



THE WAR ON POVERTY

**50 years of social action:
Was it worth the cost?**

COMMUNITY FORUM PARTICIPANT GUIDE

September 16, 2014 • 8:00 a.m. – 11:30 a.m. • Logsdon Community Center

Public Life Foundation of Owensboro

- 7:30-8:00 Registration and Breakfast**
- 8:00-8:15 Welcome**
- 8:15-8:45 Background**
- Review and description of conditions in 1964 and 2014 (PowerPoint and PBS video)
- 8:45-9:15 Option #1**
- “It’s time to de-fund the war on poverty programs.”
- Review of pros/cons
 - Roundtable dialogue and deliberation
- 9:15-9:45 Option #2**
- “Only continue the programs and services that are most important, efficient and affordable.”
- Review of pros/cons
 - Roundtable dialogue and deliberation
- 9:45-10:15 Option #3**
- “War on Poverty programs work and should be expanded.”
- Review of pros/cons
 - Roundtable dialogue and deliberation
- 10:15-11:00 Summaries from Table Discussions**
- 11:00-11:30 Open Forum/Discussion Prompters**
- 11:30 Adjourn**



An initiative now in its fifth generation

The War on Poverty was the unofficial name of legislation brought forth during President Lyndon Johnson’s State of the Union address on January 8, 1964. The national poverty rate was close to 20 percent at that time, 30 percent for seniors.

This was the impetus of the Office of Economic Opportunity Act which authorized the use of federal funds aimed at ending poverty. Johnson challenged Americans to build a “Great Society” and eliminate poverty through programs such as:

- Social Security Amendment
- Food Stamps
- Community Action
- Job Corp
- VISTA (Volunteers in Service to America)
- Elementary and Secondary Education
- Head Start

Poverty Across Kentucky (2012)*

	Adults	Children (under 18)
Hazard	27%	34.6%
Pikeville	23.6%	18.9%
Somerset	23.5%	31.2%
Bowling Green	19.8%	25.8%
Louisville	18.2%	26%
Paducah	18%	26.6%
Hopkinsville	16.8%	23%
Lexington	16.2%	24%
Owensboro	16%	23%
Covington	14.7%	20.8%

*Highest poverty rate in major Kentucky cities
Source: U.S. Census



Poverty Across America (2012)

State	Number	Percentage
Mississippi	689,116	23.8%
New Mexico	421,123	20.6%
Louisiana	900,395	20.1%
Arkansas	560,928	19.6%
Kentucky	821,067	19.3%
Georgia	1,852,459	19.2%
Alabama	896,515	19.0%
District of Columbia	112,719	18.8%
Arizona	1,195,931	18.7%
South Carolina	837,327	18.3%

Source: U.S. Census Bureau

By 1973, poverty in America dropped to 11 percent, its lowest level. Poverty in adult Americans has remained between 11 and 15 percent ever since.

The Office of Economic Opportunity was dismantled by the Nixon and Ford administrations when the poverty programs were transferred by other government departments. Funding was cut drastically by the Reagan administration in 1981.

Fifty years since the War on Poverty initiatives, we have made progress, but we still have far too many people living in poverty, particularly children. Now, the poor are not all unemployed; many struggle in low-wage jobs, both full and part-time.

“Unfortunately, many Americans live on the outskirts of hope. Some because of their poverty, and some because of their color, and all too many because of both.

Our task is to help replace their despair with opportunity. This administration today here and now declares unconditional war on poverty in America.”

President Lyndon Johnson

State of the Union Address
January 8, 1964



After 50 years of experience, through numerous programs and projects, what do we do next – as individuals, as community organizations, as governing bodies?

For discussion purposes, we set forth three options:

OPTION 1

It is time to de-fund the War on Poverty programs.

OPTION 2

Only continue the programs and services that are most important, efficient and affordable.

OPTION 3

War on Poverty programs work, and should be expanded.

Option 1: It is time to de-fund the War on Poverty programs.

This option assumes that, for the most part, the War on Poverty has not worked and it is time to do some major downsizing and restructuring.

Those who agree with this option may say...

- There are still 15 percent of our nation living in poverty despite programs that have been around for 50 years and have cost trillions of dollars.
- Government should get out of its social service role.
- Human needs are best addressed at the local level with local resources: public agencies, churches, volunteers and charitable organizations.
- We simply cannot afford these programs and services.

Those who disagree with this option may say...

- Without the programs launched in the 1960s, the poverty rate would be much higher than it is today – perhaps as high as 28 percent.
- Government should take on initiatives that are effective in addressing social problems.
- Many states and communities simply do not have the resources to meet these needs; the federal government needs to step in.
- We can afford government programs and services when we make them a priority. For example, we have made military spending a priority over many social programs.

Option 2: Only continue the programs and services that are most important, efficient and affordable.

This option assumes that some War on Poverty programs have indeed worked, and should be continued once scrutinized diligently.

Those who agree with this option may say...

- Many working families have made ends meet without these programs.
- We should expect efficiency and not tolerate abuses of the system.
- The determined effort that has been made has prevented the poverty rate from increasing.
- We can take steps to reduce the number of people in poverty. We need to view people from all walks of life as valued citizens.

Those who disagree with this option may say...

- Agencies should stand up to cost-benefit analyses.
- Poverty still exists and has not reduced at a level that is justified by the spending. (Poverty rates are only four percent lower today than five decades ago.)
- Many programs are too piece meal and plagued by bureaucracy.
- The best way to address these challenges is not through government spending, but through economic growth.

Option 3: These War on Poverty programs work and should be expanded.

This option assumes that the War on Poverty has made an immense difference and that the programs should be supported aggressively.

Those who agree with this option may say...

- People from all walks of life deserve a just and compassionate government that responds to needs and opportunities.
- Since 1964, 1.2 billion people have been lifted out of poverty.
- It is hard to imagine how many more people would be living in poverty without Social Security and Medicare. Imagine the social tensions that would occur.

Those who disagree with this option may say...

- These programs have not worked and have bankrupted our nation.
- The role of government is not to help poor people. We have created a society that is dependent on handouts.
- With fewer and lower taxes, concerned citizens have more money to direct to their own charitable interests.

Assuming that there are positive and negative aspects of each option, which do you find most persuasive?

It is 1964. If you could start over on efforts to reduce poverty, what would you do?

What War on Poverty programs do you think are most important and valuable?

Which option(s) reflect the values that you want our nation to embrace?

Did those at your table identify any common ground for action – locally, regional, statewide, nationally and internationally?

What, if anything, have you learned through this exercise?