

Poverty

What is life like if you are poor? What is it like to be surrounded by so much excess knowing that you and your child cannot afford medical insurance even though you work 50 hours a week? How does it feel to go Christmas gift shopping knowing that your retirement saving value has dropped by half and you have no idea what you will do when it runs out in a couple of years? What is it like to have mental and emotional challenges and no job, no housing and no family to help? How patient would you be with your noisy children if you were getting several calls a week from collection agencies for money you owe but your job just covers the rent and groceries. How optimistic would you be when employers say they could give you a better job if you had more education but you don't have enough income to eat and go to school at the same time? Most of us can only guess.

Before the recent financial melt-down, there were already 482,000 men, women and children in poverty in Minnesota alone.

How can one get into poverty? Ask the mother with one child who works 50 hours every week at the highest minimum wage. That's 50 hours X 52 weeks X \$6.15/ hour = \$15,990 a year. Subtract \$600/month for apartment rent, if you can find one near a bus line for that price, and you have \$8,790 left. That comes to \$732 per month to cover taxes, food, utilities, clothing, child care, health insurance and transportation: no movies, fast-food, vacation, video rentals or savings.

So what is this all about? Well, on Wednesday, January 21st the Legislative Commission to End Poverty in Minnesota by 2020 released its recommendations. This report was the outcome of a challenge started by the Lutherans, picked up the Minnesota Council of Churches and lobbied by the Joint Religious Legislative Council that resulted in the legislature calling a bi-partisan Commission to study poverty in Minnesota and make recommendations back to the legislature.

The Commission's recommendations are:

- Restore work as a way out of poverty
- Refocus public assistance to streamline services and support everyone's capacity and potential
- Help Minnesotans build and maintain financial assets
- Revitalize our communities through infrastructure and person-to-person support
- Modernize our system of education to build the best workforce in the nation
- Develop an ongoing structure to monitor Minnesota's effort to end poverty.

What a milestone! Our own government has studied the issue, recognized the need, identified the key elements to achieve the goal and spelled out their parts of the task. Even our new President, Barak Obama, has raised the issue of poverty and challenged Americans to get involved. What great start to ending poverty in Minnesota by 2020.

But what about the economy? How can we do this now? My view is: How can we abandon our brothers and sisters now, when times are the toughest. They have no one else to fall back on for support and representation. The theme of the A Minnesota Without Poverty state organizing team is: If not we -- then who? If not now -- then when?

There is much more to this story. For now, let me leave you with this thought: We already have the resources in Minnesota to eliminate poverty, we just need to chose to do it and our Legislature has now recognized their role in helping us to reach this goal. Religious groups, businesses, non-profit organizations, private citizens and our State Government working together can eliminate poverty by 2020.

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A Minnesota Without Poverty by 2020
mnwithoutpoverty.org