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FORUM

Reward people who work, and we'll cut poverty

IN 2004, Connecticut became the first state in the nation to pass legislation mandating a state goal of reducing poverty. Hailed at the time as a visionary piece of legislation, the law called for a 50 percent reduction in the state's poverty level by 2014. The reality is that painfully little

has happened since and poverty has actually risen slightly.



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Many people do not know this legislation exists, not just everyday people, but people in the know who you would think should be aware of such legislation such as legislators, mayors, business leaders, heads of non-profit organizations. This

lack of awareness illustrates both the unique opportunity and demanding challenge that Connecticut poses as advocates attempt to engage with the state's elected and public officials to advance the poverty reduction goal.

Connecticut, home of the highest per-capita income in the United States, is also home to the nation's largest academic achievement gap and widest income disparity. What a dubious distinction! With the state's budget condition worsening, surely many will hide behind that to argue that Connecticut can ill afford to spend money on reducing poverty. But now is exactly the time to make the structural tax and revenue changes needed to ensure larger numbers of families do not slip deeper into poverty.

Reducing poverty is not easy. However, we know how to reduce poverty because it has happened several times in our country's history when there was sufficient political will and economic activity.

While poverty is caused by a number of factors, two interrelated problems complicate our ability to reduce poverty — falling wages among low-skilled workers and a sharp increase in the number of children living in female-headed households.

As wages for men with a high school diploma or less began to fall in the 1980s, so did their employment rates and their ability to generate an income that could support a family.

As a result, writes Gordon Berlin, president of MDRC, a national work force evaluation firm, "The share of men who could support a family above the poverty level began to decline — and with it the willingness of low-income women to marry the fathers of their children." Because our social welfare system is designed to attend to the needs of children in poor families, it creates disincentives to work and marry for some families. Add in the high cost of living in the Northeast, and it is easy to see how these problems are exacerbated.

Connecticut is not a big state. With its small size I believe we have the potential to solve issues that other places simply find beyond their grasp. I have come to realize, however, that political will is often the missing ingredient needed to achieve durable change.

Alleviating poverty is not about "those poor people." Poverty is symptomatic of larger problems that connect directly to our education system, our future economic competitiveness as a state and our quality of life. The raging debate over universal health care has crystallized these issues and clearly demonstrates they cut across race and class. The barriers affecting low-income families are now reaching up the income scale to impact previously secure families, creating the need for broader, more inclusive dialogue about income and wealth inequities and the need to get back to basics and invest in people.

A strong first step to alleviating poverty is for Connecticut to embrace social and economic policies that reward individuals who work. We must move away from outdated, counter-productive policies that keep low-income people in enforced poverty because continued eligibility for safety net programs and work supports like rent subsidies, child care vouchers or food stamps depend on people keeping their incomes very low. These policies create strong disincentives for people to leave these programs by advancing into jobs that pay slightly more. We need to move away from policies that penalize families where a male is present in the household, but does not earn enough to make ends meet.

Most of all, Connecticut needs policies that add up to something! When implemented in tandem, these policies should add up to promote business expansion, economic development, greater opportunity, more jobs and ultimately, a reduction in the number of families living in poverty. We face a situation for the first time in the history of this great country in which children will be less healthy, and have less opportunity, than their parents. Is this to be our legacy? I hope not.

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