of Oneida County families do not make enough to live in this kind of housing. You need to earn \$11 an hour to afford this rent, and you know many people here are not earning 11 per hour."

When asked what relevance this has to Oneida County being one of the state's oldest-aged communities, with a high percentage of retirees, Selkove responded, "Child poverty affects everyone. A national study done this year by researchers at Georgetown University estimated that child poverty has a \$500 billion impact on the economy, in the areas of crime, incarceration, teen pregnancy, health care, poor school outcomes, poor job performance—it costs the whole community, even older people, because it impacts the quality of employees you can get to work here. Think of this as an investment in the health of your local economy."

Selkove said those who scoffed at the idea of eliminating childhood poverty in the state by 2020, need to take a history lesson. "In 1964, a War on Poverty was declared. In 9 years, poverty in the U.S. was reduced by 42 percent. If nearly half of all poverty can be wiped out in 9 years, imagine what we can do in this state if we set our mind to it, because Wisconsin is in a good position right now—we're not crippled by unemployment or a terrible economy."

Selkove's formula for achieving a better report card is to motivate those who already care about the issue. "Not everybody has to focus on this, just those who 'get' this as a problem. If these people, and it only takes a few, can take a step beyond what they're doing now—their volunteer work and serving families individually—and commit to action by connecting to policy action, we can accomplish this," she said.

"We can talk to our local representatives at the town and county level," she continued, "and put pressure on state legislators. We can drop our representatives a postcard and ask them what actions are they taking to provide affordable housing, higher-wage jobs, early childcare education and health care—ask them, 'What are you going to do about these issues?'"

For more information about WCCF, visit wccf.org. For the Vision2020 initiative, visit 2020wi.org.



LOCAL LEADERS MET WITH Vicky Selkove last week. From left, are Sue Scheller Kirby, Selkove, Ginger Chrobak, Jane Motowski and Lois Blonski.

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