

Sharpen focus on best ways to win the war on poverty

Jan. 20, 2016

By Robert Ehrlich, and Vann Ellison

Deep-rooted challenges facing our country often simmer in the background during election years because they have been with us for generations, failing to garner headlines or "trend" on Twitter feeds.

Or they may receive only token acknowledgement among national priorities in the case of President Obama's final State of the Union address last week. One such challenge is President Lyndon Johnson's War on Poverty, which created the modern welfare state and the mixed results in achieving its mission a half-century later.

With all the arguments about income inequality, one would think helping those struggling to get on the bottom rungs of the economic ladder would be front and center on the national agenda. After all, there has been constant talk over the last several years about the "unfairness" of compensation for corporate CEOs, hedge fund managers and whoever else is deemed to be in the top 1 percent of economic achievement.

Another way to address income inequality is to modernize an outdated system to better help the bottom 15 percent, or 46 million Americans, escape poverty.

Fortunately, a policy forum held in the key primary state of South Carolina this month did just that. Including several presidential candidates, the event raised concerns about how effective this so-called war, waged largely from government office buildings in Washington, D.C., has been.

Named after legendary public servant Jack Kemp, the forum recalled his legacy of expanding economic opportunity for all. Whether the subject of intense media scrutiny on the mean streets of Baltimore or largely hidden from public view in relatively wealthy Naples, poverty remains America's No. 1 social ill.

House Speaker Paul Ryan, one of the co-moderators and a protégé of Kemp, defined the problem of the "poverty trap" caused by a tax code and welfare system that rewards benefits and penalizes work. Equally important, he described how the last 50 years have witnessed the advent of 80 unique, non-coordinated anti-poverty programs targeted to every need imaginable. The bottom line: the nation's poverty rate is nearly 15 percent, having changed little since the 1960s.

Each year, the Government Accountability Office (the watchdog auditing function of Congress) documents fragmentation, duplication, and overlap among the nation's annual \$1 trillion worth of poverty assistance programs, which they maintain adversely impacts service delivery. What this means in practice is at any given time the wrong benefits are provided to the wrong people — hardly the type

of targeted relief required. Moreover, soon after, Congress forgets what they have authorized; programs are put on bureaucratic auto-pilot.

Anyone interested in achieving results with the federal government, whether as a governor attempting to effectively implement programs statewide or the head of a nonprofit trying to make them work on the streets, has experienced the utter frustration of applying for federal waivers or having to follow program "guidance."

Such terms are Washington-speak for bureaucratic procedure, which is what happens when "inputs" are measured instead of "outputs." Government does a fine job of measuring resources going into programs but is far less concerned about how many individuals secure employment.

Florida's presidential candidates are among those who understand the need to empower individuals, not government.

Sen. Marco Rubio highlighted his flex grant plan which would allow state and local entities more power to innovate and develop initiatives that meet local priorities. Championing the free enterprise system, he undercut arguments from the political left about income inequality, saying it's the only system in the world that can make poor people richer without making rich people poorer.

Former Gov. Jeb Bush, who released a plan to devolve funding to the states, talked about how compassion should never be measured in dollars, only results.

Gov. John Kasich is coordinating the myriad government assistance programs in Ohio and advancing the concept of states being the "laboratories of democracy" through innovation. For example, combining employment opportunities and welfare assistance into one facility would end the practice of rubber-stamping people through the system without addressing the need for a job.

The well-respected community activist Bob Woodson condemned both political parties, accusing Republicans of insufficient sensitivity to the underclass, while Democrats continue their victimization rhetoric.

Despite the absence of Democratic presidential candidates at the forum, we may yet see the two parties describe their respective solutions for expanding opportunity and eliminating poverty before this election is over. That would not only capture the public's attention, but it would renew a second "War on Poverty."

This is the war Kemp started and the one we should finish as a matter of common decency.

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<http://archive.naplesnews.com/opinion/perspectives/guest-commentary-sharpen-focus-on-best-ways-to-win-the-war-on-poverty--298d2b65-3a48-7e85-e053-01000-365586631.html>