

Efforts to Fight Poverty are on the Rise in a Growing Number of States

New study highlights trend in a dozen states to focus political attention on poverty and calls on the next president to spotlight poverty and economic opportunity nationally

WASHINGTON, D.C. – A growing number of states have taken action in recent years to fight poverty and focus attention on the glaring need to lift more Americans into the economic mainstream, a new report finds. In all, a dozen states have taken significant steps to bring down poverty, including ten as recently as 2006 and 2007.

The report, “Seizing the Moment: State Governments and the New Commitment to Reduce Poverty in America,” details this little-recognized but remarkable state movement to fight poverty. The report was released today by the Center for Law and Social Policy (CLASP) and the foundation-led initiative, Spotlight on Poverty and Opportunity.

States are focusing on issues related to poverty and the creation of economic opportunity through various means, including poverty commissions, new legislative caucuses, state-sponsored summits and state poverty-reduction targets. And the trend is gaining strength. At least four more states are considering proposals to create poverty commissions.

Among the actions taken by state government to raise the political profile of poverty:

- Connecticut, Delaware and Vermont have commissions charged with overseeing efforts to meet official targets of cutting child poverty in half in a decade;
- Colorado and Iowa have established new legislative caucuses. Iowa’s Family Success Caucus includes one fifth of the state’s legislators;
- Michigan is holding its first statewide poverty summit in the fall of 2008. State officials are holding public hearings and collecting information in advance of the summit; and
- Minnesota has a Legislative Commission to End Poverty in Minnesota by 2020, which is preparing a final report for delivery this year.

Jodie Levin-Epstein, CLASP’s deputy director and lead author of the report, notes that many factors are fueling the state trend after many years in which poverty received relatively little attention from state policymakers.

“These factors include growing income inequality, a general economic insecurity, and the realization that to stay globally competitive we need a workforce that is skilled and agile,” she said. “These add up to a new political awareness that we cannot allow poverty – and a lack of economic opportunities for people in poverty – to continue to be largely ignored.”

The report identifies which states have raised the political profile of fighting poverty and the challenges facing people who are not officially in poverty but who still struggle to make ends meet;

it also details each state's policy recommendations. To date, four states have released formal policy recommendations. The on-line version of the study will be updated as more states issue recommendations.

Experts on poverty issues hope the report's findings will help spur the next president to make a priority of addressing such issues beginning in 2009.

The report notes that during the presidential campaign, the three leading Republican and Democratic candidates have committed to leading a national fight against poverty. The leading Democratic contenders, Senator Hillary Clinton (D-NY) and Senator Barack Obama (D-IL), have called for naming a high-level point person on poverty issues. Additionally, Clinton has called for cutting childhood poverty in half by 2020 and Obama has said he will seek to reduce poverty by half within 10 years. Sen. John McCain (R-AZ), the expected Republican nominee, has pledged to make the "eradication of poverty a top priority."

Levin-Epstein notes that the state trend is happening alongside other developments that should help ensure that the next president focuses new federal attention on poverty. "The state actions by themselves are enough to give the next president an impetus for action. But we also see a growing number of initiatives in cities, more national organizations taking firm positions on fighting poverty and statements on the issue by both progressive and conservative leaders," Levin-Epstein said. "All of these developments call out for this country to tackle poverty and rededicate itself to providing opportunity for all."

Roughly one in eight Americans lives under the official poverty line.

"It remains a cause for genuine concern that so many Americans live in poverty, including 13 million children – 17 percent of all kids in this country," said Douglas W. Nelson, president of the Annie E. Casey Foundation, a key supporter of Spotlight on Poverty and Opportunity, which is working to generate sustained public and political attention to these issues. "It is heartening; however, that many states are putting poverty and economic opportunity on political agendas. I hope our political leaders will carefully consider the report's findings and its implications." The full report is available at www.spotlightonpoverty.org.

The Center for Law and Social Policy (CLASP) is a national nonprofit that works to improve the lives of low-income people. CLASP's mission is to improve the economic security, educational and workforce prospects, and family stability of low-income parents, children, and youth and to secure equal justice for all.

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Spotlight on Poverty and Opportunity: Foundations Ask Presidential Candidates What They'll Do for America is a new initiative supported by American foundations to develop sustained political will on the pressing issues of poverty and opportunity. Spotlight starts by engaging candidates in substantive discussions about poverty in our country and eliciting ideas and perspectives about what must be done. The Spotlight web site offers the latest research and news from around the country and features compelling commentary from leading public figures and experts. Through ongoing forums, discussions, and outreach, Spotlight will seek to ensure that poverty and opportunity are on the national agenda long after the elections are over. For more information, visit www.spotlightonpoverty.org.