



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

July 26, 2011

Ohio

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](#)

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.¹

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 6th 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.

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.ⁱⁱ 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.

Ohio Anti-Poverty Task Force

Established: May 2008

End Date: April 2009

Target: None

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

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.ⁱⁱⁱ In addition to creating 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.”

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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.

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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.”

ⁱ Greg Landsman, interview with author, March 22, 2011. All subsequent statements from Landsman also were taken from this interview.

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

ⁱⁱⁱ 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>.