



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

July 26, 2011

## Minnesota

### 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](#)

*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>1</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.

## 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>ii</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.

### 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)

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 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>iii</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

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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>iv</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>v</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>vi</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>vii</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>viii</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>ix</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.

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- <sup>i</sup> Deborah Schlick, interview with author, March 11, 2011. All subsequent statements from Schick also were taken from this interview.
- <sup>ii</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>iii</sup> H.F. No. 979, 87<sup>th</sup> Leg. Session, (2011-2012).
- <sup>iv</sup> Levin-Epstein and Gorzelany, *Seizing the Moment*.
- <sup>v</sup> 2010 Minn. Laws 374.
- <sup>vi</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>vii</sup> H.F. No. 77, 87<sup>th</sup> Leg. Session, (2011-2012).
- <sup>viii</sup> S.F. No. 1328, 87<sup>th</sup> Leg. Session, (2011-2012).
- <sup>ix</sup> H.F. No. 1818, 86<sup>th</sup> Leg. Session, (2009-2010).