



# Poverty and Opportunity: What Difference Can a Task Force Make? Lessons from Four States

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*“There is a movement and there is a moment. Take the time to  
build the movement.”*

Doug Schenkelberg  
Heartland Alliance, Illinois

In 2009, one in seven, or 43.6 million, Americans lived with incomes below the federal poverty level, the highest rate in 15 years. The number living in extreme poverty, or with incomes less than half of the poverty line, increased to more than 19 million—the highest level since 1975. These staggering statistics have created a new sense of urgency among policymakers about the need to take significant action to reduce poverty. In the words of one poverty advocate, “If we are not bold now, then when?”

Even before the Great Recession, state governments began taking steps to address poverty and provide opportunity through poverty task forces.<sup>1</sup> Of the state task forces established since 2003, about half began before and half in the midst of the Great Recession. Some have been created by governors, others by state legislatures. While each state task force approaches the work differently, there is a common mission: to provide recommendations for action. Some are established for a short period, while others are enduring and expected to monitor progress on a plan and to continually suggest tweaks or pivots in policy. These entities engage state policymakers, private sector partners, and citizens to inject interest and energy into the effort to provide genuine opportunity. Since 2008, CLASP has closely followed these state efforts.

Twelve state governments had established a task force on poverty and opportunity by 2008. This was more than a hint that a political sea-change was underway since until then, states and elected officials had generally avoided talking about and taking steps to develop comprehensive solutions to provide opportunity for all. CLASP’s 2008 report *Seizing the Moment: State Governments and the New Commitment to Reduce Poverty in*

America captured this development and explored *why* state elected officials were re-energized to tackle what often is perceived as an intractable problem. Possible explanations include:

- Evidence that economic mobility in America is no longer a hallmark of our society. A number of other countries better ensure that children advance into a higher income from the income bracket in which they were born;
- The appreciation that poverty is costly, in part because it reduces the productivity of our nation's future workers; and
- The dramatic and growing income gap between the rich and the poor threatens the nation's "dynamism" as the Federal Reserve Chairman, Ben Bernanke observed

Today, the number of states and territories that have created poverty and opportunity task forces has grown substantially to 21: 19 states, plus Washington, D.C. and the U.S. Virgin Islands. A chart, *Poverty and Opportunity: State Government Task Forces* offers a list with links to authorizations and reports. To date, 16 states have released recommendations. *State Poverty Task Force Recommendations* summarizes these in six policy areas: adult education and employment; child education and child care; family structure; housing and health; income and assets; work supports and safety net; and a final section for miscellaneous policy recommendations. The composition and operations of the task forces vary widely across the states (see *Poverty and Opportunity: State Government Task Forces' Member Composition and Operations*). Legislators are included in the majority of the task forces, with four comprised solely of state legislators. Many of the requirements for membership ensure economic diversity among the membership and representatives of the business communities and economic development were included in more than a third of the task forces.

Fully, 11 of these states have also established explicit poverty reduction targets. Connecticut, Delaware, and Louisiana are aiming to reduce childhood poverty by half over the course of a decade. Minnesota passed a target of

ending poverty within their state by 2020. And Arkansas is working to get poverty down to pre-recession levels in five years and to cut it in half in ten. Targets present an opportunity to set a common vision across stakeholders and for the public, provides a clear metric for policy makers, and can also promote ongoing attention to the issue of poverty.

Using examples of four state task forces, *Poverty and Opportunity: What Difference Can a Task Force Make?* shares stories and lessons to show how a task force can contribute to reducing poverty. It provides a closer look at efforts in **Minnesota** and **Colorado**, two states included in *Seizing the Moment*. It also looks at initiatives in two states that have created task forces since the publication, **Illinois** and **Ohio**. These task forces are driving legislative action, building bi-partisan engagement, and fostering greater understanding of the realities faced by low-income people. Minnesota, Ohio, Illinois, and Colorado are highlighted because they reflect differences in approach and scope, provide unique insights and stories, and still capture themes relatable across many state poverty task forces. The profiles are in chronological order of their start date.

Minnesota's legislative task force has the ambitious goal target of eliminating poverty by 2020. Imbued with a spirit of bipartisanship and using partnerships with a wide range of stakeholders, a series of listening sessions, and other tools, the task force attracted attention to the issue of poverty and fueled legislative solutions. The Ohio task force was created out of an executive order. The Governor asked for short and long term recommendations, and the task force pursued broad engagement of the public across the state. Illinois has a poverty target which is unique. First, it focuses on extreme poverty; second the work of the task is framed through a lens of freedom from poverty as a human right. Colorado, which also has a legislated poverty reduction target, has a set of legislative accomplishments and emphasizes the connection between poverty reduction and economic development and opportunities.

### Making a Difference

The four profiled state task forces have made a difference in their states and their stories are intended to illuminate the small and large contributions a task force can make. They also lay out the challenges and lessons learned, and reveal the potential for task forces to:

### Spread Awareness

*“Thousands of people participated in listening sessions around the state, where small groups grappled with difficult policy questions such as what it would take to create a community without poverty.”*

Greg Landsman  
Ohio Anti-Poverty Task Force

Task forces can reframe poverty to help myriad stakeholders better grasp the significance of the issue. Colorado and Minnesota have focused on tying poverty reduction to economic development. Historically there has been a disconnect between economic vulnerability and economic growth. By zeroing in on how family and community wealth influence the ability to grow area economies, the task forces can engage new audiences in the conversation.

The task forces can show common needs across income groups and how policy can fill in for unmet needs. “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 Representative John Kefalas (D-Colorado), who is instrumental in Colorado’s anti-poverty initiative.

The task forces have also helped low-income people realize their own claims to respect and equity. Advocate Doug Schenkelberg recounts a story of a homeless youth whose “take away” from a task force meeting was that even a homeless boy had rights, including the right to live without poverty. The youth explained that this new realization helped him make it day to day, and as Schenkelberg notes “Moments like that say to me that we’ve had an impact, regardless of what legislation is passed.”

### Collaborate

*“Through the task force, a new opportunity to discuss poverty has emerged.”*

Tracy Stewart  
Colorado Center for Law and Policy

Poverty task forces can bring together otherwise scattered stakeholders. In Colorado, advocate Tracey Stewart described how the task force connected people from across issue areas under the more general umbrella of poverty reduction, “we are seeing new synergies in which the anti-poverty advocacy community is changing how we get going, and what the next two to five to ten years look like.” In addition to busting down silos, a task force can enhance opportunities for public-private partnership. For example, the Heartland Alliance helped staff the Illinois Commission on the Elimination of Poverty. While helping the commission, Heartland also continued to work on their own complimentary From Poverty to Opportunity Campaign.

The task forces also provide the opportunity for people to collaborate across party lines. In Illinois, the commission helped create anti-poverty champions among legislators in both political parties, transcending partisanship. Colorado Representative Kefalas noted that bringing together a bipartisan group, “helps us view these issues from a different lens.” Minnesota advocate, Deborah Schlick of Affirmative Options, said “If we want lasting policy change, we can’t get it on a party-line vote. It’s then a policy that’s as fragile as whoever the majority is.” Task forces are breaking down silos and building a solid support system for state poverty efforts.

### Put Ideas into Action

*“Let’s not let the commission report sit on the shelf and collect dust and have nothing come of it.”*

Representative Lanning (R-Minnesota)

The task forces are providing recommendations, protecting programs from budget cuts, and passing legislation.

In Colorado, the task force passed eight pieces of poverty-related legislation during the first year. In Minnesota,

several bills have been introduced based on poverty commission recommendations, including one that would require state agencies to prepare a poverty impact statement for any new legislation likely to impact low-income people.

Just as important as the action carried by the task forces are the lessons learned about how to effectively gain support and create action. Stories of fostering new cooperation, confronting roadblocks, and navigating political instability show promise for the future of state poverty efforts nationwide.

### **Can a task force make a difference in increasing opportunity?**

With a record number of Americans struggling to make ends meet, the need to combat poverty has become more pressing than ever, and state task forces have the potential to play a critical role in this campaign. A task force can get the public, legislators, and other stakeholders to focus on poverty; change attitudes; attract new constituencies to anti-poverty efforts; and reinvigorate existing supporters. Each of these steps can make a difference toward increasing opportunity and lay the groundwork that is often essential for policy change.

Task forces recommend policy changes. Whether those recommendations gather dust or move toward implementation depends on lots of variables. The recommendations may be outlandish or they could be well conceived but not communicated. In addition, even the perfect report and set of recommendations cannot trump a political environment determined to thwart it. Task forces can, however, move new ideas and foster policy change.

The Earned Income Tax Credit, the Child Tax Credit, and the State Children's Health Insurance Program are attributed to the momentum from a report of a Congressional Commission on Children; the Hope VI housing initiative was prompted by the federal Commission on Distressed Housing and the National Commission on Teaching and America's Future, promoted policy attention to teachers as part of the solution in the achievement gap as well as building a

coalition of more than 20 states and partnerships on the local level which lead to legislative changes across the country. Managed effectively, the high-level attention of a task force is an important step toward building the political and public will that is essential for policy change

Whether or not task forces can make a difference in state anti-poverty efforts depends on a number of factors, and *Poverty and Opportunity: What Difference Can a Task Force Make?* offers personal accounts from legislators and advocates about the reasons behind some successes and some of the lessons learned from task force work. Ultimately, we hope these stories will provide guideposts—and perhaps inspiration—for states seeking to establish poverty task forces, allowing them to make effective use of scarce resources and focus on the most successful strategies in an era of unprecedented economic challenges and increased political polarization.

## Legislative Commission to End Poverty in Minnesota by 2020

*All people need to work together to overcome poverty, and this work transcends both any particular political theory or party and any particular economic theory or structure. ... Alliances are needed between the faith community, nonprofit agencies, government, business, and others with a commitment to overcoming poverty.*

- Enacting Legislation, Minnesota H.F. No. 4162

The Legislative Commission to End Poverty in Minnesota by 2020 had a simple, yet daunting goal: develop a proposal to eradicate a seemingly intransigent problem from the state in little more than a decade. When then-Governor Tim Pawlenty (R) signed legislation establishing the commission in 2006, more than 420,000 Minnesotans – 8.2 percent of the state’s population – was living in poverty. Among its tasks, the commission was charged with determining the scope and nature of poverty in the state, considering potential solutions, and creating a plan of action to address the issue.

The work of the commission, which spanned about three years, during which time it issued an interim report and a final report of recommendations to the state legislature—has impacted anti-poverty efforts in a number of ways, many of which continue to resonate today. Through a series of listening sessions and other efforts, the commission shined a spotlight on poverty, illuminating the issue for both lawmakers and the public. The commission galvanized the advocacy community, breaking down silos and allowing a diverse group of organizations to unite under a common banner, and provided a conduit between advocates and state lawmakers. Through its recommendations, the commission helped draw a new, more politically potent sketch of poverty, framing the issue in terms of economic development, an area of concern for all residents as the state emerges from the Great Recession. Finally, the work

of the commission led to the introduction of a number of new bills to address poverty, as well as the formation of an ongoing legislative task force that seeks to tackle concerns related to assets and predatory lending.

### Auspicious Birth

The formation of the commission marked an important advance for anti-poverty efforts in Minnesota. However, it might never have occurred without the efforts of two state religious leaders, a local newspaper columnist, and an outgoing state legislator.

The story of the commission began in 2004, when a Catholic archbishop and Lutheran bishop decided to hold a large, interdenominational summit to increase the visibility of poverty issues. Although the event took place only two miles from the state capital of Minneapolis, no state legislators attended, a fact not overlooked in a local newspaper column that chided them for their absence.<sup>2</sup> When the bishops held a second summit in 2005, now-retired state Senator John Hottinger (D) remembered the column and decided to attend the gathering, which led him and a state House Republican to introduce legislation to establish the commission. Deborah Schlick, executive director of the advocacy group Affirmative Options, recounts that the bill came close to failing in a veto by Pawlenty, but with some convincing from Hottinger and the Lutheran bishop, he signed the bill into law – and the new commission was born.

### Legislative Commission to End Poverty in Minnesota by 2020

**Established:** June 2006

**End Date:** June 2009

**Target:** Eliminate Poverty by 2020

**Reports:** [Interim Report](#) (June 2008)

[Final Report](#) (January 2009)

### Ingredients for Success

The accomplishments of the commission could not have occurred without the dedicated efforts of the Minnesota legislators involved and the support provided by advocacy, religious, and community groups, but the work of the commission also benefited from several factors related to its internal structure and funding. From the sponsorship of its enabling legislation to the composition of its membership and leadership, the commission

remained a bipartisan endeavor, which advocates considered critical to its long-term impact on anti-poverty efforts. Schlick said, “If we want lasting policy change, we don’t really get that if whoever the existing majority is can win a bill or a policy change on a party-line vote. It’s then a policy that’s as fragile as whoever the majority is.” In addition, the bipartisanship of the commission lent credibility to its work and helped it gather support from outside groups. State Rep. Morrie Lanning (R), who served on the executive committee of the commission, said, “If people perceive us as strictly a partisan effort, it’s going to be more difficult for us to get the support and cooperation we need from others throughout the state.”<sup>3</sup>

The commission also had boldly stamped in its name a target – to eliminate poverty – that both created a goal against which to measure anti-poverty efforts and brought attention to the issue. Poverty reduction targets, or numerical goals to reduce poverty by a specific amount in a set timeframe, have begun to gain political momentum in recent years, although only 11 states have established them to date. In Minnesota, advocates and others initially had concerns about the ambitious goal set for the commission, but they quickly realized that this target could serve as a useful tool in anti-poverty efforts. Schlick said, “There were two scary words in that title – one was ‘poverty,’ and the other was ‘end,’ – but we decided we as advocates certainly couldn’t call on them to do less than end poverty.” In addition, Schlick said that, although “‘poverty’ is a really touchy word in trying to build political will, if it isn’t named, it’s skirted.” According to Schlick, the commission’s Executive Director Gregory Gray agreed that the name provided an advantage because, wherever he went, it never failed to provoke a conversation and debate about poverty.

Apart from its ambitious target, the commission benefited from \$250,000 in dedicated state funding, which according to Schlick, “was everything.” The dedicated funding allowed for a full-time executive director and research and data analyst, listening sessions around the state, and a website to promote its work. Schlick noted

that without this funding, the commission would have needed to rely on the efforts of legislative aides and committee assistants, who likely would have only limited time to spend on its work, or find an outside group to provide staffing. Lanning said, “You certainly need state funding. ... \$250,000 is not a lot of money in comparison to all of our budgets with the state, but we couldn’t have done what we did without that kind of seed money.”

## Making a Difference

**Spotlight on Poverty** The work of the commission, although now officially concluded, has left a lasting effect on anti-poverty efforts in Minnesota. The work of the commission attracted local media attention, especially in rural areas of the state, giving local communities the opportunity to discuss poverty and helping dispel the myth that the issue of poverty only affects cities.

The commission’s meetings with the public to discuss poverty in several venues allowed for direct interaction on the issue. The commission held monthly formal hearings in the state Capitol, and each of its three working groups held separate meetings open to the public. With support from advocacy, religious, and community groups, the commission also held listening sessions at various sites in local communities and regions statewide to collect information from individuals affected by poverty to inform its recommendations. Rather than hold these sessions in a formal setting, such as a government building, commission members went to laundromats, soup kitchens, and other places frequented by low-income individuals to create an informal environment that allowed these individuals to have conversations with state lawmakers and share stories about the impact of poverty on their lives. “We recognized that we needed to learn a lot from people who are advocates, people working with those who are struggling with poverty, and from people who themselves experienced poverty,” Lanning said. The listening sessions motivated state legislators to address issues related to poverty and, in some cases, changed their minds about the most effective ways to

**The report recognized both that the economic crisis made resolving poverty even more important and that, by addressing the issue, the state could at the same time help rebuild its economy.**

respond to these concerns. Schlick recounts how one Democratic legislator, struck by the number of individuals who told him about their work to address poverty in their own communities, began advocating for the state government to partner with local communities in anti-poverty efforts.

She also observes that after attending the listening sessions, Lanning himself underwent a conversion on the need to address asset tests used in determining eligibility for public assistance programs. He led a commission working group on building assets, and during its first meeting, the group heard a proposal to lift asset tests—a plan that Lanning initially dismissed as not worth pursuing in the state legislature. However, after hearing stories from a number of low-income individuals about the damage asset tests had done to their lives, Lanning, a Republican, later told state lawmakers that they needed to solve the problems related to these tests and introduced a bill<sup>4</sup> that would direct the state to analyze the effects of making them consistent across all programs. “His intellectual shift about asset tests is very directly informed by his experience of getting to know that set of low-income people, and that started in the commission’s listening sessions,” said Schlick.

The work of the commission had a ripple effect that extended to other state legislators, increasing their engagement on issues related to poverty and their willingness to consider proposals to address these concerns. Gray said, “What has been striking about the commission is that it has clearly opened up the minds of many legislators—not just those on the commission,” adding, “There is now a sense that we can make a difference if we want to, and legislators now realize that there is a groundswell of constituent support for action in districts both poor and wealthy.”<sup>5</sup>

**Under One Tent** Apart from increasing awareness among state legislators and the public, the commission served as a focal point for anti-poverty efforts in the state, allowing advocacy, religious, and community groups to come together to address the many different concerns undergirding the larger issue. “So much advocacy is done... in really specialized areas” – such as housing, early childhood, public assistance, or homelessness – and the

commission “gave a way for people who care about poverty to come together on something that joined them on the bigger picture,” Schlick said. She added that the commission provided advocates and others a place to interact with the state legislature on the issue of poverty. “We heard a lot from people who are in the trenches, so to speak, addressing this issue,” Lanning said.

**It’s the Economy** In the *Legislative Commission to End Poverty Final Report*, the commission framed poverty in the context of economic development, in part as a means to foster broader support for its recommendations at a time when the state faced significant economic challenges with the onset of the Great Recession. The report recognized both that the economic crisis made resolving poverty even more important than that, by addressing the issue, the state could at the same time help rebuild its economy. As Schlick noted, “Given the economic collapse ... it was important to make their recommendations not seem like something competing with the response to the economic crisis, but working in tandem with that.” In addition, although the commission did not preclude any recommendations because of cost, it prioritized steps that the state should take immediately to help alleviate the economic crisis over those it could take in the future, when the financial situation improved. The commission also did not cost its recommendations, a move that Schlick said “would have killed things.” She added, “First, the legislature and the public need to consider what it will take to end poverty. From there, policymakers can decide if certain pieces of legislation are cost-effective enough to introduce.”

**Engine for Legislation** The work of the commission spawned a number of new legislative efforts to address poverty. Based on its recommendations, Lanning and a state Senate Republican who also participated on the commission introduced a bill, which became law in 2010, to establish a new Ladder Out of Poverty Task Force.<sup>6</sup> The task force, on which Lanning serves as a co-chair, will address issues such as asset building and predatory lending, seeking to continue the commission’s work by turning its recommendations into legislation. Lanning said, “Let’s not let the commission report sit on the shelf and collect dust and have nothing come of it.”<sup>7</sup> Since its formation, the task force has put forward the asset test

analysis legislation, as well as a bill that would expand Circles of Support,<sup>8</sup> a program that matches low-income individuals with middle-income volunteers to provide support as they work to move out of poverty; increase services available to low-income individuals trying to keep jobs; and engage the Search Institute, a national research center based in Minneapolis, to help local communities plan efforts to strengthen their social infrastructure.

State Sen. John Marty (D), who served as co-chair of the commission, has introduced a “vision bill,” which calls for an increase in the state minimum wage, fully funding child care assistance, and expanding the state income tax credit program.<sup>9</sup> Although the legislation likely will not pass in the near term because of its hefty price tag, according to Schlick, “it’s a bill that he and advocacy groups want to put on the table to just say, ‘This is what it will take.’” During its last session, the state legislature almost approved a bill that would have required state agencies to prepare a poverty impact statement for any legislation likely to have a significant impact on low-income individuals, one of the recommendations of the commission.<sup>10</sup> Schlick says that advocates also plan to approach the new governor and his administration about the possibility of developing this type of tool.

### Limitations and Lessons

The commission, despite its many successes, was not without limitations. The work of the commission, for example, had little to no impact on efforts to protect social service programs for low- to moderate-income individuals from funding reductions during state budget debates. As Schlick noted, state legislators “who were reluctant about those cuts were reluctant before they were on the commission and after.” Among conservative lawmakers, she said, advocates did not “change a single vote when it was time to do a budget bill and cuts because of their work on the commission.” The commission also largely failed to engage the business community in anti-poverty efforts in the state. “There were efforts to bring the business community” – which had a history of civic engagement from the 1940s through the 1970s – into the work of the commission, but today “as companies find that their customer bases are all over the world, it’s less clear how

their business mission and their civic mission line up,” and business leaders appear less “comfortable with a public policy role,” Schlick said.

In addition to these shortcomings, advocates took some issue with the panoply of recommendations included in the final report of the commission. According to Schlick, advocates had hoped that the commission would take what it learned from the listening sessions, hearings, and working group meetings and draft “three very large-scale recommendations that the members of that commission could get behind and ... everyone could focus on,” rather than included “everything that it would take to end poverty.” Schlick recommended that other states considering forming poverty commissions pay attention to this step and not “skip over the step of finding common ground” on priority recommendations. States should attempt to “get the leadership to agree to the hard work of saying, ‘Let’s pick a few ideas, and let’s hammer out some consensus behind those, so we can move forward on them,’” said Schlick.

Schlick also recommended that, as happened in Minnesota, states seeking to establish poverty commissions work closely with advocacy groups. “Advocates have done lots of planning and work about where they want to see anti-poverty efforts go and who they want to be engaged, so that they’re always steps ahead of the commission” and can help direct its work, she said. In addition, she suggested that emerging state poverty commissions hold listening sessions similar to those conducted in Minnesota. They were “very powerful” and placed local communities “in the lead” on anti-poverty efforts, she said.

## Ohio Anti-Poverty Task Force

*There are too many Ohioans living in poverty...In order to ensure that Ohio is doing all that it can to move people from poverty to self-sufficiency, and to ensure that my Administration has access to a diverse set of perspectives, expertise and ideas when tackling this important challenge, I hereby order the creation of the Ohio Anti-Poverty Task Force.*

-Executive Order Ohio 2008-11  
Governor Ted Strickland

The Governor of Ohio wanted his poverty task force to pull together ideas on poverty reduction and he wanted them fast. To make sure no time was wasted, he ordered that within 45 days after its first meeting, the task force should deliver a list of actions to help reduce poverty that he could take unilaterally without involving the legislature. These short term recommendations and a later set of long term recommendations were generated in the one year the task force was authorized between 2008 and 2009.

The task force was born during the Great Recession and some consider that it continues to play a role in the recession's aftermath and with a new governor. "The task force created a renewed public attention around poverty reduction, and several anti-poverty programs fared better than might be expected in a budget focused on steep cuts," observes Greg Landsman, director of the task force.<sup>11</sup>

Governor Ted Strickland (D) took office in January 2007 with a goal of improving the state economy by investing in job creation, education and business. The governor came to the job with a perspective shaped by having grown up in poverty in the heart of Appalachian Ohio. His dad was a steel worker with a 6<sup>th</sup> grade education. Strickland had first-hand experience of the difficult choices facing low-income families every day and a drive to strengthen the state economy by reducing poverty in Ohio. Anti-poverty programs and new, creative ideas to

support low-income people became a central focus for his administration.

Strickland used his own authority, as did five other states' governors, to establish a task force through executive order. The Ohio Anti-Poverty Task Force was located in the Governor's Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives. Under Landsman's direction, the one-year, 30-member task force was charged with developing its recommendations within an overarching goal to find solutions that would reduce the percentage of people living at or below 200 percent of the Federal Poverty Level.

The task force immediately turned the spotlight on poverty. It raised significant media attention. It fostered collaboration among advocates, business and faith leaders, state agency employees, and individuals living in poverty. It gave low-income people the opportunity to express their needs and become engaged partners through 21 listening sessions around the state. It also led to the launch or growth of a number of key anti-poverty programs and policies that otherwise would not have gained traction.

### Ohio Anti-Poverty Task Force

**Established:** May 2008

**End Date:** April 2009

**Target:** None

**Reports:** [Final Report](#) (April 2009)

### Making a Difference

**Informing the Public** The task force was launched in conjunction with the Governor's Summit on Poverty and Opportunity in May 2008. Media attention was significant, and brought home the task force's message and goals to Ohioans across the state. The Summit and task force were featured on front pages, and local papers shared the perspectives of low-income people participating in the statewide listening sessions. Three major papers, *Dayton Daily News*, *McClatchy-Tribune* and *The Plain Dealer*, ran no fewer than 19 articles between 2008 and 2010 and smaller newspapers picked up on their area's listening sessions.<sup>12</sup> For example, the *Marietta Times* introduced readers to Anne Walker, a single mother of three who had recently been working three jobs to support her family. Walker attended her local

listening session and shared her personal story of climbing out of poverty with the help of the Workforce Investment Act program. The state's plan to tackle poverty was covered in papers from small towns like Marietta to cities like Columbus. With readerships totaling in the hundreds of thousands, the work of the task force made the radar.

Awareness and engagement in the issue of poverty is a strategy to reduce it; that's a view taken by the task force in its short-term recommendations which urged the Governor to continue to support initiatives that built greater public awareness of and engagement in poverty reduction in Ohio communities.

**Collaboration and Community Engagement** Governor Strickland wanted a diverse set of perspectives, ideas, and expertise to encourage new, creative solutions to poverty. Critically important, the task force included individuals living in poverty. The governor also appointed representatives from several state agencies, the board of regents, nonprofit organizations such as food banks, and organizations addressing homelessness, businesses, labor, and the faith community.

The development of recommendations – which Landsman said were meant to be practical, pragmatic and specific – was organized into five work groups, led by the 30 task force members and included the participation of more than 300 Ohioans. He notes, “While small is sometimes easier to manage, ours was a ‘big is better’ approach. That’s because lots of Ohioans work on these issues and we wanted to tap into their expertise and their perspectives. It’s doable and we think our recommendations are stronger for it.” The work groups identified recommendations in five major areas: the working poor; children and young adults; multiple barriers to employment; seniors; and benchmarks, measures and implementation.

To ensure its recommendations were grounded in the needs of low-income people, the task force coordinated with the Ohio Association of Community Action Agencies to hold 21 Regional Conversations on Reducing Poverty

throughout the state to inform the recommendations, build consensus, and engage those living in poverty. Sessions were held at Community Action Agency offices, libraries, colleges, community centers, government buildings, the United Way, and other locations that were easily accessible to members of the public to engage as diverse an audience as possible.

More than 1,800 people participated in these listening sessions where small groups grappled with difficult questions around what it would take to create a community without poverty. Ultimately, it was the goal that “these conversations [would] benefit low-income populations by providing a forum for all to share ideas on how to reduce poverty,” noted the executive director of a local community action agency.<sup>13</sup> In addition to creating

**More than 1,800 people participated in these listening sessions where small groups grappled with difficult questions around what it would take to create a community without poverty.**

ideas for the work groups to consider, these sessions also gave people the opportunity to speak about the problems they were facing. Moira Weir, director of Hamilton County Job and Family Services, told

a reporter with the *Cincinnati Enquirer*: “People shared a lot of personal stories... about their immediate struggles with food shortages and housing foreclosures.”

A number of important themes arose from these discussions, which informed the longer-term recommendations. These included the need for good-paying jobs with benefits, lifelong learning opportunities, affordable housing, and reliable public transportation. Landsman cited an illuminating discussion on problematic loans aimed at low-income people called refund anticipation loans. The short-term loans are secured by a taxpayer's expected tax refund. Some advocates wanted to end these practices because they reduce income a person ultimately receives as a result of the high loan charges, however some low-income participants pushed back arguing that some people simply need the money right away. The direct dialogue enriched the policy considerations.

Community Action Association Executive Director Phil Cole told the Governor and task force members, “These conversations were a success. Many communities asked

that the conversations be held again. They were great examples of the purest form of democracy. Alexis de Tocqueville would have been proud.”

**Short- and Long-Term Solutions** The task force laid out a series of recommendations to meet short- and long-term goals. Ohio was the first state to put its recommendations into tiers and a number of commissions have subsequently taken this approach. Tiers can divide lower and higher cost recommendations, proven and emerging policy solutions, or ease of implementation. In Ohio, Landsman notes, “We constructed two tiered recommendations to reflect our realities; first, the Governor needed to know what he could do to act quickly. We asked for and got those ideas on a fast track; then, we wanted to learn about multi-year strategies.”

**The task force’s location within the Executive Branch allowed the work groups to come up with practical, actionable ideas that could quickly be put into effect by the Governor.**

The longer-term recommendations followed a set of guiding principles, among which were:

- Maximizing the quality of opportunity.
- Reducing the disparity of wealth by reducing poverty and strengthening the middle class will benefit all Ohioans.
- Building an economy that works for everyone.

A number of the recommendations built on existing initiatives in Ohio, including investments in job creation using federal stimulus funding available in the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act efforts to expand access to health care and early childhood development programs, increase affordable housing, and improve transportation. They included innovative ideas for tackling poverty, such as building the skills of entry-level and low-income workers by giving preference to projects that use a portion of public works resources to support on-the-job training; establishing steps to soften the “cliff effect” so that getting a job didn’t automatically lead to loss of supports such as child care; and ensuring that investments are universally measured with a uniform cross agency/program tracking system. “The task force found good ideas from around the

country and the report is kind of a blueprint for action. We got pieces of it implemented but not the whole plan,” said Landsman.

**Catalyst for Change** The one-year task force led to a range of administrative and policy changes, as well as new programs. Governor Strickland immediately implemented several of the short-term recommendations, including ones to help struggling families access support programs. This included expanding categorical eligibility for food stamps so that families demonstrating need did not go through unnecessary hoops providing documentation, and allowing families to apply for cash assistance, food assistance and Medicaid programs online through the Ohio Benefit Bank. In addition, Governor Strickland’s adoption of the task force’s budget recommendation for presumptive eligibility, self-declaration, and administrative verification of income for Medicaid for children meant more low-income children could access Medicaid.

Programs that were created or amended due to the recommendations include a summer learning grant program, a 2-1-1 information and referral system, youth mentoring, and the expansion of the Circles program, which partners middle-income families with low-income families as they work to get out of poverty. The hard-to-employ are a particular challenge in any effort to reduce poverty. One long-term recommendation focused on giving the hard-to-employ more attention by concentrating government resources. Specifically, the state launched the Ohio Social Entrepreneurship Initiative which serves as a clearinghouse for funding as well as technical support and training. The Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives worked collaboratively with the state Department of Development’s Entrepreneurship and Small Business Division. Landsman notes, “I’m proud of this model as a viable solution for Ohioans with barriers to employment. And, I hope it’s a solution that will carry over into the next administration.”

**Lessons Learned** The task force was the driving force behind many successes in its short existence, including

bringing public attention to the problem of poverty, encouraging collaboration among diverse stakeholders, and leading to positive changes in policies and programs to improve the lives of people living in poverty. Importantly, the task force led legislators and other stakeholders to consider issues outside of their own agenda, and to think more comprehensively about ways to address poverty.

The task force's location within the Executive Branch allowed the work groups to come up with practical, actionable ideas that could quickly be put into effect by the Governor. These short-term recommendations led to a number of important and immediate changes, such as implementing electronic submission of assistance applications. The idea of creating short- and long-term recommendations also created a successful model that was followed by a number of other state commissions.

While the task force benefited from the strong support of Governor Strickland, its location within the Executive Branch also posed some challenges. "I think having legislators involved is important so that the work leads to drafted legislation," said Landsman. "Ultimately having what comes out of it carry the weight of legislation would be powerful, and that would come about if you initiate the effort as part of the legislature's work." Landsman also suggested that a commission time its recommendations so that they don't interfere with the election cycle and to allow enough time for policymakers to act on them.

The Ohio task force benefited from the engagement of advocates, business and faith leaders, state agency employees, and individuals living in poverty who were committed to addressing poverty. Looking both back and to the future, Landsman said, "Our process showed strong public willingness to do the job; what remains is renewed political will. The report still serves as a blueprint for how to get the job done."

## The Illinois Commission on the Elimination of Poverty

*“The purpose of the Commission is to comprehensively address poverty in Illinois consistent with international human rights standards.”*

- Enacting Legislation: Illinois HB 4369

Illinois is the only state with a poverty reduction target that is focused on extreme poverty. In Illinois, one in 20 people and more than one in 12 children are living in extreme poverty.

Those who live below the official poverty line are severely challenged by limited income; people who live in extreme or deep poverty live *below* half the official poverty line. That translates into living with less than \$9 per person per day for a family of three. Throughout the nation extreme poverty is increasing and has reached the highest rate (6.3 percent of all people) in three decades.

The 2008 law which established the extreme poverty reduction target and the Illinois Commission on the Elimination of Poverty was the result of a two-year grassroots campaign. The Commission is charged with making recommendations on how the state can achieve its commitment to cut by half the number of residents living in extreme poverty by 2015

The Commission’s mission is rooted in the state’s constitution which explicitly seeks the elimination of poverty; further, the state’s Human Rights Act establishes that Illinois public policy should be designed to maximize the productive capacity of all its residents. The commission’s approach to poverty reduction is anchored on identifying poverty as a key human rights issue and is committed to “ensuring that everyone has opportunities to make ends meet and improve their lives.”<sup>14</sup>

In 2010, the commission released its initial strategic recommendations, which are to be implemented in stages over time. The early years of the commission’s work are already yielding successes, including generating a set of bold but pragmatic recommendations, creating legislative champions, and increasing bipartisanship and political engagement.

### A Commitment to Halve Extreme Poverty

In 2008, the Illinois legislature unanimously approved the law creating the Commission on the Elimination of Poverty. The vote was a direct response to a grassroots demand for action initiated almost two years before by the Heartland Alliance for Human Needs and Human Rights’ “From Poverty to Opportunity Campaign.” The advocacy campaign was rigorous. Virtually every county throughout the state involved a collaboration of community members, advocates, organizers, faith-based institutions, and policy leaders all working to hold Illinois responsible to the Illinois constitutional requirement to “eliminate poverty and inequality; [and] assure economic, social, and legal justice.” The campaign recognized that too often, different issues that impact poverty – housing, health care, education and training, transportation, food, work, and others – are not addressed in concert, reflecting how these issues really impact the lives of those experiencing poverty.

Meetings and public hearings held throughout the state allowed committee members to gain

insight into the every-day experiences of those living in poverty, as well as allowing those who would be most impacted by its recommendations to actively participate in the commission’s meetings. The commission developed three “person-focused” working committees, designed to develop recommendations to address the diverse circumstances, barriers, and needs facing Illinois residents living in extreme poverty. The committees were organized around the capacity to work and sought solutions for “Living with Dignity” (for those unable to work);

#### Illinois Commission on the Elimination of Poverty

**Established:** August, 2008

**End Date:** None

**Target:** Cut extreme poverty by 50 percent by 2015

**Reports:** [Building a Pathway to Dignity and Work](#) (December 2010)

“Making Work Accessible (for those disconnected from the workforce); and, “Making Work Pay” (for those working yet living within extreme poverty).

The Making Work Pay committee focused on a disturbing and little known fact: some workers, including those employed full-time, year-round live in extreme poverty. While most of those in extreme poverty are children, the elderly and disabled, fully 20 percent are workers. In Illinois, 17.3 percent of working age adults living in extreme poverty are working for over half of the year. An additional 3.5 percent work full-time, year-round yet still live in extreme poverty. Many of these workers have lower levels of education. Of those adults who work over half the year, 45.5% had a high school diploma or less.<sup>15</sup> Republican State Representative Bob Pritchard, who served on the Making Work Pay committee, said the experience “was eye opening. To see the condition of poverty and the causes of that poverty, and the challenges to solving and ameliorating some of those conditions” made the problem and impact of poverty more clear.<sup>16</sup>

**In Illinois, The Making Work Pay committee focused on a disturbing and little known fact: some workers, including those employed full-time, year-round live in extreme poverty.**

In December 2010, the commission released its first strategic report on the elimination of poverty, *Building a Pathway to Dignity and Work*. Within the report, the commission emphasized the value of “ensuring that everyone has opportunities to make ends meet and improve their lives.” Its recommendations recognize the value of opportunity and a strong safety net, targeting policies affecting income support, housing, children and childcare, access to work, labor, education, and taxes. The commission will continue to hold full meetings, committee meetings, and public hearings, in addition to producing annual reports starting in 2011.

## Making a Difference

**Reframing Poverty as a Human Rights Issue** The commission characterizes poverty as a “manifestation of a failure to uphold various aspects of the human rights spectrum.”<sup>17</sup> The United States is a signatory to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights which establishes the right to adequate levels of food, clothing, housing,

health care and social services as well as the right for security when unemployed, ill, disabled, or aged. In its report, the commission outlined how its work must be consistent with international human rights standards, recognize the inherent value of all people, and provide opportunity for all because barriers to basic necessities often prohibit many Illinoisans from living with dignity. Its recommendations include input by the very individuals they would impact, and seeks to make Illinois a state where every individual has a basic level of dignity and economic security.

**“If not here, where?”** Illinois’ poverty efforts are marked by a determination to be both bold and pragmatic. Despite unprecedented budget constraints and one of the worst state fiscal crises, the commission’s recommendations remained unaltered and were put forth as honest, necessary means to meet the poverty target. Heartland Alliance’s Doug Schenkelberg acknowledged

this difficult context but stated, “If we’re not bold here, where would we be bold? If we can’t have bold recommendations that

are grounded in strategy and reality, if we don’t do that in a commission on the elimination of poverty, then we’re never going to make any really bold efforts to address this issue. We’re always going to be playing around the edges. If not here, where?”<sup>18</sup>

Issuing recommendations immediately following the Great Recession presented the commission with several challenges, but instead of holding back on necessary steps to eliminate extreme poverty, the commission repackaged the recommendations according to Schenkelberg. The recommendations call for implementing policies in stages, with lower-cost and easier-to-implement items presented as immediate steps the state could take to revive its economy. For example, shorter-term recommendations include:

- Increasing utilization rates of assistance programs
- Making Illinois a “1634 Medicaid State”, which would allow those with disabilities to

automatically become eligible for Medicaid when they are determined eligible for Supplemental Security Income by the Social Security Administration

- Supporting the Supplemental Security/Social Security Disability Insurance Outreach, Access, and Recovery Initiative
- Adopting “Ban the Box” legislation prohibiting employers from asking about criminal backgrounds of potential employees
- Permanently eliminating co-payments for Child Care Assistance for families living in extreme poverty<sup>19</sup>

Later stage recommendations were more politically challenging, particularly in the context of a state budget crisis, such as increasing the number of rental subsidies available to those in extreme poverty, creating a program of general assistance for single adults, and incorporating English instruction into vocational and educational training for immigrants.

### **Creating Champions through Political Engagement, Bipartisanship, and Activism**

The work of the commission has created an “echo chamber amongst advocates,” allowing extreme poverty to emerge as a front-burner theme in the state. In other words, the commission channels the efforts of advocates and policymakers. Doug Schenkelberg said the commission provided a clear cause and target to rally around, turning both legislators newly engaged on poverty and long-time advocates into what he termed, “legislative champions.”

More than 70 cosponsors from both sides of the aisle signed on to the bill establishing the commission. The bill passed the legislature unanimously. While a Democrats in the House and Senate were spearheads of the bill in their respective chambers, the Commission today enjoys active participation by Republican members.

For Republican Rep. Bob Pritchard, this has meant promoting a number of policies, including advocating that child care co-payments required of families living in extreme poverty be eliminated. “Often times, parents are trying to get a higher education,” he said. “And yet they can’t do that because there is the inability to fund day care

for their children. The recommendation that is in our first stage of goals deals with this issue.”<sup>20</sup>

Commission members are collaborating on legislative developments as they unfold. In an exercise of true bipartisanship, state representatives Karen Yarbrough (D) and Bob Pritchard (R) co-authored an appeal to Illinois House leaders to protect a core safety net program from possible budget cuts. Their April 2011 letter makes the case that the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program should have its services sustained, not cut, in the fiscal year 2012 budget. Together the Democratic and Republican legislators noted how TANF is instrumental in meeting the state’s goal to reduce extreme poverty. They concluded “We cannot undercut this effort by reducing funding and hurting families.”

Another illustration of how the commission has interjected its deliberations into pending action is through outreach to a range of state players involved in the budget process. Specifically, the commission provided talking points and evidence to state agency officials and legislators to help lay out potential impacts of a variety of proposed cuts that would harm low-income families in the state.

**The Poverty Target: A Tool to Reduce Poverty** “Without goals, targets, or dates, the problem simply becomes philosophical. It can be seen as so big that we don’t see an end. By setting the targets and goals we affirm that poverty was created by our system and our system can fix it,” said Democratic Rep. Karen Yarbrough.<sup>21</sup>

The unique Illinois goal to halve extreme poverty by 2015 is supported by the governor’s office, the state legislature, and the advocacy community. In his introduction to the strategic report, Governor Pat Quinn asserts, “I am encouraged by the commission’s work to examine poverty as a human rights issue, since every individual deserves to have their basic needs met in food, shelter and human services.”<sup>22</sup> Doug Schenkelberg said the target has served as a “rallying cry” among advocates, who can point to this goal to promote their efforts in the political and advocacy arenas. Schenkelberg felt the target has been useful in messaging and engaging the grassroots community, because it is simple and clear, allowing stakeholders to

understand the goal of helping the neediest without being bogged down in political jargon.

The poverty target is also useful in promoting specific legislation designed to reduce extreme poverty. Advocates can use the target as a reference point, stating that a particular bill would move the state a certain amount closer to reaching the overall goal of cutting extreme poverty in half by 2015. The Urban Institute is currently conducting research to project the extent to which policies promoted by the commission get the state closer to their goal.

The target also serves as a reminder of the commitment the state of Illinois has made to protect the most vulnerable populations. When advocates heard that the state Department of Human Services would likely need to make additional budget cuts, Schenkelberg said they used the target to remind the department of the state's legislated commitment to reduce the number of residents living in extreme poverty and to explore how proposed cuts work against the target.

**Awareness and Understanding of Human Rights** The commission's impact has extended well beyond the political and advocacy communities and into the hearts and minds of those living in extreme poverty. During a forum for homeless youth in Chicago's North Side, the Illinois commission described housing and health care not just as needed services but as fundamental human rights. Advocate Doug Schenkelberg remembers that "A couple weeks later, at a meeting of the Chicago Coalition for the Homeless, a homeless youth who had been at the Commission forum was asked to speak. He talked about how at the forum, he learned about human rights. He learned about the rights that they had because they are on this planet. And about how much this meant to him in terms of his ability to make it day to day. Moments like that say to me that we've had an impact regardless of what legislation is passed."

**Lessons Learned from Illinois** Without a commission structure and membership base that can outlast political shifts, Schenkelberg believes little can be accomplished after initial meetings and reports. In Illinois, support was broad. Advocates promoted a bill that gained support among legislators and the governor who signed the bill into law. Importantly, the law transcends administrations.

Governor Quinn, who was sworn in after the commission was created, has continued his predecessor's support of the commission. Administration support is never a given, however. Without a structure that carries a commission past one administration, it is challenging to carry on the work. Advocates fought for the creation of a commission that would exist despite inevitable political shifts.

In the same vein, Schenkelberg noted that without support from a range of political ideologies, parties, and actors, an anti-poverty commission will have little chance of making a real impact. He feels it is important that all members feel ownership in the commission's work. Addressing poverty is not a partisan issue, and the structure of an anti-poverty commission should reflect this.

Perhaps most notably, Schenkelberg observed the importance of ongoing grassroots work by advocates for holding the commission accountable and providing clear motivation for its work. The Heartland Alliance shepherds a parallel effort of advocates external to the commission who continue to press for action. "Were it not for an external entity pushing for this commission, it would have been gone," said Schenkelberg. "[Advocates and state policymakers should] create an infrastructure that is sustainable and deep so that it can weather the storms you will necessarily come up against."

## Colorado's Economic Opportunity Poverty Reduction Task Force

*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?”<sup>23</sup> 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.”<sup>24</sup> 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

### 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)

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 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

**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.**

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."<sup>25</sup> 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.

**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.<sup>26</sup>

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.<sup>27</sup> 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.<sup>28</sup> 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.

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.<sup>29</sup> 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.”

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> “Task force” and “commission” will be used interchangeably throughout this report.

<sup>2</sup> Deborah Schlick, interview with author, March 11, 2011. All subsequent statements from Schick also were taken from this interview.

<sup>3</sup> Minnesota Rep. Morrie Lanning, “First-Hand Facts: Visits, Tours, Testimony, and More,” Audio Conference, Center for Law and Social Policy, July 30, 2008, [http://www.clasp.org/admin/site/publications/files/Firsthandfacts\\_transcript\\_07302008.pdf](http://www.clasp.org/admin/site/publications/files/Firsthandfacts_transcript_07302008.pdf). All subsequent statements from Lanning are from this interview unless otherwise noted.

<sup>4</sup> H.F. No. 979, 87<sup>th</sup> Leg. Session, (2011-2012).

<sup>5</sup> Levin-Epstein and Gorzelany, *Seizing the Moment*.

<sup>6</sup> 2010 Minn. Laws 374.

<sup>7</sup> Nick Busse, “Building a ladder out of poverty,” *Session Daily*, Feb. 5, 2010, <http://www.house.leg.state.mn.us/hinfo/sessiondaily.asp?storyid=1997>

<sup>8</sup> H.F. No. 77, 87<sup>th</sup> Leg. Session, (2011-2012).

<sup>9</sup> S.F. No. 1328, 87<sup>th</sup> Leg. Session, (2011-2012).

<sup>10</sup> H.F. No. 1818, 86<sup>th</sup> Leg. Session, (2009-2010).

<sup>11</sup> Greg Landsman, interview with author, March 22, 2011. All subsequent statements from Landsman also were taken from this interview.

<sup>12</sup> Search for “Ohio Anti-Poverty Task Force” in Ohio News, WestlawNext, <https://a.next.westlaw.com/> (Accessed on July 5, 2011).

<sup>13</sup> Connie Cartmell, “‘Conversation’ on poverty forum held,” *Marietta Times*, February 13, 2009, <http://www.mariettatimes.com/page/content.detail/id/510621/-Conversation--on-poverty-forum-held.html>.

<sup>14</sup> *Building a Pathway to Dignity and Work: Illinois Commission on the Elimination of Poverty Poverty Elimination Strategy*, 2010, 10,

<http://www.clasp.org/admin/site/documents/files/Building-a-Pathway-to-Dignity-Work-Poverty-Elmination-Strategy.pdf>.

<sup>15</sup> Calculations based on *Building a Pathway to Dignity and Work*, 20.

<sup>16</sup> State Representative Bob Pritchard, “Illinois Poverty Commission Recommendations,” Audio Conference, Spotlight on Poverty, December 10, 2010, [http://www.clasp.org/resources\\_and\\_publications/publication?id=0849&list=publications](http://www.clasp.org/resources_and_publications/publication?id=0849&list=publications).

<sup>17</sup> *Building a Pathway to Dignity and Work*, 13.

<sup>18</sup> Doug Schenkelberg, interview with author, March 9, 2011. All subsequent statements from Schenkelberg also were taken from this interview unless otherwise noted.

<sup>19</sup> *Building a Pathway to Dignity and Work*, 23.

<sup>20</sup> “Illinois Poverty Commission Recommendations,” Audio Conference, Spotlight on Poverty, December 10, 2010, [http://www.clasp.org/resources\\_and\\_publications/publication?id=0849&list=publications](http://www.clasp.org/resources_and_publications/publication?id=0849&list=publications).

<sup>21</sup> “Illinois Poverty Commission Recommendations.”

<sup>22</sup> *Building a Pathway to Dignity and Work*, 2.

<sup>23</sup> Representative John Kefalas, interview with author, March 14, 2011. All subsequent statements from Kefalas also were taken from this interview unless otherwise noted.

<sup>24</sup> *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>.

<sup>25</sup> Tracey Stewart, interview with author, March 15, 2011. All subsequent statements from Stewart also were taken from this interview.

<sup>26</sup> Kefalas, interview with author

<sup>27</sup> No Public Assistance at Strip Club ATMs, 68<sup>th</sup> Leg. Session, HB 11-1058 (2011).

<sup>28</sup> 2010 Colo. Sess. Laws 167.

<sup>29</sup> Poverty Impact Statement in Fiscal Note, 68<sup>th</sup> Leg. Session, HB11-1078 (2011). (*Status: Lost in State, Veterans & Military Affairs*, 2/9)