

REMOVING BARRIERS – DRAFT RECOMMENDATIONS
Version 2.5 at 9/10/08

I. We see that poverty robs the state of social and economic benefits by inhibiting the full participation of all Minnesotans. We believe that every person has inherent dignity and has potential to contribute to building strong communities and a strong state. While the demographics show that certain pockets of the population are disproportionately prone to become, and stay, impoverished, we have found that no one is immune from poverty, and that the needs of people in poverty are the same as those of all Minnesotans. The disparities caused by poverty weaken our abilities to build strong communities and a stronger Minnesota. By building awareness about the ways in which poverty and disparity hinder our mutual prosperity, we believe Minnesotans will embrace solutions to address poverty in their own families and communities.

A. We recommend a public awareness campaign to educate Minnesotans about the causes of poverty, and consequences that poverty has not only on individuals, but for the community at large. The goal of the campaign would be to correct misinformation about people affected by poverty and to suggest solutions that will help Minnesotans fight poverty in order to build strong, healthy communities.

B. We recommend that the Minnesota Legislature, in conjunction with the Minnesota Councils of Color, Minnesota State Council on Disability, and the Office on the Economic Status of Women, adopt a "disparities impact statement" process for any proposed legislation, in order to determine how legislation contributes to either eliminating or increasing poverty in Minnesota. This process would be informal, and could be requested by any legislator on any piece of legislation.

C. We recommend that Minnesota schools, along with faith-based organizations, community groups, public libraries, and other interested organizations establish, support, and/or adopt existing educational initiatives to help educate Minnesota children about caring for, and demonstrating compassion and respect for others. Such initiatives should also educate children about poverty in Minnesota and the pathways out of poverty, specifically, employment and a defined career path. The goals of this recommendation are two-fold and can be taught together or separately: first, to teach children compassion, respect, and the skills needed to effectively care for others in order to promote a culture of community and caring. Service learning options are recommended to supplement this goal. The second goal is to open children's horizons about how school, college, and career choices affect the outcomes of their lives (and others' lives), and

encourage them to make good choices to ensure their economic success.

Resource ideas for implementing these recommendations:

- “What Will it Take?” Campaign to end domestic violence (Chicago); <http://www.cfw.org/Page.aspx?pid=506> a statewide media campaign that will help people understand that violence against women and girls happens cradle to grave and we are in the midst of an epidemic (sponsor – Chicago Women’s Foundation)
- “Groove Your Body” “do” campaign (Minnesota) <http://www.do-groove.com/> -- The do physical activity campaign was developed by Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Minnesota and the American Heart Association. The purpose is to encourage all Minnesotans to make healthier choices and increase their physical activity throughout the day. (sponsor: Blue Cross Blue Shield and the American Heart Association)
- Youth Frontiers: www.youthfrontiers.org -- Youth Frontiers is a nonprofit organization that partners with schools to create more positive school communities. Through programs that help young people realize the importance of living a life of character, Youth Frontiers is transforming the day-to-day experience in schools across America so that schools - and therefore students - can thrive.
- National Youth Leadership Council (NYLC) nylc.org -- NYLC is a Minnesota-based non-profit that promotes service learning nationally and internationally, and has research, school curricula, etc. to assist schools and communities in using service learning.

II. We see that support and caregiving for those in need can often be done most effectively and efficiently by families and communities when they are properly supported to do so. We also see that sometimes, current intervention strategies discourage families and communities from providing needed care and support for those around them. We believe that intervention strategies should strengthen a web support that begins with family and community-centered caregiving wherever possible. We believe that family and community-centered interventions should be available for all individuals and that existing publicly-funded case management services will be available alongside new or enhanced community-centered supports whenever those supports are insufficient or ineffective for an individual. By supporting family and community-centered support, the state of Minnesota can more effectively help individuals move out of poverty, avoid slipping into poverty, and use public resources as efficiently as possible. In addition to having direct impact on serving those in poverty, these strategies further strengthen Minnesota communities and contribute to stable and supportive communities throughout the state.

A. We recommend that individuals receiving or seeking assistance be

encouraged to have, if desired, a designated advocate to help them navigate and access needed services. This individual can be a family member, friend, community volunteer, or paid professional and would be formally recognized by service providers and government programs and agencies as an individual able to assist with a particular case. Advocates will be supported by communities with training and guidance. Consider establishment of a network of statewide telecounselors to assist individuals attempting to access needed services. The expectation would be that all people struggling to escape or avoid poverty would have access to an advocate to assist them.

B. We recommend that a statewide training initiative be established to train community members how to recognize mental illness, and effectively intervene in a mental health crisis in order to get professional help for those who need it. This initiative will be implemented through community education, faith communities, and other organizations. Because poverty, mental health concerns, and crisis often go hand-in-hand, we believe this recommendation will address the needs of a critical segment of Minnesotans currently in or nearing poverty.

C. We recommend that marriage and family counseling is accessible through insurance coverage or other means, allowing couples and families access to the tools and support they need to stabilize their family. We also encourage other forms of support for families and caregivers (e.g., respite care, adult day care, etc.) be made available to ensure that all those in caregiving roles have access to needed support.

D. We encourage a review of how individuals are compensated with public funds for various caregiving roles (e.g., foster parenting, guardianship, etc.) and recommend that caregiving be compensated when necessary and appropriate; and, that such compensation be equitable regardless of the relationship between caregiver and individual in need.

E. We recommend community-centered implementation of program services and policies that address barriers which keep ex-offenders from getting housing, employment, and other necessities to keep them out of poverty and prohibits them from contributing fully to the community. Specifically, we recommend a) providing parole officers with the time and resources to enable them to spend more time with parolees and support them in meeting their employment, housing, transportation, and other needs, b) implementing the recommendations of the Collateral Sanctions workgroup from 2007, as further recommended by LCEP; and, c) providing some sort of assurance to employers regarding ex-offenders' fitness and reliability for work in the form of a rehabilitation report, certificate of employability or training, or insurance bond.

Resource ideas for implementing these recommendations:

- Lutheran Social Services Older Adult Teams (OAT's): <http://www.lssmn.org/olderadult/default.htm> -- The Older Adult teams are comprised of staff who represent each service that LSS provides in a specific geographic area of the state. There are 10 teams across the state. The teams meet monthly to learn about the services LSS provides, discuss ways to improve service systems, organize marketing, discuss program needs, and research opportunities for growth. This approach allows team members to instantly understand when someone in the community should be cross referred to another line of service.
- Block Nurse Program/Elderberry Institute: <http://www.elderberry.org/> -- For over twenty-five years, non-profit, community-owned Living at Home/Block Nurse Programs have helped elders stay healthy while living in their own homes. Elderberry Institute was established as a resource center to support these community efforts and extend the Program model to new neighborhoods, towns and cities. In turn, elders remain safe and independent, while still socially involved in their communities
- Northern Connections: www.northernconnections.org -- Northern Connections is a free, voluntary program which helps low-wage individuals. When you call, representatives at Northern Connections can help you find resources.
- Connectinc: An older larger program on which Northern Connections is based is North Carolina's Connectinc: <http://www.connectinc.org/> -- Connectinc. is a nonprofit organization founded on the simple idea that there is another side to economic growth-a human side-and it occurs one person and one family at a time. Connectinc. is the connection that bridges the gap between where families are and where they want and need to be. Connectinc. isn't just about jobs, it's about connecting families with a network of support services. Connectinc. has designed programs to assist individuals in connecting to opportunities that will not only benefit them but make a difference in their community and family.
- Australia's Mental Health First Aid program: <http://www.mhfa.com.au/index.shtml> -- The Mental Health First Aid Training and Research Program. In order to help people provide initial support for someone with a mental health problem, the Mental Health First Aid (MHFA) training course has been developed. This Program includes a 5-day Instructor Training Course to accredit suitable candidates to become MHFA Instructors who deliver the 12-hour MHFA course to their communities. This 12-hour course is designed to give members of the public some skills to help someone developing a mental health problem or in a mental health crisis situation. The philosophy behind the course is that mental health crises, such as

suicidal and self-harming actions, may be avoided through early intervention with people developing mental disorders. If crises do arise, then members of the public can take action to reduce the harms that could result.

- Minnesota Statute 517.08 subd 1b, "term of license" allows that 12 hours of premarital counseling will reduce the marriage license fee. The statute could be expanded to encourage such counseling.

III. We see that Minnesota's service systems, in and of themselves, sometimes contribute to people staying in poverty and struggling to become fully independent. We see that individuals seeking service are confronted with confusing, duplicative, and often inefficient access points to needed services. We see that eligibility levels vary widely from program to program and their rigidity is a barrier to people struggling to become self-sufficient. We believe that the success of our service systems must be measured by our ability to move individuals and families out of poverty. We also believe that services are a means to helping people move out of poverty and must therefore be accessible and integrated in order to meet more quickly and efficiently meet those goals.

A. We recommend the development of one integrated, comprehensive process for determining eligibility and making application for services across publicly-funded programs for individuals in poverty. This process should be accessible to individuals electronically, or on paper with individual personal assistance and accessible throughout the state at a network of public, nonprofit, and/or community-based locations. We recommend that program eligibility criteria be revised to ensure that initial eligibility for needed services is more uniform; and, that gradual growth in income and assets does not penalize individuals or create "benefit cliffs" that discourage income and asset growth.

B. We see that gainful employment is, for many Minnesotans, the sustainable solution to moving out of, or avoiding, poverty. We recommend support and strengthening for services and programs which address employment barriers for individuals. ; Specifically, we recommend: a) providing supports to employers so that they can more successfully employ a diverse workforce (Itasca model); b) promoting and disseminating career information and career laddering information; and, c) providing job training and support to help workers get jobs and be productive in those jobs. We encourage such programs to focus on serving both people in poverty and those at risk of falling into poverty.

C. We see that a significant barrier to employment for all families is access to affordable, high-quality child care and that many families have to make the difficult choice on whether or not to work, based on the availability of

child care. Meeting families' needs for affordable, high quality child care will benefit all families and have a major impact on reducing poverty in Minnesota. We recommend that...

D. We see that a major reason people fall into poverty is because of health care incidents and the high cost of care. In fact, health care-related bankruptcies exceed the number of bankruptcies from all other sources combined. We also see that the most significant barriers to people getting out of poverty are health problems – whether mental or physical illness or injury, or physical, mental, or emotional disability. These health-related barriers make it difficult for people to function on a daily basis (prepare food, do laundry, pay rent, raise their children) let alone hold down a full-time job. Further, the wide variation of health care costs from person to person – in many cases among those who are already insured – means that allotting a specific amount of money to pay for an individual or family's health care expenses is an unrealistic way of calculating how much money a person needs to escape poverty.

We also see that the lack of treatment for such barriers is a significant loss of productivity to our state economy. Unless all Minnesotans have affordable access to the health care they need, we cannot end poverty. We encourage Minnesota leaders to continue working on this issue as one strategy toward ending poverty in Minnesota by 2020.

Resource ideas for implementing these recommendations:

- Benefit Bank: <http://www.thebenefitbank.com/> -- Every year The Benefit Bank® closes the gap between public funds and people in need. Designed to bring people closer to stability and closer to self-sufficiency, this free web-based system simplifies and centralizes the process of applying for many state and federal benefits for low and moderate-income individuals and families. Developed for use by a wide range of community based, faith-based, governmental, job-training, healthcare or social service agencies, The Benefit Bank can be part of a community-wide response to poverty.
- Bridge to Benefits: <http://www.coveringallfamilies.org> -- Bridge to Benefits is a multi-state project by Children's Defense Fund Minnesota to improve the well-being of families and individuals by linking them to public work support programs and tax credits.
- The Itasca Project completed research on employment disparities and created an employer toolkit to "close the gap". For more information, see: <http://www.brookings.edu/metro/pubs/20051027mindthegap.pdf> and <http://www.unitedwaytwincities.org/communityinfo/Documents/closethegap000.pdf>