



Poverty and Opportunity: What Difference Can a Task Force Make?

July 26, 2011

Colorado

About this Series:

About 20 states, including D.C., have established a state government poverty and opportunity task force; fully 11 of these states have set poverty reduction targets such as cutting poverty in half in a decade. Profiles of four of these task forces in Minnesota, Ohio, Illinois, and Colorado and an overview of their impacts appears in [*Poverty and Opportunity: What Difference Can a Task Force Make?*](#).

Additional Resources:

Commissions

[State Poverty Task Force Recommendations](#)

[Poverty and Opportunity: Chart of State Government Task Forces](#)

[Poverty and Opportunity: State Government Task Forces' Member Composition and Operations](#)

[Seizing the Moment: State Governments and the New Commitment to Reduce Poverty in America](#)

Poverty Targets

[Target Practice: Lessons for Poverty Reduction](#)

[Targeting Poverty: Aim at a Bull's Eye](#)

It is in the public interest to pursue the common good whereby all Colorado families and individuals have improved access to economic and educational opportunities that help families achieve self-sufficiency and financial security while reducing the number of Coloradans living in Poverty

- Enacting Legislation, Colorado HB 09-1064

“How do we build an economy that works for all of us; an economy that serves people, not the other way around?”²¹ While that question is difficult to answer in ordinary times, in the wake of the Great Recession even asking it takes political gumption. Yet, this central question is being asked and put before Colorado’s Economic Opportunity Poverty Reduction Task Force. By 2009, the recession left 613,000 Coloradans (12.3 percent of its population) below the federal poverty threshold and even more struggling to make ends meet. For the task force, that means finding a path to opportunity at the same time as more people in the state confront losing jobs and wages.

The bipartisan legislative task force is charged with figuring out how to halve poverty in the state by 2019, a decade after the law which created it passed. In its first year, the task force defined the problem of poverty and explored its dimensions; the year’s work culminated in eight legislative recommendations. In 2010, after all eight of the bills were signed into law, the task force, along with all other interim committees, was shut down due to the state’s budget situation.

While it may have been officially shut down, the task force barely slowed down. It continued to meet on an ad hoc basis throughout the second half of 2010 after various stakeholders pushed for meetings and deliberations. “How could we ...not continue this work?” task force chair Representative John Kefalas (D) remembers Rep. Daniel Kagan (D) asking at the time. Now, after the dedication and diligence shown by a wide

cross-section of stakeholders involved, the task force will meet in an official capacity again in 2011. There is no small task ahead. In the coming year, the task force is to create a comprehensive plan to reduce poverty in Colorado by 50 percent by 2019.

Background

In the spring of 2007, the bipartisan and bicameral Common Good Caucus was formed. Not a legislated entity, the Common Good Caucus instead provided a forum for interested legislators to learn about and gain insights into poverty reduction policies and private sector solutions “that promote self-sufficiency, family well-being, and community development.”ⁱⁱ The lawmakers collaborated with the “Paycheck Away” Coalition on a series of listening tours statewide to better understand the challenges facing people living paycheck to paycheck. Out of these tours, DVDs and fact sheets were created and distributed to all members of Colorado’s General Assembly.

The action and conversations spurred by the Common Good Caucus helped to make issues around poverty too big to ignore. By 2009, Representative Kefalas, who had initiated the Caucus, was joined by 26 representatives and 15 senators as sponsors of a bill to create a new, five-year legislative committee, the Economic Opportunity Poverty Reduction Task Force. As enacted, the law spelled out two primary outcomes for the task force to accomplish: to increase access to economic and educational opportunities statewide so that all Coloradans can reach self-sufficiency and financial security; and to reduce poverty in Colorado by 50 percent by 2019.

The law allows legislators to present a range of recommendations to meet these goals, and also requires the task force to release a comprehensive plan by the end of its second year, which is now the end of 2011. The

task force must also produce an annual report along with their legislative recommendations.

To broaden the task force’s efforts, the law created a mechanism to engage a larger group of stakeholders. Specifically, the legislators are to collaborate with subcommittees and an advisory group. The advisory group, made up of legislators, staff from state agencies, and those in the non-profit sector created an initial implementation plan. The advisory group helped recommend research, assess current programs and best practices, undertook outreach and participation, and identified potential subject matter experts.

From the onset, the task force has focused on getting past the rhetoric. “We really need to focus on finding solutions and best practices,” said Rep. Kefalas. To test whether solutions are working, in their Community Report, the task force set an expectation to establish measurable benchmarks for assessments along the way to their 2019 target.

In 2010, budget constraints in Colorado motivated the suspension of all interim committees, including the task force. The task force, nevertheless, forged on with its work through unofficial ad hoc meetings, listening tours, and even the introduction of new legislation.

In 2011, the task force’s official status has been reinstated and it will soon start to design a comprehensive plan for how Colorado will meet its legislated 2019 target of cutting poverty in the state by half.

Making a Difference

Reframing Poverty For Representative Kefalas, “it was critical that we move the dial to reframe and rethink the issues of child and family poverty.” The task force focuses its discussion on the intersection of economic development and the challenges faced by low-income Coloradans. “People understand the moral component of

Economic Opportunity Poverty Reduction Task Force

Established: June 2009

End Date: July 2014

Target: Reducing poverty by at least 50 percent by 2019

Reports: [Report to the Colorado General Assembly](#) (December 2009)

[Community Report](#) (2009)

protecting our most vulnerable neighbors, such as children that are hungry, elders that survive on fixed incomes, or families that live paycheck to paycheck,” wrote Kefalas in the *Community Report*, “What is often missing is the inextricable connection between this vulnerability in our community and sustainable economic development.” The task force provides a new paradigm on reducing poverty in Colorado in which economic development and policies that promote poverty reduction do not compete. Rather, the work of the task force centered on reaching recommendations and policies that would encourage both and benefit all stakeholders.

Connecting Stakeholders The task force consciously seeks to break down silos and bring together disparate government and nonprofit agencies to tackle the interplay between poverty reduction, housing, education, economic development and other concerns. “Connecting the dots between policies is vital. High quality child care can reduce the need for child welfare. When we talk about lowering health care costs, that’s totally tied into poverty reduction. The task force is constantly pointing to these kinds of connections,” notes Tracey Stewart of the Colorado Center for Law and Policy and a member of the Advisory Group. At a housing meeting attended by advocates, Stewart remembers that “all of a sudden the conversation turned to the hard choices put on limited resources at the household level and the possibility that health care reform could influence whether people are able to keep their housing. The housing advocates saw that if their goal is to keep people housed then medical expenditures is a piece of that; the conversation then moved to how the housing advocates could lend a hand in other arenas that force people to make decisions that cost them their housing.”ⁱⁱⁱ Because the task force has helped connect the different stakeholders, “we are seeing new synergies on which the anti-poverty advocacy community is changing how we get going, and what the next two to five to ten years look like,” she says.

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Engaging the Community From the beginning the task force focused on being as inclusive as possible. Subcommittees chaired by members of the task force included a wide range of community advocates and government agencies. Dedicated to community engagement, each full task force meeting includes a public hearing to provide the people most affected by their work, those in poverty, an opportunity to share their perspectives and ideas for working toward the 2019 goal. The public’s involvement was instrumental in providing the Advisory Group with a sense of grassroots needs, and mattered during the period that they met ad hoc.^{iv}

The business community became an important partner to the task force as they worked to connect poverty reduction with economic development. The Colorado Chapter of the National Federation of Independent Business participated in the initial work subcommittee, bringing the business community’s perspective into deliberations about how best to improve economic opportunities through work. Their participation provided employer representatives a space to reflect and reexamine their commonalities with some of the obstacles that people in poverty face. One business leader shared his own daughter’s story of high child care costs, which became a barrier to her joining the workforce. “When we can translate policy into its real-world implications, it is easier for each of us to see what others go through; often the challenges are the same, it’s the economics that are different,” said Rep. Kefalas.

Understanding Poverty As these conversations increased and the task force’s actions were more visible, Colorado legislators became more attuned to the on-the-ground realities of poverty and opportunity. “Knowledge and awareness went from zero to ten,” said Tracey Stewart. Illustrative of this new awareness is legislators’ response to a recent bill that would have prevented electronic benefits transfer (EBT) cards from being used at places such as liquor stores and places with adult entertainment.^v In the past, such a bill might have

quickly passed, driven by an assumption that poor people should not be allowed to use their EBT cards in such places; instead, the bill was killed. The bill was voted down because, through testimony hosted by the task force, more legislators became aware that these places were often the only places that TANF recipients in some distressed communities could access necessary cash to use for the bus or other needed goods and services; it “became a story about limiting access instead of punishing the poor,” Stewart said.

Legislative Victories In total the task force was able to pass eight bills in its first year, often with bipartisan support. While a number of the bills were relatively modest in scope, even these would have ordinarily been unable to move forward because they either would have been “crowded out” by other legislation or deemed dead on arrival. One bill eliminated barriers to hiring people who had been incarcerated.^{vi} It addressed red tape and employer liability issues and it expanded and created new opportunities for employers to hire people with criminal records. “To me that is an example of how we have been able to reframe the conversation around poverty and to build a better, more nuanced appreciation of the problem and possible solutions,” said Rep Kefalas about the new law.

Connecting Local/State Efforts During travels across the state in the summer and fall of 2010, the ad hoc task force learned about community solutions already underway all over the state that could help meet the 2019 poverty reduction target. For example, a number of counties were at work on developing livable communities. In drawing attention to this local work, the state task force succeeded in building a bridge between localities and a much needed state partner. The state housing agency, which had not previously been involved, started to partner with the local livable communities efforts. Now housing services will become part of the county level plans. The task force’s comprehensive strategic plan, to be released in 2011,

will elevate best practices from the local level and connect them to each other and statewide efforts.

Measuring Poverty From the onset, the task force prioritized the search for better metrics to define poverty so that it can monitor progress toward the legislated target of reducing poverty by 50 percent in ten years. In both the public and private sector there is a large focus on outcomes. The task force found the federal government’s official poverty measure to be outmoded since it fails to consider modern day expenses (such as child care) or sources of income (such as the Earned Income Tax Credit). While the federal government announced plans to create an additional new measure to help address these issues, the Supplemental Poverty Measure, it is not yet in effect. Further, its capacity to capture the variety of Colorado solutions is another question.

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In addition to monitoring progress around poverty reduction, a related issue is the ability to predict the impact on poverty of alternative solutions as they are proposed in the legislature. In February of 2011, Kefalas introduced a Poverty Impact Statement bill which was designed to project the likely impact of legislative proposals.^{vii} The measure was defeated in committee. Stewart attributes it largely to members that did not want to spend limited government funds on it. Advocate Tracey Stewart explained that “poverty impact statements would go a long way because they would formalize these conversations and enable legislators to have an informed debate about which investments would have bigger outcomes so we still are trying to find a way to fund this kind of important tool.”

Lessons Learned

Tracey Stewart of the Colorado Center on Law and Policy has said that it’s critical to “Allow space, room and time for inter agency collaborations to happen. Colorado is super segregated within the service delivery system – people didn’t know that they were fighting each other and that their requirements contradict each

other. Before the task force they were only looking at policies and not the implementation. Now the task force has an evaluation piece and will look at the interconnection of programs moving people out of poverty.”

The task force has found that bipartisanship is a key factor in moving forward. Its *Community Report* addresses the issue head on, noting “The concern and desire to see all Colorado families succeed certainly crossed party lines. The bipartisan tone was set at the very first task force meeting when each appointed legislator stated why they were on the task force and shared childhood events and experiences within their communities which helped form their values and desire to serve in public office. The report also makes the observation that this bipartisanship extended through to “votes that went beyond the traditional party line affiliation.” Working across the aisle “helps us view these issues from a different lens” said Representative Kefalas.

While it’s probably a “lesson” the task force would not ever want to learn or observe again, the Great Recession served as a dynamic and compelling background for the task force’s work. The task force’s *Community Report* comments that “the current national economic crises have only highlighted the need to strengthen the state’s safety-net programs and to find better ways to ensure all Coloradans have the same opportunities to live healthy, productive lives.” Rising unemployment and poverty due to the recession elevated the conversation of poverty to a much larger audience. As Tracey Stewart notes, “Colorado has never paid attention to poverty; therefore poverty reduction has always been on the back burner. But now that so many people who never thought about it are finding themselves in poverty a new opportunity to discuss it has emerged.”

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- ⁱ Representative John Kefalas, interview with author, March 14, 2011. All subsequent statements from Kefalas also were taken from this interview unless otherwise noted.
- ⁱⁱ 2009 *Community Report*, Economic Opportunity Poverty Reduction Task Force, 2009, <http://www.clasp.org/admin/site/documents/files/Poverty-Task-Force-Final-Report-with-Bills.pdf>.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Tracey Stewart, interview with author, March 15, 2011. All subsequent statements from Stewart also were taken from this interview.
- ^{iv} Kefalas, interview with author
- ^v No Public Assistance at Strip Club ATMs, 68th Leg. Session, [HB 11-1058](#) (2011).
- ^{vi} 2010 Colo. Sess. Laws 167.
- ^{vii} Poverty Impact Statement in Fiscal Note, 68th Leg. Session, [HB11-1078](#) (2011). (*Status: Lost in State, Veterans & Military Affairs, 2/9*)