Anti-poverty fight needs bold ideas

Thanks to Jennifer Leonard, CEO of the Community Foundation, it is easy to recognize the issue of poverty in our community. The Rochester-Monroe County Anti-Poverty Task Force, led by Joe Morelle and Peter Carpino, has been brave in tackling poverty head-on, crafting an ambitious vision that all children will have the opportunity to live the American dream. For their leadership, they should be commended.

As the task force assembles, we must recognize two critical principles. First, we must engage the people at the center of this issue: poor families and people of color living in our inner city. Structural racial inequality — systems, policies and traditions of leadership that operate with limited access for people of color — should not be reinforced in this work.

Second, ultimately it will be policy that will enable people to improve their economic standing. Certainly some programs, notably Head Start, have proved successful and must be strengthened. But policy change must be a priority to reduce the concentration of poverty that leads to substandard housing, abysmal educational outcomes, shocking health inequalities and chronic joblessness.

The most impactful anti-poverty strategy is to ensure those who can work can find jobs that will support a family. This is why Rochester’s "ban the box" ordinance was vital and why we support Mayor Warren’s exploration of new economic opportunities. In addition, New York’s economic development efforts should become part of this strategy — the state could apply the same tax benefits to businesses providing jobs in economically challenged neighborhoods as they do to businesses located near universities.

We also support policies to deconcentrate inner-city poverty by expanding housing opportunities for low-income families outside the city. In Maryland, including low-income housing in every new development was a county requirement. Concentrated poverty in the City School District could be lessened with state incentives for suburban districts to engage in the Urban-Suburban Program or with regional magnet schools that would attract a diverse socioeconomic mix of students.

Bold new ideas must be explored. For instance, why not simply provide the cash value of categorical and related supports to low-income people and let them determine for themselves how to best spend their funds? Imagine how this would release low-income individuals from being passive captives of the system and enable them to act as consumers of food, housing, transportation and support services. This would also have the benefit of changing participants’ roles from “clients” who receive services to “customers” who actively choose how to spend their resources.

In the short-term, we must act quickly to lessen the burden of hunger on our children. Increased investments in housing and child care subsidies, home visiting programs, and the supplemental nutrition assistance program will help families living in poverty now. Prospects for healthy and bright futures will be strengthened by reducing the chronic stress of economic hardship today.

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