



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

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## Illinois

### 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](#)

*"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>1</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); "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>ii</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>iii</sup>

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

### 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)

spectrum.”<sup>iv</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>v</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>vi</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

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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>vii</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>viii</sup>

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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>ix</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."

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- <sup>i</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>ii</sup> Calculations based on *Building a Pathway to Dignity and Work*, 20.
- <sup>iii</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>iv</sup> *Building a Pathway to Dignity and Work*, 13.
- <sup>v</sup> Doug Schenkelberg, interview with author, March 9, 2011. All subsequent statements from Schenkelberg also were taken from this interview unless otherwise noted.
- <sup>vi</sup> *Building a Pathway to Dignity and Work*, 23.
- <sup>vii</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>viii</sup> "Illinois Poverty Commission Recommendations."
- <sup>ix</sup> *Building a Pathway to Dignity and Work*, 2.