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Oklahoma poverty a chronic, unaddressed problem

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The economy is showing some modest signs of recovery in Oklahoma, but for a staggering number of Oklahoma families, that's not the case.

In fact, if anything, the consequences of poverty are growing worse in Oklahoma. Consider this shocking statistic: Currently about a third of Oklahoma's population is receiving government assistance for food or health care. And that figure is expected to grow in the coming year.

"Even as the economy shows signs of improvement, a large segment of Oklahoma's population is encountering ongoing hardship. This can be seen from the persistently high unemployment rate and from the numbers of families that turn to public benefit programs such as food stamps, which continues to hit historic highs each month," said David Blatt, director of the Oklahoma Policy Institute, who put together an overview on Oklahoma's poverty problems for the Oklahoma Conference of Churches Day at the Capitol last month.

"Successive rounds of state budget cuts, and the prospect of additional cuts in state and federal programs, are making it even more difficult for many families to stay on their feet and return to a situation of economic security."

As far-reaching as poverty is, there are remedies that would help alleviate the poverty problems in Oklahoma - if only there were the political will to pursue them more aggressively.

Oklahoma's poor

According to various sources - the Department of Human Services, the U.S. Census Bureau, the Oklahoma Institute for Child Advocacy, the Oklahoma Policy Institute - this is the way it is in Oklahoma:

Oklahoma's poverty rate of 15.7 percent is well above the national average of 13.2 percent. To be considered poor by federal standards, a family of four would have to have an income at or below \$22,050 in 2009.

The poverty rate for children in the state is far worse: 22 percent.

About 63 percent of the poverty-stricken population in 2009, according to census data, was white. But minorities have higher rates of poverty when looked at as a subpopulation. More than 30 percent of Oklahoma African-Americans are poor by the 2009 federal standard; nearly 22 percent of Indians, and nearly 29 percent of Hispanics.

As the data suggest, children in Oklahoma are especially hard hit by the ravages of poverty. According to census data, single mothers are five times as likely to live in poverty as families headed by married couples.

Poverty is deepening in Oklahoma at a time when state services for needy Oklahomans continue shrinking. According to Blatt's summary, more than half of all state agencies have been cut by at least 15 percent in the last few years. And cuts in the range of 5 percent, perhaps more, are being contemplated this year.

At the Department of Human Services, the workload continues increasing as the staff continues decreasing. In recent years, the staff has been reduced by 1,186 full-time employees. Yet a third of Oklahomans now are on food stamps or Medicaid, both programs that require DHS workers for processing.

As has been detailed on this page recently, the number of Oklahomans on food stamps has grown by a staggering amount in the last decade - by more than 62 percent since 2002. At the end of 2010, more than 779,000 Oklahomans were on food stamps. More than 30 percent of the state's children were receiving food

stamps last December.

The growth in Medicaid enrollment is similar - a 43 percent increase since 2002. Currently more than 885,000 Oklahomans receive some Medicaid services. The number is expected to continue growing this year and next to approach the 1 million mark by 2012.

What this data mean is that now, approximately a third of Oklahoma's population - 1.3 million people - are on food stamps or Medicaid, or both.

What works

Yet, amid all this misery and despair, there are rays of hope. DHS reports that in fiscal 2010, 1,615 welfare recipients were able to go to work, and leave cash assistance behind, in large part because of the help they received through the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families program. And 70,453 different Oklahoma children were able to stay in good day care programs, thanks to state subsidies, enabling their parents to go to work or school.

In other words, government programs can help lift people out of poverty. But that's not a popular concept, especially in Oklahoma.

Two other proven remedies for poverty are marriage and education. According to DHS data, only about 8.5 percent of the children of married couples live in poverty, while about 43 percent of children living in a single-mother family live in poverty.

Not surprisingly, the birth rate for single mothers has grown at an astonishing rate in recent years - by nearly 29 percent from 2001 to 2007 - which continues fueling increases in poverty. Single mothers are much less likely to further their education, for obvious reasons, and therefore much more likely to continue living in poverty - along with their children.

DHS conducts a program aimed at encouraging young couples with children to get married, and helping them learn the do's and don'ts of marriage and parenting. It shows considerable promise, but obviously it isn't reaching many who might benefit from it.

There are other answers out there. Blatt has lobbied for deferring or repealing tax cuts to allow needed services to recover, which would help to get more people on their feet. But don't hold your breath waiting for that to happen.

Prevention and treatment programs that address the symptoms of poverty - substance abuse, for example - could and should be expanded. But again, budget issues have long kept that from happening.

Blatt's other ideas: matched savings accounts for needy families and children; tighter regulations on high-cost loans; and a requirement that employers that benefit from public programs provide retirement benefits. All good ideas that probably won't go anywhere any time soon.

The economy will continue improving, but that rising tide will not lift all boats. Said Blatt: "We can't just assume that economic growth will succeed by itself in lifting up low-income families that have been battered by the recession. We need a purposeful strategy aimed at helping families confront barriers to economic success. These strategies can include expanding access to quality education and training; ensuring affordable health care; and providing opportunities for savings and ownership."

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Associated Images:



Long lines of people wait outside Iron Gate in Tulsa last summer for a free meal, for an event marking child poverty and hunger in Oklahoma. JAMES GIBBARD/Tulsa World

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