



THE **WAR** ON POVERTY

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

The Ronald Lee Logsdon Community Center • September 16, 2014

Public Life Foundation of Owensboro



More than 60 people gathered at the Logsdon Community Center to discuss the effectiveness of the 50 year old “War on Poverty”. President Lyndon Johnson proposed this bold social initiative during his State of the Union address on January 8, 1964, delivered just seven weeks following the assassination of President John F. Kennedy. The national poverty rate was close to 20 percent at that time, 30 percent for seniors. 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.

While not a scientific sample, participants reflected a valuable cross section of citizens: social workers, educators, a banker, accountant, community activists, a lawyer, college administrators, a farmer, ministers, a scientist and more. The forum lasted approximately three hours. All were welcomed at this public meeting.

Participants received an issue brief/discussion guide. The moderator, Rodney Berry, reviewed War on Poverty programs, including

- Social Security expansion
- Food Stamps
- Community Action
- Job Corp
- VISTA (Volunteers in Service to America)
- Federal support for elementary and secondary education
- Head Start and more

He shared trends, state and national comparisons, and a news feature from a PBS program on the topic.

Following this background and introduction, participants discussed three options facing our nation as they assessed the track record of the War on Poverty programs:

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.

Notable points from group discussions:

- This view was not shared by many participants.
- However, some participants felt strongly that War on Poverty programs – and similar programs that have been adopted since then – have not been effective:
 - The programs should be defunded because the programs are abused.
 - Unemployment compensation, in particular, is abused.
 - The programs are not accountable.
 - It hurts the economy when people abuse the system.
 - It is easier and more financially beneficial to not work and live off the government.

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

Notable points from group discussions:

- How do we gauge which programs are the most important?
- Without these programs, there is no doubt that the poverty rate would be much worse.
- The programs must be working or poverty would have increased.
- Program efficiencies and value should be revisited often.
- These programs boost the economy.
- We should change the perception of the War on Poverty programs.
- Private funding should not supplement public programs.
- Programs should be continued when cost-effective.
- Administrators should be prepared for influx or decrease in participation.
- Should there be a time limit to cut off services for families who use benefits often but don't make an effort to improve their conditions?
- We should raise expectations of beneficiaries.

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

Notable points from group discussions:

- Programs that have positive outcomes and make an impact should be expanded.
- We have a larger population than we did in 1964; that strengthens the case for expansion.
- We are dealing with changing demographics and structure of this country.
- We must change our immigration policies.
- Generational issues must be addressed.
- Programs must be evaluated.
- We must revisit, refocus and re-prioritize.



Open Forum Remarks

Once they heard the remarks from the discussion tables, participants were invited to share other thoughts:

- The need for these kinds of social programs is obvious.
- Poverty will not be reduced or ended through a forum. However, few problems are solved until we first talk about our problems.
- How can we attract the poor to become involved in these forums?
- Where would we be without these programs? Poverty would be out of control in America if we didn't have these kinds of programs.
- We need to support these programs.
- There are so many regulations and requirements with all the programs. The poor literally have to “shop around” to find out what they are eligible for.
- Agencies that work with the poor need to keep doing so...lots of work to be done.
- Poverty in Owensboro is not as much concentrated by race.
- We should break everything apart—look at all the programs—see what is working, what is not, and start over.
- If we did take away all welfare, we would run primarily off transitional programming.

- We need reform across the board.
- Programs for the poor should not be de-funded.
- Congress is disconnected and people are not voting anymore.
- Education is vital and financial literacy is key. Financial literacy should be present in high school curricula.

“Government should step out of the way and our community should take care of its own.”

Tom Anderson

- We must build partnerships with community stakeholders.
- Is it time for a new community needs assessment?
- Poverty among elderly is substantially lower due to the War on Poverty.
- Reward organizations and funding sources that are working.
- Government should step out of the way and our community should take care of its own.
- If we expand programs we can include more people.
- Poverty of 1964 is different than today’s poverty. We have something called the working poor today. It is sometimes very difficult for someone working full time to stay out of poverty.

- We need to meet the needs of all children.
- We need to develop a culture of thrift
- There has been a disengagement of citizens in our country. Citizens need to get involved!
- Our goal should be to facilitate and enable the broader community to grow within Maslow’s hierarchy of needs toward self-actualization.
- People in rural areas have different types of needs.

“Poverty of 1964 is different than today’s poverty. We have something called the working poor today. It is sometimes very difficult for someone working full time to stay out of poverty.”

Keith Sanders

- There is a ripple effect: Poverty leads to domestic violence, child abuse, mental health crime and more.
- Income inequality drives poverty.
- Tax reform is needed.
- Earned Income Tax Credit works.
- Education about poverty needs to start at the top and include every elected official.

Participants generally agreed that the War on Poverty was a bold, necessary social initiative of its time.

There was also common support for routine cost-benefit assessments of such programs.

Addressing poverty in an effective way requires comprehensive strategies: from early childhood education to financial literacy, parenting to job training, domestic violence awareness/prevention to substance abuse treatment and much more.