



Testimony before the Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs

*A NEW AND EFFECTIVE PARADIGM FOR THE NATION'S
ANTIPOVERTY STRATEGY*

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The facts are incontestable: After the expenditure of \$20 trillion in a 50-year “war on poverty” the numbers of impoverished Americans have barely budged. The obvious failure of the strategy that has dominated our nation’s antipoverty agenda is testament of a critical need to reassess the fundamental assumptions that have guided policies and the qualifications of those who are considered “experts.” Reform is vital—not only to stop the waste of an annual expenditure of \$1 trillion on an ineffective strategy but, more importantly, for the sake of millions of Americans and generations of families who are spending years in demeaning dependency.

To develop an effective approach, the problem must be correctly defined.

The failure to develop an effective agenda is rooted in a misdiagnosis of the problem of poverty. Even among those who have the best intentions, policymakers on the Left and Right are deadlocked in debates about solutions but are talking about entirely different cohorts of the poor.

All people are not poor for the same reason and our remedies must be as diverse as the cohorts of the population in poverty. Through my experience with the Center for Neighborhood Enterprise and the nearly 2,500 community groups working in low-income neighborhoods that it has served, I have come to understand that there are four basic categories of the poor.

There is one cohort whose poverty is the result of an unexpected setback, such as the death of a breadwinner or a job loss. For these people, the welfare system can function as it was originally intended—providing temporary support until recipients can find their footing again. A second cohort is comprised of those who have remained dependent on the system because the disincentives to marriage and work that are embedded in its regulations make it a rational choice to avoid those stepping stones to self-sufficiency. In sum, they’ve “done the math” and realized it’s not worth the loss of benefits to take first steps toward upward mobility. The third group is comprised of the disabled, who will always be in need of some support. The fourth cohort is made up of those who are in poverty because of the choices they make and the chances they take—for example, those who are living with the consequences of alcoholism and addiction.

With regard to “category four,” giving no-strings attached to those whose poverty is due to the chances they take and the choice they make simply enables them to continue their self-destructive lifestyles—in essence, injuring with the helping hand. For this group, a fundamental revitalization in vision, character, and values is a prerequisite for them to reclaim their lives and escape from dependence. Until that is achieved, no amount of cash payments or benefits can engender a change in their circumstances.

The good news is that agents that can engender such fundamental transformation are even now at work in disadvantaged and devastated communities throughout the nation. That life salvaging work is the forte of the hundreds of community leaders and grassroots neighborhood healers that

I have had the privilege to know and support throughout the last 40 years. Their success in empowering those who once seemed beyond hope to reclaim their lives and move up from dependency is due to common traits they share, wherever they live and whatever issue they address: they share the same geographic and cultural zip-codes with the people they serve; they have a firsthand understanding of the challenges they face; they are available 24-7 for those who need them; and they are committed for the long-haul.

Nothing short of a paradigm shift is needed to develop an antipoverty agenda that can effectively move the poor to a pathway of upward mobility and an escape from dependence to self-sufficiency. And, it's among those who suffer the most entrenched and debilitating poverty, the "category four" poor, where authentic reform of the nation's antipoverty agenda will have the most powerful and striking impact.

Recognize and build-on capacity

To date, the anti-poverty agenda has been built on what I call "failure studies." Typically, researchers go into low-income neighborhoods to tally the youths who have dropped out of school, births outside of marriage, and incidence of gang activity and crime. In contrast, my organization, the Center for Neighborhood Enterprise, goes into those communities to talk to the parents of families that are intact, the youths who have not been involved in substance abuse or crime, and the kids who have graduated from high-school to learn how they accomplished what they did in spite of the odds they faced. We go into corner stores, barbershops, and beauty salons and ask the people who they would turn to in times of crisis. Invariably, they point to some person within the community that they can trust and rely on.

The testimonies of those who have been empowered to reclaim their lives through the work of these grassroots mentors are awe-inspiring. Men and women who had virtually lost their lives to drugs and alcohol have emerged as responsible employees, spouses, and parents. Fatherless youths who were raised on the streets and were drawn to the lures of gang violence and drug trafficking have become agents of peace and renewal in their communities. Men released from prison—with the mark of a felon and no prospects for a job—have risen to become successful businessmen and entrepreneurs who provide employment to others in the community.

These agents of change and renewal have the potential to make a substantive and sustainable impact on the most entrenched poverty in this country and should be incorporated in the nation's antipoverty agenda. Tapping their transformative power will require the risk of innovative thinking.

I would like to share ten lessons I have learned through decades of my efforts to support the healing agents of America's low-income communities.

1. **If you keep doing what you're doing you'll keep getting what you've got.** When government programs fail to effectively address poverty, the conclusion is typically either a) It is due to a failure on the part of recipients, or b) it was underfunded and more resources should be invested in the same programs. As Einstein declared, "Insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results.
2. **Good intentions are not enough.** Too often the disadvantaged are victims of "injury by the helping hand. Regardless of how well-funded they are, government programs designed by experts and parachuted in to low-income communities will not have substantial or sustainable effect.
3. **Not all poverty is the same and our solutions should be as diverse as the populations in poverty.**
4. **For poverty rooted in self-destructive behavior, substantial and sustainable results entail a restoration of values and vision,** and this can, uniquely, be engendered by healing agents that live within their communities and are committed to their uplift.
5. **Effective antidotes to the most entrenched and devastating type of poverty exist in virtually every low-income community.** The residents will identify these neighborhood healers as the persons they would turn to in a time of crisis.
6. **Low-income neighborhoods should be approached with the goal of identifying and building on their capacity.**
7. **People must be agents of change in their own transformation. Those who live in neighborhoods suffering a problem should be involved in the design and implementation of its solution.**
8. **We must be willing to recognize brand of "experts"** that should be trusted and supported: Those whose authority comes not from diplomas and certificates on their walls, but from the testimonies of the men, women, and youths whose lives they have touched and changed.
9. **The rules of the market economy should extend to our social economy.** Social entrepreneurship should be rewarded on the basis of its outcome and impact—evidenced by how many have been empowered to rise from dependency.

10. Substantial and Sustainable community revitalization and individual renewal must come from the bottom up and the inside out.

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Center for Neighborhood Enterprise.*