

A VOICE for the Reduction of Poverty

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This is one of an ongoing series of newsletters published by A VOICE for the purpose of keeping our membership, Ambassadors of the Poor, aware of current issues related to the reduction of poverty. Please feel free to broadly share this newsletter with your e-lists.

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War on Poverty

The findings of academic researchers at Columbia University paint a mixed picture of the United States 50 years after President Johnson's famous State of the Union Address during which he declared war on poverty. According to their findings, while government safety net programs including food stamps and unemployment insurance have had a significant positive impact on easing the plight of the poor our nation's economy has failed its citizenry ... making it extremely difficult for people to lift themselves out of poverty without government assistance. This research implores us to preserve the safety net as a critical tool to help the poor while taking the steps necessary to make sure that lower-income Americans can earn high enough wages to escape poverty. In the weeks ahead many critics will sell the War on Poverty short. Without question, poverty is still with us. Without questions, some intervention programs have worked better than others. But directed policies can reduce poverty. More than ever before we must renew our commitment to the War on Poverty by strengthening our economy and society while continuing to provide people with the supports they need. We have proven on several occasions in the past that we have the ability, if not the will, to reduce poverty. Government programs have not failed the poor ... it is our economy that has.

Medicaid Reform

The Supreme Court ruled in June that the Affordable Health Care law must provide states the choice to opt in or out of Medicaid expansion, something more than half have done (and more on the brink of doing). Unfortunately Tennessee is not among them even though opting in will provide health insurance to more than 330,000 uninsured Tennesseans and will keep 54 Tennessee hospitals from closing - hospitals that cannot afford to pay for the uninsured who call on them and whose closings will jeopardize the jobs of tens of thousands of workers they employ.

Important to note is that taxpayers across the country are on the hook for Medicaid expansion regardless of whether their state government decides to opt in or not. If we do not opt in, Tennessee taxpayers will give up \$2.88 in federal funding for every dollar we put in for the expansion of Medicaid in other states, a daily loss of \$2.4m.

A recent poll taken by Vanderbilt University shows that a significant majority of Tennesseans is in favor of expanding Medicaid ... it is clear that Tennesseans want our Governor to opt in. We just need to remind him that we do. Please contact **Governor Haslam** (bill.haslam@tn.gov, 615/741-2001) and his **Chief of Staff Mark Cate** (Mark@billhaslam.com) to remind both that we expect Tennessee to sign on to Medicaid expansion and, in the nicest of wording, that we will be disappointed, even angry, if we don't. Also, please sign the petition attached to this link: <http://www.tennesseeplan.org>.

Help for the Jobless

This week the U.S. Senate agreed to break the filibuster of a bill that would restore emergency unemployment insurance to 1.3 million long-term unemployed Americans. The conventional wisdom said we did not have a chance to win this one (60 votes were needed), but somehow we did. Sadly, neither of our two Senators voted with the six Republicans who signed on with 54 members of the Senate Democratic Caucus. In actuality, this win does not mean anything yet. Because Senate rules are so whacky, this vote, while a surprise victory, was just to allow the beginning of debate ... and already two of the "yes" Republican voters are already threatening to vote "no" the next time. Ultimate passage of this bill would reinstate the unemployment benefits that expired Dec. 28 when during the recent budget debate Congress irresponsibly failed to renew them.

As it is on so many important social matters, how one looks at passage is like a Tale of Two Cities. Most Republicans are opposed to the reinstatement of benefits unless spending cuts elsewhere in the budget offsets the \$6.4 billion cost of the extension. Democrats argue that because unemployment benefits boost consumer spending the cost should not have to be offset, especially not to other safety net programs. Republicans argue that extending benefits will deter people from looking for work. Democrats argue that doing so provides critical relief to Americans who have found it hardest to recover from our economic downturn.

The Tennessean published a terrific op-ed calling on our two Senators to reconsider their no vote on extension (<file:///Users/aviposter/Desktop/Extend%20jobless%20benefits,%20pinch%20elsewhere%20%7C%20The%20Tennessean%20%7C%20tennessean.com.webarchive>).

The view for us at A VOICE is clear. We too need to convince Senators Alexander and Corker to support extension. Please call and or email both of them ASAP and strongly insist that they do.

Senator Alexander: (202) 224-4944 <http://www.alexander.senate.gov/public/index.cfm?p=Email>

Senator Corker: (202) 224-3344 <http://www.corker.senate.gov/public/index.cfm/contactme>

Cuts in SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance – aka Food Stamps)

SNAP cuts hit hungry Americans hard in 2013. On November 1, the 2009 Recovery Act expired, cutting nutrition assistance to over 47 million Americans, including 22 million children. The average SNAP benefit is now less than \$1.40 per meal. As hard as it is for us to accept the cuts that were made, SNAP recipients will lose even more in 2014, as Congress debates cutting even more. The Senate has already passed legislation that cuts SNAP by and additional \$4 billion over 10 years while the House passed legislation that would cut SNAP by nearly \$40

billion. A conference committee has been negotiating a compromise bill since early November. A final decision is expected in January. The picture is not bright. Here in TN SNAP recipients have already seen an 8% decrease in SNAP benefits since the cuts took effect in November. Seems counterproductive as it means that \$12 million less per month will be going into our state economy and onto the plates of over a million hungry Tennessee children, seniors, and folks who can't find work that supports an actual living. To defend their call for an additional \$79.8 billion dollars in SNAP cuts, Conservatives argue that too many among the poor are misusing the assistance they are being given. This is simply not truthful. Misuse accounts for just 1 percent of the total food stamp program.

Homeless in Nashville ... Families Doing Worse, Single Adults a Bit Better

According to a report issued last week by the U.S. Conference of Mayors, the number of homeless families in Nashville increased 25 percent in the past year, more than any of the 25 cities in its study. Memphis, by contrast, saw a 5 percent decrease in homeless families even as that city grapples with higher poverty and unemployment rates than Nashville. Unfortunately, our city's emergency shelters have not been able to keep up with demand - turning away nearly one-third of those seeking shelter.

The number of homeless single adults in Nashville increased by 3 percent. City officials credit the smaller increase in individuals to a concerted effort this year to create permanent housing for people who have been homeless for long periods of time. "Nashville has made great strides over the past year with a coordinated, collaborative response to chronic homelessness," a statement from Mayor Karl Dean said. "The quadrupling of the monthly housing rate for homeless individuals — particularly those who are very hard to serve — gives me encouragement that we will be able to see similar results for families facing homelessness. This report is a reminder that we have more work ahead of us and that now is not the time to back down from this challenge."

Homeless and Poverty in Nashville Public Schools

Families need to be at or below the poverty line to qualify for the MNPS Free and Reduced Lunch Program (e.g. less than \$24,00 a year for a family of four). Currently 72% of MNPS students (59,690) so qualify. In 2012-2013 school year there was a total of 2750 students enrolled in MNPS HERO Program (Homeless Education and Resource Office), a 12% increase from the year before. As of Jan. 3, 2014, this number increased to 2831 students enrolled, exceeding the number reached by May of last year. Not surprisingly, MNPS has seen a significant increase across the district in requests for clothing, food, and housing assistance. Many more schools now have food and clothing pantries onsite, and partner with agencies and churches to address needs.

The implications are dramatic. While being poor is not an excuse for poor school performance, the negative impact of poverty on a child's educational achievement is indisputable. Whether the metric is school grades, state assessments, the National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP), or the SAT — the scores of low-income children, in urban centers across the country, are far lower than those of their wealthier peers. The gap in K-12 test scores continues to grow between high and low-income students. The overall college rate increased about 4%, but increased almost 20% for wealthy households.

Income Inequality

In June 2013, Brookings Institution-Hamilton Project released *Thirteen Economic Facts about Social Mobility and the Role of Education*, which described the income divide that has increased in the U.S. It explains that Census Bureau data demonstrates that more than 1/3 of children today are raised in families with lower incomes than compared to 35 years ago. During the same time, children in the highest 5% of family income distribution experienced a doubling in their families' incomes.

Most would agree that a better distribution of wealth in this country would be healthy for our nation. Attached is a link to a short but powerful video that clearly explains just how out of line our distribution of wealth has become. This is a fascinating and riveting picture of our nation's income distribution and the failed hope of most Americans. <http://www.upworthy.com/9-out-of-10-americans-are-completely-wrong-about-this-mind-blowing-fact-2?g=2&c=recon1>

Half in Ten Annual Report

To better understand this sobering picture of poverty in America we refer you to the Center for American Progress/Half in Ten 2013 State of Poverty and Opportunity Report that clearly describes the continuing struggle of the middle class as well as the growth of poverty and inequality. It notes that the number of Americans with incomes below twice the poverty line is now up to 34.2%, representing a 12.1% increase since the recession began. It also notes that the top 5% of Americans increased their real incomes by 5% during recovery from the recession, while the middle 60% lost 1.2% of their income. Adjusting for inflation, a typical middle-class family earns less today than in 1989, a loss of almost 25 years of economic progress. This year's report outlines a pathway forward, and recommends a set of policy priorities that would move more families from poverty to prosperity. It makes the clear case for using what we learned during the five decades since the launch of the War on Poverty to renew our national commitment to cutting poverty. ([Download the Full 2013 Annual Report](#))

For information about A VOICE please contact co-facilitators Marsha Edwards (medwards@marthaobryan.org) or Avi Poster (aviposter@comcast.net).

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