



LOCAL LEADERS SHARE THOUGHTS ON WAR ON POVERTY

## How we help our poor: Cayuga County politicians, service providers assess the war on poverty



MAY 16, 2014 6:30 AM • [DAVID WILCOX](#) | [DAVID.WILCOX@LEE.NET](mailto:DAVID.WILCOX@LEE.NET)

Fifty years ago, America declared war. The target was not a nation, but a notion.

"Many Americans live on the outskirts of hope," President Lyndon B. Johnson said in his Jan. 8, 1964 State of the Union address. "Our task is to help replace their despair with opportunity. This administration today, here and now, declares unconditional war on poverty in America."

Half a century later, America's war on poverty doesn't just continue — it's become another war itself.

Public opinion draws battle lines between those who think the government should help the poor, and those who think they should help themselves. Where some see a welfare state, others see a safety net. One person's dream of independence is another's nightmare of dependence.

That debate, however, hasn't stopped the people fighting poverty on the front lines in Cayuga County from soldiering forward, finding new strategies and facing new challenges in their war.

***"It is in fact a crime for an American to be poor, even though America is a nation of poor." — Kurt Vonnegut***

At the heart of the war on poverty are two questions still unanswered — perhaps even unanswerable — after 50 years: How best can America help its poor? And how much should it?

Across the country, agreement is scarce. A 2012 Rasmussen Reports survey found that a slim majority of 51 percent of Americans think the government spends too much on poverty programs. In a 2014 Pew study, 49 percent said that those programs do more good than harm.

Across party lines, the split in the Pew study is starker: 66 percent of Democrats believes in the positivity of government aid, compared to 65 percent of Republicans who believe the opposite.

As the subject deepens to identifying the cause of poverty, the ideological divide persists: 35 percent of all respondents said poverty can mostly be blamed on a lack of effort, but that number rises to 51 percent among Republicans. When the question becomes whether poverty is caused by circumstances beyond one's control, 50 percent of the pool said yes — 63 percent of Democrats.

U.S. Rep. Dan Maffei, D-Syracuse, said this contrast is nowhere sharper than in Washington.

"One group is saying we absolutely need to keep the social programs," he said. "The other side is saying get rid of all of them."

Maffei, who said he falls "in the middle" of that debate, stresses case-by-case evaluation of what's working and what isn't in America's war on poverty. Programs like job training invest in people's futures, he said, whereas government assistance — Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, unemployment insurance — provide needed help but no grander solutions.

"Some programs partially work; some do, some don't. I'm not an ideologue on this," Maffei said. "I don't believe government has all the answers, but I also don't believe it has no role to play."

In New York, Sen. John DeFrancisco, R-Syracuse, also acknowledges the complexity of poverty, but sees its roots in somewhat sharper relief.

It's the government's duty to help those who can't help themselves, he said. However, it's also imperative that the government distinguish that population from those who can — such as able-bodied men who produce children without marrying or living with the mother, he said.

"We need to define who should be receiving benefits and who should be made to carry their own weight," DeFrancisco said. "You're never going to touch the issue of poverty as long as this cycle continues."

***"What a weary time those years were — to have the desire and the need to live but not the ability." — Charles Bukowski***

The people providing relief for the poor in Cayuga County feel the philosophical squeeze of their work.

"I think at times it's even more prevalent now to hear, 'They're lazy.' 'Well what did you expect, they didn't graduate from high school.' They don't realize there's usually underlying circumstances why somebody's not graduating from high school or not getting the higher-paid job," said Cayuga/Seneca Community Action Agency Executive Director Laurie Piccolo.

Addressing those circumstances — treating the sickness, and not the symptoms — is something the agency and other Cayuga County service providers are striving toward perhaps now more than ever.

For the Cayuga County Health and Human Services Department, the move toward case management epitomizes this effort. Where once people in need of help were seen more as numbers, Director Elane Daly said, today they're seen as humans with unique strengths and weaknesses.

"When I first came, we had human services examiners whose position and job was to determine your eligibility," said Daly, who started at the department in the late '70s. "You come in, they know the rules, they know what you had to do to be eligible for the program, and you're either eligible or you're not."

Were a woman to miss her appointment with that examiner because of domestic violence or some other problem at the root of her poverty, Deputy Director Casey Meyer said, all the examiner saw was a missed appointment.

Today, Meyer said, a philosophy akin to Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs informs the department's work: The most basic problems have to be addressed first.

In one such effort, Daly said, the department contracted with Partnership for Results about five years ago to bring people the department couldn't help before mental health professionals. The department wanted to probe whether issues like undiagnosed learning disabilities presented a barrier to those people's employment. The contract wasn't entirely successful — possibly because the cases were exceptionally difficult — but it was still a worthwhile experiment in case management, Daly said.

That same mindset motivated the Rescue Mission's Family Transitions program, said James Breslin, its Cayuga County regional director of program development. Among the families the homeless service agency had been housing in Cayuga County, he said, some form of trauma — sexual abuse, domestic violence — haunted 95 percent of them.

In response, the Rescue Mission implemented Family Transitions in July 2011 as a paradigm shift. Program Manager Li Sullivan, who has a master's degree in mental health, now assesses each person referred to the program and determines which services — Sexual Assault Victims Advocate Resource of Cayuga County, Confidential Help for Alcohol and Drugs — could help prepare them to emerge from poverty.

"A lot of people, whether it's social services or just in the community, they might say, 'What's wrong with you?'" Breslin said. "We start with, 'What happened?'"

***"Being unwanted, unloved, uncared for, forgotten by everybody, I think that is a much greater hunger, a much greater poverty than the person who has nothing to eat."* — Mother Theresa**

Where the Rescue Mission sees its reach come up short, Breslin said, is with people the agency has helped who suffer a "bump in the road." Indeed, several Cayuga County service agencies have found themselves helpless to lend a hand until people approach the bottom.

"You have an array of individuals that are coming to you at their most crucial time. They're in crisis; they may have been denied services," Piccolo said.

That's where programs like CHESS (Cayuga Has Employment Supports and Solutions) come in. If case management and Family Transitions are treating the sickness and not the symptoms, the new program is more like preventive medicine.

Implemented in 2010, CHESS has a simple mission statement: A little money now instead of a lot later. The program provides one-time assistance for people whose broken washing machine or missed NYSEG bill would otherwise send them into poverty — and to the service providers' doorstep months later. It stops the first domino from falling, Meyer said.

"Maybe their car broke down and they had to spend their rent money on fixing their car to get to

their job," she said. "So now, oops, I owe my landlord money."

Before CHESS, such cases most commonly came to the Cayuga/Seneca Community Action Agency. In 2013, it helped 59 clients with expenses like rent, utilities, clothing for work, car repairs and insurance, and moving or storage expenses. Of those clients, 83 percent never came back for temporary or emergency assistance, Meyer said.

Piccolo sees another gap in service at the site of the triggering events CHESS was created to prevent. When those events do happen, both employees and employers are often ill-equipped to handle them, she said.

"A lot of times they may lose employment because they're in a crisis. They may be a single parent and the child's sick or they have to leave because their child care fell through. Gas and electric are shut off and it puts them in a tailspin," she said. "Those are days lost on the job."

Programming that teaches employees close to poverty how to conduct themselves appropriately — and also teaches employers how to manage their expectations of them — would benefit both parties, Piccolo said.

Another area of concern for poverty service providers in Cayuga County, now and going forward, is inter-agency communication. Where once applicants for aid would be discouraged by doors in their face, today the people attending those doors may point to a neighbor, Meyer said.

"The Rescue Mission, the Housing Authority, Cayuga/Seneca, the Chapel House — there's a lot of dialogue when someone lands on one of their doorsteps," she said. "Now we're making sure that we talk and understand what roles we can and can't assist with."

Facilitating that, Breslin said, will be a one-stop access point for people in need that's slated to open in January. Instead of bouncing applicants around from place to place, breeding fear and frustration with each reroute, the system will try to locate the right path for them, then and there.

There are many benefits to such a model, Breslin said. People who travel from the farther reaches of Cayuga County will have to do so fewer times before finding their helping hand. Service agencies will work more in unison than in parallel, making the most of their resources. And people seeking help might not wait until the last minute to ask because they're more confident in their chances of getting it.

"You're trying to cultivate options and choices, because poor people do deserve to have choices," Breslin said. "You just want to show them that there's a path."

## **LBJ's War on Poverty**

Below is an excerpt from the Jan. 8, 1964 State of the Union address by President Lyndon Baines Johnson:

*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. I urge this Congress and all Americans to join with me in that effort.*

*It will not be a short or easy struggle, no single weapon or strategy will suffice, but we shall not rest until that war is won. The richest nation on earth can afford to win it. We cannot afford to lose it. One thousand dollars invested in salvaging an unemployable youth today can return \$40,000 or more in his lifetime.*

*Poverty is a national problem, requiring improved national organization and support. But this attack, to be effective, must also be organized at the state and the local level and must be supported and directed by state and local efforts.*

*For the war against poverty will not be won here in Washington. It must be won in the field, in every private home, in every public office, from the courthouse to the White House.*

*The program I shall propose will emphasize this cooperative approach to help that one-fifth of all American families with incomes too small to even meet their basic needs.*

*Our chief weapons in a more pinpointed attack will be better schools, and better health, and better homes, and better training, and better job opportunities to help more Americans, especially young Americans, escape from squalor and misery and unemployment rolls where other citizens help to carry them.*

*Very often a lack of jobs and money is not the cause of poverty, but the symptom. The cause may lie deeper in our failure to give our fellowcitizens a fair chance to develop their own capacities, in a lack of education and training, in a lack of medical care and housing, in a lack of decent communities in which to live and bring up their children.*

*But whatever the cause, our joint federal-local effort must pursue poverty, pursue it wherever it exists—in city slums and small towns, in sharecropper shacks or in migrant worker camps, on Indian Reservations, among whites as well as Negroes, among the young as well as the aged, in the boom towns and in the depressed areas.*

*Our aim is not only to relieve the symptom of poverty, but to cure it and, above all, to prevent it.*