

MANAGING

Governance and Regulation

The Long War on Poverty

Five decades after President Johnson's speech, nonprofits try 21st-century approaches to a stubborn problem

By Suzanne Perry

FIFTY YEARS after President Lyndon Johnson declared a war on poverty, the soldiers in the trenches are still grappling with the immensity of the challenge he laid out.

Poverty has proven to be a stubborn foe, seemingly resistant to decades of government and private attacks. Nonprofit leaders and others keep redrawing the battle plans, attempting

to draw lessons from the last five decades to find the elusive formula that will put far more Americans on a path to economic security.

But many are resigned to fighting a

long, drawn-out campaign, especially now that the public has lost its appetite for big-government intervention.

"It's so big, it's so huge, you can get very dejected," says Hallie Cohen, who coordinates a workshop that offers tips on "getting ahead" to low-income people at the Exchange Club Family Center of Mem-

phis, in one of the country's poorest cities. "The reality is major changes are going to happen at much higher levels than I sit at."

"We have a tendency of, if you can't do it with a silver bullet overnight, something has failed, it's not working," says Sara Schastok, president of the Evanston Community Foundation. "The gap in wealth and income has been growing so much in our country, it's really difficult for any one organization to make a dent."

In 2013, as the economy moved out of recession, the official poverty rate fell from 15.1 percent to 14.5 percent, but that still translated into about 45 million people below the poverty line, the same as the previous year. (The U.S. Census Bureau classifies a family of four with two children as poor if its income is less than \$23,624.) Reflecting continuing racial and ethnic disparities, the rates for blacks and Hispanics were much higher, 27.2 percent and 23.5 percent, respectively.

As antipoverty warriors contemplate how to move forward, several themes have gained momentum in recent years:



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The War
on Poverty

Poverty is a complex problem that extends far beyond income.

Does a family have a financial cushion to avoid slipping back into poverty at the next crisis? Does it have mental, spiritual, and emotional resources? "The bottom line is, the more unstable the resources base, the greater your inability to plan," says Ruby Payne, an author and trainer who gives workshops on fighting poverty that many nonprofits attend.

The Robin Hood Foundation, a New York City antipoverty group, has poured more than \$1-billion into local nonprofits since 1988, yet about one-fifth of the city's population remains in poverty, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. But Michael Weinstein, the chief program officer, says the group's goal is not to lower the official poverty rate, since that doesn't offer a true measure of what it takes to survive in a high-priced city like New York.

Robin Hood is attempting to learn more about the city's low-income families by surveying them every quarter about issues like their experience with job-training programs. "We will have a dynamic picture of urban poverty," he says.

Programs must focus on more than one generation.

"Patterns of opportunity get set up over generations, and patterns of lost opportunity get set up the same way," says Reilly Morse, chief executive of the Mississippi Center for Justice. "One of the issues we see is poor children become poor parents who have poor children who become poor parents who have poor children," says Heather Reynolds, chief executive of Catholic Charities Fort Worth.

The Aspen Institute, with more than \$10-million in foundation money, several years ago created a major program, Ascend, to promote "two-generation" antipoverty strategies. Anne Mosle, Ascend's executive director, says the program aims to attack poverty in a more "integrated and holistic" way. When she worked at the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, which now supports Ascend, "a lot of our work was grant by grant," she says. "That's really important work, but we weren't always able to connect the investment across community to community or across policy or program areas."

Nonprofits need to know what works.

"If something we're doing is not working, we don't want to do it anymore," says Ms. Reynolds. "We want to be really good stewards of the money we have." Her group is participating in a randomized, controlled trial to test the effectiveness of its program to help low-income community-college students, designed by a new "poverty lab" at Notre Dame University, the Wilson Sheehan Lab for Economic Opportunities.

Some antipoverty workers say measurement doesn't tell the whole story, however. "One of the trends today is moving the needle, big data," says Ms. Schastok of the Evanston Community Foundation. "If we can in our project, in our community, improve the lives of a group of parents and a group of children, we may not, quote unquote, be moving the big needle, but we are improving lives and futures in that way."

Of course, President Johnson's crusade gave the government a major role in defeating poverty, something Sheldon Danziger, president of the Russell Sage Foundation, says shouldn't be forgotten: "Only the federal government has the resources to make sure programs are available everywhere."

Charity Seeks to Keep Poverty From Being Passed to Next Generation

By Suzanne Perry

When Casa de Maryland released the findings last summer of a yearlong study of Langley Park, a mostly Latino neighborhood in suburban Washington, the conclusions were grim:

"Few of Langley Park's 3,700 children—almost all born in the U.S.—are currently on track for a secure future," the immigrants-rights group said in a news release. One of the biggest obstacles: Parents have "staggering low levels of schooling and limited access to continuing education," making it difficult for them to support their children.

Those findings highlight a dynamic getting increasing attention from today's poverty fighters: economic hardships that are handed down from generation to generation.

Casa de Maryland is trying to cut the odds of that happening in Langley Park with a program called Learning Together, an effort to help the children of immigrants succeed by teaching their parents, many with poor English skills, how to navigate the U.S. education system. Sometimes what they need to know can be as basic as "What does this report card mean?" says senior manager Jamila Ball.

Learning Together, which won a \$3-million grant from the U.S. Education Department last year, also earned Casa de Maryland a spot in a new net-

The program helps the children of immigrants by teaching their parents, how to navigate the school system.

work created by the Aspen Institute to unite organizations that attempt to disrupt poverty by providing services to children and their parents together.

The network is part of the think tank's Ascend program, which has emerged as a hub of projects and policy ideas promoting "two-generation" strategies—an approach that has found favor with a variety of big grant makers. The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, W.K. Kellogg Foundation, Kresge Foundation, Open Society Foundations, and others have poured more than \$10-million into Ascend since it was created in late 2010.

Casa de Maryland is one of 58 organizations selected for the Ascend Network last spring after a national competition, putting them in line for \$1.2-million in grants and other assistance.

The Learning Together program, which received \$50,000, aims to head off a falloff in performance once children move from elementary to middle school. The project, operated with the public schools, offers classes, home visits, school events, and teacher training to help immigrant parents guide their children to read, complete homework, and get to school on time. It also helps parents get marketable skills.

Another Ascend Network member, the Evanston Community Foundation, created the Two-Generation Education Initiative last year to offer services to parents of children enrolled in early-education programs operated by foundation grantees. "Working with



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both children and parents at the same time, we're hoping the children will stand a chance of being better off economically than their own parents are," says Sara Schastock, the Illinois grant maker's president.

Ascend offered \$100,000 to help the foundation set up a pilot program, working with Lindsay Chase Lansdale, a professor of human development and social policy at Northwestern University, who was one of 20 nonprofit, academic, and government leaders to win 18-month Ascend Fellowships in 2012.

Exploring Careers

The first class of 13 women in Evanston graduated in May after attending a 13-week course that helped them explore careers in high-demand fields, took them on site visits to a local manufacturer and a senior-living facility, provided information about community-college job-certification programs, and offered financial-literacy training.

Artishia Hunter, the program's director, recalls that one woman who needed a car loan was able to increase her credit score by 26 points using information from class handouts. The second class started in November.

In October, Ascend gathered more than 180 leaders in Aspen to discuss the latest thinking about "two-generation" strategies and released a report proposing the "Top 10 for 2Gen" policies that policy makers should adopt to support those efforts. They should, for example, allow recipients of Temporary Assistance for Needy Families to count certain educational and job-training activities toward the requirement that they work.

Anne Mosle, Ascend's director, says the Aspen program aims to promote an integrated approach to fighting poverty, taking into account demographic and economic changes like the explosion of single-parent families headed by women. "We're very comfortable investing in women and mothers internationally," she says. "We're still struggling with that here at home."

Above, a teacher and student interact at an Acelero Learning facility. Like Casa de Maryland, Acelero takes a multigenerational approach to education. At right, Kylette Lindsey and her daughter Sarah appear in promotional materials for the Evanston Community Foundation.

