

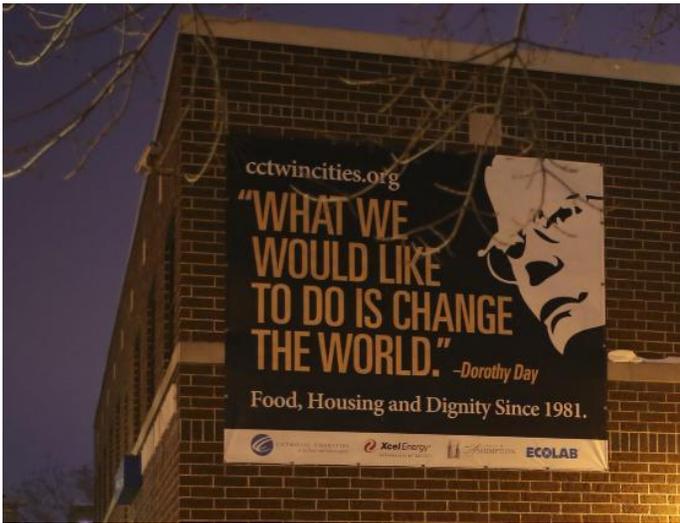
StarTribune

Mired in poverty, left behind

Many in the Twin Cities are truly struggling despite the economic recovery, and this threatens us all.

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My daily headline from the Dorothy Day Center homeless shelter in St. Paul: “42 people upstairs. 229 inside on the floor. 3 by the wall outside (1 in a lean-to). 6 cars in lot (1 family of 3).”

This, while mass media headlines say that the Great Recession is over, that Minnesota has recovered the jobs it lost and that stock market indexes have reached record highs.

Those headlines mask the stark reality that thousands in our region have fallen into poverty and can’t climb out, or teeter-totter up and down, or live on its edge:

- Andrew, 6, attends the Northside Child Development Center in Minneapolis. He is “third-generation poverty.” A shooting just took place near his home — a common trauma for him and others — making it more difficult to learn to read well by third grade.
- Leticia, 52, is unable to work as she recovers from a knee injury. She can’t stomach the overcrowding and smells of the Dorothy Day Center and sleeps outside with steel rebar in her sleeping bag — “just in case.”
- Daniel, a 60-year-old veteran, lives in Minneapolis and works part-time at the State Fair and various sports facilities. He is cobbling together an income, and an unexpected expense would pose harsh choices — rent, medicine, food, transportation — and could put him back on the streets.

Andrew, Leticia and Daniel, and so many others, are not experiencing a recovery. We see them in our shelters, housing, child development centers, clinics, schools, employment and meal programs, and senior services.

Although recent census figures show a slight decline in poverty, we remain stuck way above prerecession levels. There are now more people in the suburbs living in poverty than in the core cities, and there is a disturbing increased racial concentration of poverty at the core and inner rings. This is where unemployment, inadequate housing, struggling schools, kids on their own and crime are all stewing. The maps produced by the Metropolitan Council — and the frustration fomenting in blogs, sermons and community meetings — suggest that “Ferguson” may not just be in faraway Missouri.

This economic insecurity and hopelessness affects more than an unfortunate few in our community — it has a direct and alarming effect on all of us. Consider these less prominently placed stories:

- Standard & Poor’s recently reduced its 10-year U.S. growth forecast because stagnant or falling wages for those with lower incomes are “a drag on long-run economic growth.”
- Federal Reserve Chairwoman Janet Yellen said in a recent speech that “an unexpected expense of just \$400 would prompt the majority of households to borrow money, sell something or simply not pay at all.”
- The 2013-14 survey of Harvard Business School graduates concluded that the economy was doing “half its job” and that we risk an “inadequate workforce, a population of depleted consumers.”

In short, businesses need more customers who can afford their products and more productive workers to make them. It’s the Henry Ford approach: He knew he could sell more cars if his employees could afford them.

What do we do?

First, let’s not go backward. We still must serve people in crisis 24/7/365 and continue to invest in strategies — housing, education, transportation — that are improving lives and strengthening communities.

But we can’t serve our way out of poverty, and current efforts aren’t to the scale necessary to put the Great Recession behind us and tackle the challenges ahead. We are overwhelmed now with the dogmas of election season: “no new taxes/tax the rich”; “solve poverty to improve education/no, just better teachers”; “increase the safety net/poverty is moral failure”; “local control/state command.”

Will we let candidates (and ourselves) off the hook so easily? Will we ask tough questions and demand real action? Will we recognize that the hopelessness of so many in our community threatens us all? Will we recognize that the changes needed must affect everyone? “The dogmas of the quiet past,” Lincoln warned, “are inadequate to the stormy present ... so we must think anew, and act anew.”

We need creative new thinking to guide bold future actions.

At a community gathering at the Dorothy Day Center this spring, Mary Brainerd, CEO of HealthPartners, delivered this keynote message: “Too often people think we can only have social justice at the expense of economic growth and vitality, or only economic growth and vitality at the expense of social justice. I am here to tell you: We need both.”

This is a really good start.