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Conclusion: A Way Forward

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Interrogating the concepts of allegiance and identity in a globalised world involves renewing our understanding of membership and participation within and beyond the nation-state. Allegiance can be used to define a singular national identity and common connection to a nation-state. In a global context, however, we need more dynamic conceptions to understand the importance of maintaining diversity and building allegiance with others outside borders. Understanding how allegiance and identity are being reconfigured today provides valuable insights into important contemporary debates around citizenship.

“This book reveals how public and international law understand allegiance and identity. Each involves viewing the nation-state as fundamental to concepts of allegiance and identity, but they also see the world slightly differently. With contributions from philosophers, political scientists and social psychologists, the result is a thorough appraisal of allegiance and identity in a range of socio-legal contexts.”

James T. Smith, *New York Literary Review*
While the United States continues to recover from the 2008 Great Recession, the country still faces unprecedented inequality as increasing numbers of poor families struggle to get by with little assistance from the government. *Holes in the Safety Net: Federalism and Poverty* offers a grounded look at how states and the federal government provide assistance to poor people. With chapters covering everything from welfare reform to recent efforts by states to impose work requirements on Medicaid recipients, the book avoids unnecessary jargon and instead focuses on how programs operate in practice. This timely work should be read by anyone who cares about poverty, rising inequality, and the relationship between state, local, and federal levels of government.

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Where do we go next? I have three suggestions. One is to enlarge the frame of our work on poverty and race, including a focus on the ever-widening chasm of inequality, and all of it pressing toward the center stage of national attention. A second is to consolidate our work about income, jobs, and cash assistance into a unified frame, which I call a three-legged stool. And the third is to think from a perspective of place, and what that tells us about our antipoverty work.

A LARGER FRAME FOR OUR WORK

We need a banner, a message, a theme, a politics for ending poverty. The substance of ending poverty is complex, but making it a top national priority requires finding a unifying concept. Experience tells us that poverty by itself is not enough to achieve center stage.

I suggest that the unifying banner is economics – the pocketbook. Of course the idea is not new. President Clinton rode to victory with the theme, “It’s the economy, stupid.” The idea was that voters would believe he was promising to help everyone who needed it. The thought succeeded in reaching people and was a major factor in his election. In office it was more complicated. The expansion of the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) in his first term and the economic boom in his second term were positive, to the point that official poverty was down to 11.3 percent when he left office, almost to the 1973 historic low level of 11.1 percent. However, his so-called welfare reform hurt millions of single mothers and their children, and he cozied up to Wall Street. Of course, the cry of economics is hawked by politicians of all stripes, but it is also the way for us, done right.

Our flag of economics goes further than helping the poor and near poor. It is the way to repair our politics generally, and it is also the mechanism by which we can get poverty in front and center in the political process. In the spring of 2018 we saw the successes of Conor Lamb in Pennsylvania and Stacey Abrams in
Georgia – individuals seemingly representative of differing wings within the party but sounding quite alike on economic issues. The pocketbook speaks to all lower levels of incomes and all races and ethnicities, and does not differentiate on gender. The vessel of economics carries a wide variety of goods, but it can sail toward a politics of economic justice.

In the light of the last few decades especially, the flag of economics has to include inequality. We need a politics of FDR updated to the twenty-first century. His words ring out now with a special truth, more than any time since then. He talked of “economic royalists” and “the privileged princes of the new economic dynasties, thirsty for power,” and said, “for many the political equality we once had . . . [is] meaningless in the face of economic inequality.”¹

This is a fight about power. It is a fight between great power in the hands of a few enormously wealthy individuals and corporations and the rest of us. There are more of us than there are of them, but we can only win if we build from the bottom up, to reach people everywhere and add up to the mass that can take the country back.

The specific content of this chapter is about poverty and near poverty, but the most powerful strategy to win on those issues is to perfect and protect our democracy.

The 2016 election was very much about economics but not in the way it should have been. What happened was not a pretty picture. President Obama had tackled the economics of the Great Recession and made important progress that deserved more credit than he received. He did emphasize economics, and we saw some real wage growth and a drop in poverty. But the gains didn’t address the deep-seated financial insecurity and lack of confidence for the future that was gripping too many lower- and middle-income people. Perhaps things would have gone better if he had trumpeted his accomplishments more effusively, but in any event the remaining gaps created a political challenge for Secretary Clinton that she did not meet. She did not convince voters that she would close the gaps, while President Trump in contrast was masterful in manipulating the anger of the people who still felt the hurt.

The debacle was not a new development. Its seeds were sown in the early 1970s. As one example of what happened, income and employment levels for African American men had risen steadily from the end of World War II, but suddenly turned down in 1973 and went in the wrong direction and kept on going. People of all races and genders were stricken, although black men were hit most dramatically.

What happened, of course, was deindustrialization. The good jobs went to other countries or were replaced by automation. New jobs replaced those that were lost, but they were low-wage jobs. They paid poorly at the outset and stayed that way, barely keeping up with inflation. Now half of all jobs in the country pay $38,000 annually or less (if the person has full-time, full-year employment). A quarter of all

¹ President Franklin D. Roosevelt, Acceptance Speech at the Democratic Convention (June 27, 1936).
jobs pay just above the poverty line for a family of four, or a little more than $26,000. Families must have two workers to have even a chance of supporting themselves, and single mother-headed families with minor children confront poverty that exceeds 40 percent.

Better jobs do exist, but they are limited in supply and require postsecondary education. The lost industrial jobs did not require even a high school diploma, but those jobs paid so well that workers nonetheless joined the middle class and sent their children to college in droves. The good jobs of the twenty-first century, in such numbers as there are, require specialized high school and postsecondary education that is not available everywhere, especially in inner-city neighborhoods and rural areas.

Deindustrialization meant leaner profits for businesses, and they took steps to protect themselves. Unions lost ground in part due to intensified opposition by management, and companies began to oppose health and safety regulations and minimum wage increases. The attack on unions and regulations weakened the capacity of workers to fight for higher wages and protection in the workplace. Bad went to worse.

All this was part of a structural change that was difficult to repair, to say the least. Democrats led in enacting the Comprehensive Employment and Training Act (CETA) program in 1973 that did create jobs, but President Reagan ended it and whatever good the program had done was gone. No one really tackled the crisis head-on.

Family incomes deteriorated a little more each year. It was like the frog in the pot of water. If the frog encounters a boiling temperature when put into the pot, it will jump out. If the temperature is raised gradually, it will stay in the pot and die when the boiling level is reached.

A version of that parable is something like what happened in 2016. From the early 1970s into the Great Recession, the hurt grew subtly, bit by bit. The people fumed but didn’t blow up. But when the Great Recession receded and most of America returned to work while many in the Rust Belt did not, the slow burn turned into rage. It was finally like the frog thrown into the boiling water. The people were furious and, realizing that neither party had addressed their plight, they turned to Trump.

His election put our democracy at risk in multiple ways, but as a consequence also evoked a national wake-up call of potentially enormous power. At a very high price (just think of the retirement of Justice Anthony Kennedy), we have an opportunity to turn the country around, an opportunity to do things right now. At the heart of it is economics – the pocketbook.

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Economics as the political framework and as a substantive foundation for people in and near poverty must have four components, covering audience, message, and organizing.

One, the focus must consist of people with incomes up to at least twice the level of the poverty line and a commitment to fight inequality on incomes at both the bottom and the top. Both substantively and politically, the effort must include people at the bottom up to that level that encompasses almost 100 million people (and must include people with incomes down to zero). For a family of three, twice the poverty line is roughly $40,000 annually, and for a family of four it is about $50,000. That nearly one in three people in this country lives below these thresholds is largely the result of the United States turning into a low-wage nation.

Substantively, this income level encompasses the low-wage families who are just one paycheck from poverty, as is often said. In fact people slide in and out of poverty. Those who are above the poverty line and those who are below it are for the most part the same people. Most people who live in poverty are there for a spell and then escape (although typically not beyond the 200 percent level). Our public policies should reach up to the 200 percent level and, in some cases, even higher.

And beyond raising income at the bottom we must tackle inequality at the top. As FDR said, “[P]olitical equality . . . [becomes] meaningless in the face of economic inequality” is as true today as it was in 1936. Destructive inequality exists at both ends and it must be attacked at both ends. To make matters worse, President Trump’s unspeakable tax law created floods of red ink as far as one can see and then some. This is not only immoral, but also means that Republicans will continue to clamor for deep cuts in programs for the poor and near poor to pay for the gifts handed to the rich.

Two, race, gender, and others subject to discrimination must be major and visible players in both politics and substance. Structural economic injustice has had a disproportionate impact on women and people of color. But it is vital to create a broad solidarity across all races and both men and women around a critical analysis of the economy, while noting that there has been deeper disadvantage due to racism and sexism.

Some antipoverty strategists tend to underplay racial or gender disparities. After all, hunger is hunger whether one is black or brown or white, or male or female. Indeed, one might point out that in sheer numbers more white people are poor than people of color and therefore might argue that we do better politically when we emphasize that fact.

There is some sense in that, but we must call out the racism. People of color receive public benefits disproportionately only because the disparity of poverty is in part the result of racism, whether outright, institutional, or implicit. Discrimination, whether in schools, employment, health care, housing and homelessness, mass incarceration, or elsewhere (and in tandem), creates poverty and perpetuates it. We must call all of it out and fight back.
But it is not either one or the other. We also want people to understand that poverty strikes all races. It is important for everyone to know that whites constitute a larger number of those in poverty than people of color. Too many people who are not poor assume that those in poverty are mainly people of color. This widely believed supposition supports stereotypes and fuels racially motivated opposition to addressing poverty.

The larger version of this question is even more challenging. That is the issue of identity politics versus the claim that Democrats cannot win unless they underplay racial and other identity issues. Of course, some important pocketbook policies that assist everyone also help people of color disproportionately. Minimum wage, housing vouchers, Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) (formerly food stamps), and so on, help everyone, although people of color do receive more because more of them live in poverty. Nonetheless, there must be visible color in the political message to get more people of color to vote.

This is win-win, in my mind. Emphasizing ideas that cross lines of color is very important – that is one reason for using economics as the flag – but it is not enough. On the merits and to get people with identity issues to the polls, those issues must be addressed explicitly. The issue of identity politics versus ideas that appeal to all has to be both-and, not either-or. Perhaps the both-and approach will drive some white voters away, but it is the right thing to do anyway (and I believe the ensuing turnout will be an increase of votes on the progressive side).

Most important, we have failed to convince people of all races that the enemy is those who use their economic and political power to satisfy their own selfish interests and hurt millions and millions of others. When we talk about the pocketbook, we have to reach people all across the board and get them to understand that their economic injury is coming in significant measure from the top.

Three, economics as our flag will strengthen our advocacy on specific issues. Education, health care, housing, disability, and the like have their own politics, but connecting them to the overarching idea of economics will add to our case. Good schools and access to postsecondary institutions strengthen the economy. Strong health care produces more effective workers. Affordable housing reduces evictions and stabilizes workforces. Better child care and child development are helpful to current employers and in the future will have more effective workers as the years pass.

Child care is an especially good example, and we see advances there. Organizing and educating for greater support for caregiving can only be enhanced if we emphasize its importance as a pocketbook matter.

The Center for Community Change has put together a group of 20 local partner organizations in 16 states that cuts across parent groups, provider associations, immigrant coalitions, faith-based federations, and multisite community organizations. Most have leadership that comes from women of color. The aims are to lift up early education as a public good, increase parent subsidies for the cost of caregiving,
raise wages for early educators, improve child care quality, and promote race and
gender equity within the child care system.

The outcomes of these actors are impressive: major budget increases in at least
five states (making the subject a high priority in three gubernatorial campaigns), a
significant increase in federal funding in 2018, and a new legislative proposal for a
national child care entitlement that has more than one hundred cosponsors in the
House of Representatives.

Four, we cannot succeed at scale without organizing at the community level.
Lawyers and other policy advocates need to work more closely with local organizers
and community builders and vice versa. Organizers and community leaders provide
the details necessary to translate community wishes into legislative proposals or
litigation put forth by advocates; and advocates, with ideas that originated in
communities, need constituents in large numbers to authenticate proposals to the
decision makers.

Movement lawyers were reasonably plentiful in the 1960s, both in civil rights and
poverty work, and later on behalf of women, environmental issues, and the LGBT
community. In the poverty movement specifically, Ed Sparer at Mobilization for
Youth Legal Services in New York and George Wiley at the National Welfare Rights
Organization collaborated across the country to build a genuine movement toward
ending poverty. Both died much too young.

The movement aspects of advocacy dwindled in the late 1970s and in the Reagan
years, and the nature of the work changed, too. American apartheid ended even
though segregation did not, but the next phase of constitutional advocacy was
deemed by the Supreme Court not to be “de jure” but just “disparate impact” and
“de facto” and therefore was not responsive. The Supreme Court also said poverty
issues did not merit any scrutiny beyond that given to ordinary business economic
regulations, and Congress barred federally funded lawyers from engaging in class
actions and legislative advocacy. Civil rights lawyers had plenty of work but it was
mainly in the form of statutory litigation against discrimination and legislative work
principally carried out by inside actors. Organizing on welfare and other poverty
issues lost steam, too.

We are seeing a new wave of movements, beginning with Occupy and then Black
Lives Matter, followed by the #MeToo Movement, the DREAMers Movement,
International Indigenous Youth Council, March for Our Lives, and more. Cutting
across all of those specific efforts, the resistance movement carries on the fight to
push back against all that President Trump is doing. Connecting these and longer-
standing organizers and community builders, on the one hand, and advocates, on
the other hand, will produce better outcomes. We have a new opportunity to do
movement work.

It isn’t just movement lawyering, though. Helped by social media, the resistance
movement showed that it could spontaneously catalyze hundreds of lawyers to push
back on the Muslim bans and the separation of children from their parents on the
Mexican border. But there are opportunities in communities all across the country to contribute pro bono to make a difference, and these opportunities need not take the form of litigation. Take housing, for example. We can forestall evictions by working in collaboration with residents and organizers. Local zoning, protesting lack of rigor in code enforcement, expanding the supply of affordable housing, and much more are areas in which lawyers can do much more than fighting off eviction of particular clients, important as that is.

Perhaps it is not necessary to say, but the work has to be everywhere and at all levels. Lawyers and other advocates, state and local elected leaders, and civic leaders must all work locally as well as nationally to build from the bottom toward a renewed democracy. The threat to our democracy is quite real.

INCOME, JOBS, AND CASH ASSISTANCE

We are seeing new ideas to address poverty on a large scale. This is exciting. It is the first time we are seeing bold positive ideas on income since the major improvement in the EITC in 1993. One, the Universal Basic Income (UBI), would create a guaranteed annual income and, two, others propose guaranteed job creation schemes. Both are very important but, depending on how they are designed, each presents major problems.

The heart of an appropriate antipoverty strategy is for people to have jobs – jobs that yield an adequate income. Cash assistance must be part of such a three-dimensional strategy but it is not the main event. Jobs are. But creating jobs without cash assistance is also deeply flawed.

The job part of the strategy means increased income as part of the wage itself (minimum wage and laws to treat unions fairly) and wage supplements in cash or cash equivalents (EITC, child and long-term care, housing vouchers, and health care). And actual job creation. But a cash assistance regimen must also be part of a total strategy, and it should be connected to work.

The new ideas are both audacious, but some of their proponents are going at them in a tunnel-vision way instead of with a holistic approach. The UBI proponents seem to show little interest in job policies, and some of those pushing job creation appear to lack interest in cash assistance. Not seeing the forest for the trees, the ideas being put forward raise both structural problems and political concerns.

As currently described by most of its supporters, UBI is troubling on three counts. One, as I said, it seems focused solely on getting money to people. A consequent disconnect between the UBI and the labor market means it would not help them find and maintain jobs. Two, depending on how it is constructed, it could be unnecessarily expensive. Three, and most important at this fraught time, it invites a bastardized version of the idea put forth by Paul Ryan and others who would use it to get rid of existing programs and replace them with a vastly less well-funded UBI.
On the job creation side a number of people are pushing a proposal to create a massive number of varied federal jobs that pay $15 an hour and apparently do not contemplate raises and promotions. Again in brief, the idea is to employ unemployed, underemployed, and low-income individuals employed in jobs that will raise their incomes by doing constructive work for $15 an hour.

This has three defects. One, mirroring the UBI lack of context, the advocates seem not to see the need for accompanying cash assistance as part of a three-dimensional strategy. Two, as of now the jobs are not defined. Some advocates do mention examples of possible jobs but not in a systematic way, and, with the one-size-fits-all $15 an hour model, it appears that the ideas of promotions and careers seem off the table and unconnected to professional norms. And three, again as of now, it is not clear how the program would be organized and managed.

My critique of UBI is not just that we need to pay attention to jobs but also to what kind of jobs we want to create. We aren’t interested in just any job even though it does generate some income. Assuaging people’s sense of insecurity is surely important, but we can do better. People need to feel independent and valuable, productive and making a difference. I worry that the $15 an hour approach misses the mark, and the mark is important.

As to UBI’s tunnel view on cash, the problem revives an old argument. As the Democratic candidate for president in 1972, Senator George McGovern proposed a “demogrant.” It was part of a proposal for a far-reaching reform of the entire tax system, raising income and estate taxes on wealthy individuals, increasing taxes on big corporations, and simplification everywhere. For those at the bottom, McGovern proposed that each member of a family would get $1,000 annually. A four-person family would therefore receive $4,000 if they had no income, an amount that would be reduced to zero when the family’s income reached the phase-out level of $12,000. Inflation since 1972 is about sixfold, so the $4,000 for a four-person family would be $24,000 now or just about the poverty line for a family of that size. The $12,000 level where the benefit would reach zero would be approximately $72,000 now.

Beginning in the fall of 1970 I had worked closely with George Wiley and the National Welfare Rights Organization to defeat President Nixon’s Family Assistance Plan. The plan had been whittled down in its journey through Congress, and we concluded that it did not provide enough for its recipients and also acquired work requirements. A new front opened when McGovern brought out his more generous plan, but while it was better it nonetheless troubled us. In retrospect, two presidential candidates competing over whose guaranteed income proposal was more generous now seems preposterous, but we found both to be unsatisfactory. Among other things, the demogrant as proposed did nothing about jobs.

My friend, Frank Mankiewicz (with whom I had worked for Robert Kennedy), was managing McGovern’s campaign, so I turned to him to complain about the problems with the “demogrant.” Frank set up a meeting with James Tobin, the Nobel Prize winner and Yale professor, and Ed Kuh, a former adviser to Robert
Kennedy and MIT professor whom I knew well, and others. We argued for something like two hours.

My argument was that jobs had to be the central focus. That encompassed a host of matters that included assuring low-income people a living wage, especially including job creation, and particularly focused on people of color because they were the ones having particular difficulty in finding work. I said cash assistance was, of course, necessary but it had to be connected to the world of jobs.

My main point was to argue for a robust job creation initiative that focused special attention on people living in areas with high unemployment. Robert Kennedy and others had proposed a substantial job creation program as part of the War on Poverty reauthorization in 1967, but they did not succeed on the Senate floor because President Johnson opposed it. I found it unacceptable that George McGovern’s friend, Robert Kennedy, along with Frank Mankiewicz who was running McGovern’s campaign would not have a major job creation proposal as part of the campaign.

It was the economists against me. As economists, they were professionally interested in a system based on money. Simple, they said. No bureaucracy. Just pay out the money. As H. L. Mencken said, “For every complex problem there is an answer that is clear, simple, and wrong.” This is the essence of the UBI idea when it is proposed as the sole answer to poverty.

I lost. The economists’ idea was elegant. But wrong. (By the time of the Democratic convention, the party’s platform said it favored “a decent job for every American.” Too late and without specificity, although the whole issue was hardly what brought McGovern down.)

THE THREE-LEGGED STOOL

There is much more to ending poverty than income. We need to tackle education, health and mental health care, housing and homelessness, ending mass incarceration, place-based strategies whether in inner cities or rural areas, civil legal aid, economic development and entrepreneurship, attacking discrimination of all kinds, and more. But when we talk about income, we need to focus on three legs: deep poverty and some form of cash assistance to help, wages and wage supplements to achieve a living income, and a system to prepare people for quality jobs plus job creation.

Deep Poverty and Some Form of Cash Assistance to Help

We have a terrible problem caused by TANF: the enormous gap of income at the very bottom. There are 18.5 million people with incomes below half the poverty line, below $10,000 a year for a family of three. Much of that stems from the loss of cash

3 See generally, Peter Edelman, So Rich, So Poor (2012).
assistance, which, of course, is TANF. The consequence of the near disappearance of TANF is that there are fewer than three million recipients nationally, under 1 percent of the nation’s population, with almost half of those people located in California and New York. TANF’s disappearance leaves about seven million people with income only from SNAP in a typical month, which pays only about a third of the poverty line, or a little more than $6,000 a year for a family of three receiving the maximum benefit in 2018. Having SNAP to afford food is crucial, but by itself it is woefully inadequate.

The problems with our public benefits are not the same as they were in 1972. The income supplementation that helps low wage workers now did not exist then. Help for them has been built gradually over the years, albeit not perfectly, with the EITC and the Child Tax Credit (CTC). Those benefits still need improvement, but the glaring gap is the huge hole at the bottom.

A national minimum benefit for TANF to fill the hole would be useful but anything that smells of welfare will be hard to sell, at least for now and maybe on a continuing basis. So we have to talk about other ideas. That’s why a well-designed UBI or something like it is very important. However, if the idea is the version of a UBI that would replace all our current programs, it is extremely dangerous as national policy right now and would still be problematic in a more benign political time.

Like the economists I debated in 1972, and even more so now, an elegant computer modeling of a guaranteed income would be inadequate and, currently, toxic. If the UBI is presented as an all-purpose answer right now, Paul Ryan would love it. He would love to enact UBI in return for EITC and CTC and SNAP and housing vouchers and everything else that we have now. The total benefit tendered to recipients would inevitably be less than the sum of the current programs. Ryan has in effect already made that offer, only with a different name on it. We cannot fall into this trap.

That’s the first problem.

The second is what I argued in my debate in 1972. It is imperative that our main focus be on jobs that produce a living income. This problem of the UBI could be alleviated by making it the cash aspect of a larger job-centered approach (although in effect it would then no longer be a UBI).

What would be involved is extensive. It starts with the minimum wage. Child care and help with transit to get to work are vital. People with little work experience need training and support. Conservatives claim that people prefer public benefits to having a job and therefore must be subjected to work requirements. This is simply not correct. People greatly prefer to work. But that does not mean they are necessarily ready to succeed immediately in a job search and in the workplace. They may need treatment for substance abuse and/or mental health services. People with minimal work records need concrete job training and subsidized employment, and “soft” supports like learning to write a resume, appropriate clothing, and
punctuality. The work of Toby Herr in Chicago shows that a person with limited work experience may need a “buddy” to navigate the working world, sometimes for a substantial time. Many people with modest work experience fail at more than one job before they stabilize and successfully stay with a job.\(^4\) And job creation must be part of a full picture, as I’ll discuss shortly.

The right is not interested in the facts, so they just say work requirements will take care of the problem. But some on the left miss the point, too. Having a cash assistance system as the totality of an antipoverty strategy is wrong, too. Having policies like child care, transportation help, and the EITC and the CTC all incentivize work and are vital. But if we really want to reach people with little work experience we need even more. Some of the UBI adherents seem not to understand that, and seem not to have much interest in policies that relate to jobs.

The third problem would be if the proposal is for a universal program with a tax attached to it for people with higher incomes. I have no personal antipathy to that idea, but the politics would be brutal because the gross figure would be thrown around in ways that would make it seem insanely expensive.

With cash assistance in a job-centered approach, we should push for a child allowance or a family allowance or, better, a broader construct of some kind that would not be limited to children or families with children. The latter would have the advantage of having a basic income for all that would include young people struggling to get into the labor market and older people not yet old enough to collect Social Security. Recipients would receive the full amount, with the benefit decreasing gradually as income increases up to a total phaseout point. The program should be administered at the federal level to avoid bureaucratic attitudes at the state and local level, and should be run in the most client friendly method. In fact, the program could be built out from the EITC, starting benefits at zero income and adding people with no children into it. Whatever the frame, it should be managed by the Internal Revenue Service or the Social Security Administration.

Even in a relatively hospitable political time, I would not abandon what we have achieved unless the atmosphere changed radically. It was developed with sweat and blood over a long period and it works reasonably well except for people at the very bottom. Building onto our current framework, we could add a base income for people of $6,667 annually for a family of three, plus SNAP. The total would be about two-thirds of the poverty line, with a formula to reduce the payment as income goes up. The payment would be complemented by the EITC and the CTC for those who find work, with housing vouchers available to all who qualify for them and help with child care to all who need it. Arguably, even without a cash payment for those at the bottom, a guarantee of SNAP, help with child care, and housing

vouchers could constitute the baseline, if that is more acceptable from a political viewpoint. It would be calibrated so it would always be more attractive to work than to rely solely on benefits.

Whatever the combined cash and in-kind portion adds up to, it must not be considered in a vacuum. There must be a framework. Wherever people can be helped to get available jobs, a structure has to be created to help them. Where people live in places with few jobs, an honest and just approach would help people move out of the area if they prefer, as well as pursue economic development where they live now. People who prefer to stay would have a limited income on which to subsist unless they find a job.

The facts are otherwise now. People in deep poverty live disproportionately where there is little work: the Mississippi Delta, the Black Belt in Alabama, Appalachia, the colonias in South Texas, and on Indian reservations. Due to the damage TANF has caused, large numbers of people in those places subsist only on SNAP, period. Extended families do what they can but life is grim. And all of it is essentially out of sight to the rest of the country.

One thing is certain. We need to convince the rest of the country to help the shocking number of people who live in extreme poverty. This is not easy, but Robert Kennedy went to Mississippi and saw the children who were suffering from serious malnutrition, and from that day on he told people all over the country what he had seen. The ultimate result was the SNAP program we now have.

*Living Income from Work and Work Supplements*

I started with deep poverty because it is so serious. Our overall policy aim, though, must be jobs that produce a living wage and have the fewest possible people who receive cash assistance and SNAP as the major source of their income. And this should be done without work requirements. Incentives to work should be built in. The vast majority of the poor want to work. People living in poverty get most of their income from working. Seventy percent of the income of people who live in poverty comes from work, typically only part-time or part of the year or both, but there are some who have little or no income and we must help them. Their income must be increased.

This brings us to the second leg of the stool, which is about income from work and from benefits connected to work, beginning with those on the very bottom up to 200 percent of the poverty line.

We have made progress but we have much more to do. To begin, we need to emphasize what we have accomplished. If we did not have the public policies we have in place, we would have almost 90 million people in poverty instead of the 41 million we have. We need to remind people of that, frequently and strongly. Paul Ryan and others repeat over and over that our public policies are a failure. They say that because we have 41 million people in poverty our public policies are a failure.
We know that repetition of lies begins to find acceptance after they are repeated again and again. We need to repeat the facts just as often.

The list of the programs that are effective is lengthy: Social Security, SNAP, EITC, CTC, housing vouchers, unemployment insurance, Supplemental Security Income (SSI), Social Security Disability Income (SSDI), workers compensation, paid leave, and more (including Medicare and Medicaid, which are not counted for purposes of whether someone is poor). Without all those we would have twice as many people in poverty.

Why are there still 41 million people in poverty? The biggest cause is that we are a low-wage nation.

Apart from the special need to help people at the very bottom, we need to raise wages and wage supplements, and there is much to do to make that happen. Altogether, improvements in all the existing programs can add up to a substantial increase in income, but there is no national understanding of the importance of this fact. We are raising the incomes of millions of working families – including people who voted for President Trump, I am sure – but they do not understand how important this is and who made it happen, let alone the need for more investment in these programs. In and of themselves, these programs make up an extremely important progressive strategy against poverty.

The minimum wage is the most obvious item and the only one that has visible politics, both nationally (although not successful in recent years) and at the state and local levels, which has produced significant success. Advocates of the other programs generally do their work more narrowly and more quietly, except perhaps for child care and paid leave.

The challenge is to tie all of this into a visible package. Of course, the biggest task now is to protect these programs from budget cuts and destructive policies like work requirements. But we need to do more. Other than emphasizing the minimum wage, candidates don’t include these policies in stump speeches. Some talk about child care and paid leave, which certainly speaks to people, but do not mention other relevant programs. Candidates should emphasize all the policies together and make such an important difference. We do not hear that now.

It struck me that Secretary Clinton’s emphasis on child care and the CTC did not move the needle much. Her arguments sounded wonky – programs that seemed out of context. The larger point would have been to explain that the programs are part of a strategy that, in the aggregate, would significantly increase people’s incomes and improve their lives. That would have had political oomph.

The nearly 60 million people with incomes between the poverty line and twice that line should be voting Democrat, but too many are voting either Republican or not voting at all. Democrats are now pushing Medicare for all, free tuition for college, and a $15 an hour minimum wage, all of which are major steps. But there is another major item. For years, Democrats have fought successfully to raise the income of people stuck in low-wage jobs, and they will keep on fighting. Having
done so, it should now be a major plank in the Democratic platform and in the playbook of every Democrat running for office.

A National Framework for Employment, Including Job Creation

The third leg of the stool is job creation and its role in a larger overhaul of our labor market. We can’t have a useful discussion of job creation if we don’t nest it in a larger context.

Other than the historic New Deal job creation programs during the Great Depression, job creation at scale has not occurred with the exception of the CETA program that I mentioned earlier. Important pilot projects like New Hope in Wisconsin took place in the nineties and Congresswoman Jan Schakowsky and Congressman George Miller introduced important job creation bills in the Great Recession (and there was Robert Kennedy’s 1967 proposal mentioned previously). By contrast, while President Obama’s 2009 Recovery Act boosted demand for labor, it had only a modest (and successful) job creation initiative that was tied to TANF but nothing more. Between Obama’s omission and the Republican control of Congress thereafter, the TANF-related program expired quickly.

Particularly in the light of the election of President Trump and the ensuing call from many quarters for more far-reaching proposals on a number of subjects, members of Congress, outside advocates, and policy analysts have begun to come up with various job creation ideas.

Even before 2017, numerous people had realized that income from wages and wage supplements was not increasing satisfactorily and that people in high-poverty areas were not finding jobs at all. Ideas for job creation began to appear that would create reasonably paid jobs, tighten the labor market, and be especially important for people living in areas with high unemployment. For example, Senator Cory Booker and Representative Bonnie Watson Coleman have introduced a bill for 15 pilot job creation projects in areas in high-unemployment communities, both rural and urban. It is a worthwhile beginning.

Booker and others are doing what they should do – legislating. At the same time, a far-reaching and more futuristic discussion is taking place, which is also important. One set of people proposes $15 an hour for an open-ended number of jobs without definitive career pathways or specific suggestions of how the program would be operated. The other group argues for what I call “national needs” jobs – jobs doing things our country needs: infrastructure, caregiving, housing, green energy, health care, and so on. Both ideas would require significant funding if and when they operate at scale, so if a major initiative begins to get traction its supporters will need to be clear about the cost and how to find the money as well as lay out the details of the proposals.

Other than CETA, we have never had a national policy to create jobs other than during recessions. The ambitious jobs proposals I’ve just mentioned are a new idea.
It should be routine to have job creation programs during recessions, and we know how to do it even if we don’t often do it. But that is quite different from job creation in times of low unemployment nationally. Jobs created in recessions generally are temporary, but most such jobs would not make sense as careers.

Before I delve further into the ideas, it might be helpful to understand that we already use job creation in various ways. Understanding them opens up a larger map so we can see where job creation fits in and reveals that we really have no overall systematic framework for job creation.

The larger map shows that job creation in the sense of paid work experience begins in high school. We don’t call it job creation, but it is. I am talking about high school, where we call it career and technical education (CTE), which at its best includes paid work experience. It tends to be symbiotic with places where employers are clamoring for employees. If you go to the Nashville area, you’ll see highly sophisticated manufacturing employers operating in tandem with schools (and postsecondary institutions) to educate young people for excellent jobs. The students are paid for their work and, just as important, their CTE curriculum also contains the complete program necessary to go to a four-year university if that is their preference. Those students have the opportunity to obtain the best jobs of the twenty-first century. (Apprenticeships are a variation. Drawn from Germany and other European countries, they are a form of paid work experience or job creation on the way to permanent employment. We have done little of it in our country, but we should.)

But it’s all spotty. Young people of color don’t get the same opportunities, even in the job-abundant Nashville area, and girls don’t get treated justly either. And in areas where employers aren’t clamoring so much for employees, they are less hungry for recruiting young people regardless of color. Of course, the engineers and computer whizzes and the electricians and plumbers could go somewhere else if the particular place isn’t hiring, except somebody has to get them started. Every school system has the responsibility to offer a first-class CTE program, but too many don’t. So much of our country is divided — the places where things are fine and the places where they are not. Education is not different.

The picture remains spotty as young people grow up. What about the young people who have dropped off the pathway, not finishing high school and sometimes acquiring a criminal record? Look at YouthBuild. The heart of what they do is job creation, focusing on building houses (although they are paid more like stipends than the wage of full-fledged employees). We need to invest far more than we do to help young people get back on the track. Job creation is a part of that effort.

AmeriCorps changes lives. People of all ages can participate. It’s community service and, while we don’t say it out loud, it’s job creation (although more as a stipend than a wage). Community service takes a variety of forms – Teach for America and City Year are partially funded by AmeriCorps – and also serves as a bridge into the labor market.
Then there is a workforce development structure that has been in place since the 1960s with federal assistance. These services are meant for people of all working ages. This system does not include job creation although other than that some of the local agencies do their work quite well, executing job training where useful, offering counselors who help people, finding jobs, and arranging child care and transit. Some do not.

Subsidized employment would fit in here, filling in the lack of job creation in the toolkit in workforce development. It is a kind of job creation that helps people to obtain a steady and reasonably paid job as a transition to permanent work. Funding of subsidized jobs is very important. It is not a new idea, but it has been re-engineered in the last few years. Senators Ron Wyden and Chris Van Hollen and Representative Ro Khanna all have bills on subsidized employment, already introduced or on the way. These will be important contributions and could serve both for-profit and nonprofit employers.

Finally in the current menu of what exists or is being proposed in Congress is the idea of having jobs programs in places of high unemployment. Senator Booker’s bill is an example of that. Indeed, the Booker and the subsidized employment bills could be brought together because many or perhaps all those who benefit would be temporary employees on their way to permanent work. The Booker bill is place based while the subsidized employment bills are not.

We need to pay attention to all of this and build on it. We have existing job creation programs and they deserve much more funding than they receive now. So before we talk about spending billions for jobs that aren’t connected to any framework, we need to look at the ones we have.

Beyond what I’ve laid out, I favor a job creation program that would involve real jobs where workers would work side by side with existing workers – no difference. Even though we are close to full employment nationally at the moment, there are big gaps in specific places and among people who have historically been left behind, and there are millions who do have jobs but are paid shockingly low wages. And as important as they are, the minimum wage, the EITC, and the other wage supplements are not getting us to where we need to be.

Beyond our current national needs, some observers believe that the continuing march of technology will dry up many of the jobs we now have. They say we must be prepared with new jobs. Perhaps, and if so, it adds another support for job creation. (Personally, I am something of a doubter. I remember vividly that in 1963 the Department of Labor released a widely publicized report that prophesied a looming technological revolution that would cause a mass loss of jobs. We still have more or less enough jobs. The problem is that they’re lousy jobs.)

Current public investment in national needs is grossly inadequate in many areas and getting worse and worse as our population ages. We read about it every day, and it’s far from just infrastructure. Of course, we will have to pay for what we need and that will require a serious national discussion, but we should spend on what we need (and only what we need).
So I would create jobs that our country needs. Some commentators believe a policy like the UBI is the answer to the disappearing jobs. I do not agree. People maintain their dignity by working, especially if their work is on tasks that make our nation a better place. There is so much to do. If people have a choice between receiving a check or doing something useful, most would do the latter. Cash assistance is needed, but as an auxiliary to jobs.

UBI is not the answer if there is a shortage of jobs. The idea of money in lieu of jobs is not what we need. We need jobs. The $15-an-hour-jobs devotees and I agree on that. Where we differ is on how the jobs should be created. Here is an example of what I would suggest (and my colleagues and I at the Georgetown Center on Poverty and Inequality have written at length about it): caregiving.5

We have an enormous need for caregiving, for children (including child development, not just caregiving), for the elderly, and for people with disabilities. There is an existing framework in place in governments at all levels, and a delivery system run by people who live in communities and don’t work for governments. Public funds to run it are essential, with copayments by recipients or families based on their ability to pay, while the delivery of services occurs at the local level by nongovernment employees.

Beyond the expansion of caregiving jobs along with improved wages and quality of service, the program would recruit for applicants among low-income people wherever they live. Applicants would be trained as any employee would be. This is crucial.

All this is certainly ambitious, and it would not be put into place instantaneously. It would take time to grow the system, both substantively and financially, but it could be carried out within a framework that already exists. That is vital.

This is different from the jobs of the Depression. Those were meant to be temporary. Hiring people now for $15 an hour in a program that mimics the Civilian Conservation Corps or the Works Progress Administration will for the most part not do for permanent employment. A permanent job has to be permanent, not a rerun from a Depression design. If we want real jobs that offer careers with promotions, they have to be just that: careers with possible promotions and built-in structures that operate side by side other employees.

Nor should caregiving be the only area of national need we pursue. Infrastructure is obvious, but to be done right requires a commitment to recruit low-income people in the same way I propose for caregiving. The Affordable Care Act and the new Medicaid have engaged in this kind of job creation, although not with enough focused effort on the training and hiring of low-income people. Housing is a great possibility. The need is enormous. YouthBuild has been doing it for years and with

5 See generally, Nina Dastur et al., Georgetown Law Center on Poverty and Inequality, Building the Caring Economy: Workforce Investments to Expand Access to Affordable, High-Quality, Early and Long-Term Care (2017).
great success although not at the scale that it deserves. And there are surely permanent jobs in environmental careers and green energy, among other growing industries.

In the meantime, current programs with job creation features must be improved and built up further. Promoting multiple pathways to success is essential. Career and technical education must be brought up to speed everywhere. Apprenticeships must be expanded. AmeriCorps should grow with increased stipends. Organizations like YouthBuild should expand. Subsidized employment should be legislated into existence and grown.

BEYOND THE THREE-LEGGED STOOL: HIGH-POVERTY PLACES

Everything I’ve discussed comes together exponentially in places of concentrated poverty. Comparing poverty in 2018 with 1968, inner-city neighborhoods and rural areas still have serious problems and some are even worse off. Every aspect of poverty converges there and the sum of its parts is even more troubling. Looking ahead, particular attention must be paid to place-based solutions.

Improving employment and income is number one, but there is much more to do and they all play a role in getting more jobs for residents. Schools including children aged zero to five, health and mental health care, housing, mass incarceration, community safety, the systemic effect of racism, and more are all important in and of themselves and crucial to increase employment in the area. We have to work on all of it simultaneously.

There is some good news here. The Bedford-Stuyvesant project in Brooklyn, New York on which I worked with Robert Kennedy ran as one large organization that was supposed to do everything. To be sure, entities like these did a great deal, but it was difficult to manage all the responsibilities when they were placed under one roof. In addition, the idea of a community development corporation was almost by definition anchored in housing and economic development. As time passed, the vast majority of the 2,000-plus community development corporations (CDCs) focused solely on developing low-income housing, and not on scale. Not bad, certainly, but not the multifaceted organizations that were envisioned.

In recent years, new kinds of multifaceted initiatives have begun to pop up, including President Obama’s Promise Neighborhoods legislation. Instead of a single organization doing everything, the new social entrepreneurs operate on principles of partnership, creating relationships both inside and outside of the neighborhoods, and bringing multiple kinds of expertise to meet residents’ needs. Instead of centering activities solely on housing and occasional community development, the new creators feature different kinds of hubs and build out their partnerships like spokes on a bicycle.

The hubs are schools, Head Start programs, community health centers, “modern” settlement houses, and mental health professionals, to name a few. The spokes are
anything that might help people—job training and placement, financial literacy, housing assistance, legal aid, parenting education, family counseling, public benefits, and much more. Characteristically, the hubs and spokes operate at scale, reaching hundreds and sometimes thousands of people, so they make a notable difference. Some of the services relate to parents to make things better in the here and now, and some relate to the futures of children, for the next generation.

These initiatives are not magic. They can’t conjure up a job that does not exist. They can’t build affordable housing if there isn’t funding. They can’t find income if a family is not eligible for any public benefit. They can’t create accessible transit if there is none. And all too often now, undocumented people can’t be saved from being terrified when they have all too many reasons to be so.

To address these structural problems, lawyers, organizers, and other advocates need to connect to these new initiatives. More broadly, the new entities need to have connections to all relevant outside forces. If one lesson of the last five decades is the idea of hubs and spokes, another is that the leadership in a high-poverty place cannot obtain everything needed within its own boundaries. It should have a local governance of some kind, but it needs external partners whether they are governments and their agencies, educational systems and institutions, businesses, unions, foundations, or faith organizations. Those who would reduce poverty in places where it is most serious must get themselves connected to these external resources.

But even where the outside is not as responsive as it should be, there is much that can be done.

In Tulsa, Steven Dow leads the Community Action Program (CAP) Tulsa, which has its “hub” in a Head Start program that serves 2,300 children at 11 sites and 350 families that receive home visits. Just running a Head Start program of that scope is impressive, but CAP has expanded in other directions, making it a set of programs that is far broader. CAP Tulsa has a large contract with Family and Children’s Services (FCS), with 27 family specialists and 11 mental health specialists. Each morning an FCS social worker meets children and parents ready to help if asked and noting if something seems amiss that could be a reason for following up. Every family has a support person who is an MA or BA social worker, and FCS offers many classes for parents as well. When called on, a multiplicity of partners is summoned to deliver the needed help.

CAP Tulsa is one of the best examples in the country for what are called two-generation or “2-Gen” programs that combine child development and family support. FCS is a partner with CAP Tulsa from the moment a child starts at Head Start. They conduct a family needs and strengths assessment with all parents at the very beginning. They organize and encourage parents to join social groups that result in important friendships and peer education. The mental health team works with about a third of the children, usually in tandem with their parents.

Career Advance works with the parents, especially on preparing for a job or a better job, with about half of the parents participating. Some of the steps are small
but important: helping parents get a GED or study English as a second language, or simply assisting families with house cleaning. Smart Singles is a group that helps to identify healthy relationships and educate parents on domestic issues that could be barriers to success. Healthy Women, Healthy Future is taught by faculty from the University of Oklahoma, College of Nursing, and helps young women decide whether to get pregnant and how to handle a pregnancy.

Learning at Home, the home visiting program, has 17 staff members serving 350 families at any one time. The team does 90-minute home visits every two weeks for families who have children up to three years old, spending about a third of the time in child interaction with the parents – reading, singing, and playing with the children – and the rest of the time with the parents, providing developmental information and addressing issues of family well-being.

Concerned with the economic well-being of parents, and seeing an opportunity with the enactment of the Affordable Care Act, CAP Tulsa created a program – the beginning of Career Advance – to train parents for health care jobs. By now it has a track record, but the experience shows how difficult it is to succeed. Many interested parents were not remotely ready to do community college work. CAP had to back up and develop what turned out to be a four-tier developmental education system, with the largest tier delivering elementary school–level instruction in English and math. Each accepted person is given an academic coach, a career coach, a financial coach, and a life coach. By now some hundreds have obtained jobs despite the struggle. It is working.

Logan Square Neighborhood Association (LSNA) in Chicago is more than half a century old. It has grown with the times – initially a traditional settlement house for an Eastern European clientele and now serving mainly Latinos – and is doing work at the cutting edge. With 51 member organizations and 225 partner organizations, LSNA organizes and advocates on affordable housing, education policy, voting, and immigrant integration, but its national claim to fame is its Parent Mentor program. Parent Mentors are parents, mostly women, from the neighborhood schools who have children in third grade or lower and are recruited at the start of the school year. They are generally low-income immigrants from Spanish-speaking homes who typically have not been working outside the home and are not active in the community. Once trained, the parents spend two hours a day in the classroom working directly with children, followed by a workshop to build leadership skills. They receive a $500 stipend at the end of the year. There are about 200 parent mentors in the nine neighborhood schools at any one time, and since the program began in the 1990s more than 2,000 parents have participated.

The track record is wonderful. Some become teachers or coordinators in the programs or work in a school as a cafeteria worker or bus monitor. Others start small day care centers, work in community centers, or do something else in the neighborhood. Many get GEDs. Logan Square gets the mothers involved in public issues, especially issues of direct interest in their community. The mothers have testified
frequently in the state legislature and have gone to Washington, DC to lobby on
immigration reform. The program has been replicated elsewhere in the state and
around the country and it deserves to be spread even further.

The Northside Achievement Zone (NAZ) is in North Minneapolis and is one of
the Promise Neighborhoods created by President Obama to improve outcomes for
children and families in neighborhoods of concentrated poverty. Built out from a
previous nonprofit organization and headed by Sondra Samuels, a long-respected
leader living in the neighborhood, the program is located in an African American
neighborhood troubled with high poverty, unemployment, and extensive violence.

Having grown up in the city, I found myself especially disturbed when I visited
the environs of NAZ. It is close to downtown, within eyesight of the tall buildings,
but it might as well be a thousand miles away. It reminded me of Alcatraz, where the
inmates could see San Francisco with no possibility of getting there.

That said, NAZ is making a difference. The preexisting organizations already
there were doing good work, but there was no ecosystem pulling them together.
Working with its partners, NAZ created a family-friendly structure. The family
coaches are like home visitors, recruiting families initially and continuing to visit
them at home and in the neighborhood. They do informal coaching and connect
families to Zone partners who have expertise in education, parenting, child care,
housing, jobs, and financial literacy.

The Zone is two-generational and includes parent involvement in strategies for
children, services directed at parents, classes at NAZ’s Family Academy, and an
emphasis on parents as leaders. The academy’s classes track the age of the children:
College Bound Babies (three and under), Ready to Succeed (ages four and
five), College Bound Scholars (kindergarten through fifth grade), and Family
Foundations for all parents. Zone staff do not tell parents how to parent, but rather
offer a toolbox of strategies.

In just a few years, NAZ has matured, nurturing and supporting a group of strong
partners with knowledge and capacity that would be impossible to create as a single
organization. It has already made a tangible difference for hundreds of families.

Of course, there are challenges that are beyond NAZ and the local community. The
city and its powerbrokers (and the state) should be ashamed for what they have allowed
to happen. Jobs, especially good jobs, are a major problem, for which the business
community must take some of the blame. And it is difficult to improve the neighbor-
hood schools when they are controlled by the system’s central office. The police are a
continuing problem as well. Affordable housing is a governmental responsibility in part.
Mass incarceration is a huge barrier. Racism is a continuing and malignant force. Still,
the Zone is making an identifiable difference in the lives of many people, even if it has
not yet been able to affect the level of poverty in the neighborhood as a whole.

For a long time Rosanne Haggerty has been one of America’s great advocates for
ending homelessness. Some years ago, though, she began to realize housing alone is
not enough, noting that it needs to be situated in healthy and safe neighborhoods
and people need to be able to pay their rent. She began looking at how homelessness might be prevented in the first place. Never one to make a small plan, she found herself in the Brownsville neighborhood in Brooklyn, New York, a place of deep poverty where becoming homeless was a common experience.

Brownsville is tough, for sure. In a neighborhood of 88,000 people, 36 percent have incomes below the poverty line and 44 percent of working-age residents are out of the workforce altogether. Its concentration of public housing is the largest in the country and it has the highest homicide per capita of any precinct in the city, with perpetrators as young as 12.

Haggerty did a reconnaissance and found that there were many public agencies and nonprofit organizations that serve neighborhood people, but in pieces, not as whole people or families. She thought she should look for a way to connect the agencies and organizations and get them to serve people comprehensively. She called it the Brownsville Partnership.

She began by focusing on homelessness prevention for people on the brink of being evicted. Using tips from various social service agencies and going door to door, she and her staff found people on the edge and coordinated with various partners to keep them in their homes. Whether the key to preventing an eviction is a lawyer, public benefits, a health or mental health professional, a job, a charity, or all of the above, the Partnership prevented more than 800 evictions and connected more than 350 residents to jobs.

Haggerty realized that the heart of the problem runs much deeper – a lack of jobs. She and her staff decided to embark on a campaign to find five thousand jobs for residents of Brownsville as the central element of the work of the Partnership’s efforts. It has not been easy work, but she has almost realized this goal.

Haggerty is determined to serve people in deep and chronic poverty whose needs often demand extra attention, make employers less welcoming, and require additional funding to address. Building relationships with high schools and community colleges has been slow, and more partners addressing education and training, health and mental health and addiction issues, domestic violence, housing issues, and criminal justice are needed. Still, she has persevered.

Complementing the jobs work, the Partnership largely shifted from direct services to more of a switchboard function, serving as a hub for the partner groups. Eviction issues were picked up by a legal organization located in the Partnership’s building. An improved communication system set up a monthly partner meeting and improved coordination of the work. Place-related partners worked on improving safety in public housing blocks, restoring a century-old park, and reclaiming a historic market street that had become blighted and dangerous. Other specific projects include food systems, early childhood supports, and a youth corps to improve public spaces and solve community challenges.

Looking forward, Haggerty is seeking partners for a tech incubator and sites for new mixed-income housing. She is working toward a collaboration with the
community, the police, and mental health professionals to reduce harm to children exposed to violence and to assist volatile families. She is also working on improving financial services starting with a free-tax preparation site at the Partnership building.

There is a great deal of action at the Brownsville Partnership.

The New Haven Mental health Outreach for MotherS (MOMS) Partnership in Connecticut emerged from the leadership and entrepreneurship of another remarkable individual: founder Megan Smith, a professor of psychiatry, child study, and public health at Yale Medical School.

Battling mental illness is the hub of this partnership and its strategy is centered on stress management groups. A total of 20.6 million children live with a parent with mental illness, and the incidence is disproportionately high for children in low-income families. Coping with the serious stresses of daily life that come with poverty or near poverty takes an enormous toll. These daily struggles do not necessarily spell psychosis for the adults involved, but they make life miserable, and that misery often spills over onto children, with long-term implications.

Using multiple strategies of community outreach, Community Mental Health Ambassadors (who are former participants) recruit mothers to enroll in the groups, which meet twice a week in two-hour sessions over a period of eight weeks. The staff starts by assessing needs; moms are then assigned to classes depending on their measure on the depression scale. The groups focus on cognitive behavior therapy but the classes are decidedly down to earth, offering mothers techniques to manage stress and take time for themselves, and educating mothers about resources in the community. They also provide babysitting. Participants who live in public housing get $20 Walmart gift cards for each session they attend. Others receive a basic needs bag that contains items that the moms request.

MOMS also offers job-readiness classes that help with resumes and mental health–oriented interview training, focusing on the stresses and fears that relate to the job-seeking process. A former participant can come by one of the Partnership’s sites any time she is stressed or needs to talk. A clinician is available to talk and to direct her or her child to other services in the community. One former group member offers financial literacy classes, too.

The groups are obviously not the solution for every problem, but participants in the stress management groups say they are now better parents and better spouses. Of course, such problems like the lack of jobs, basic skills, affordable child care, and affordable housing, as well as mass transit, domestic violence, addiction, and so on, do not go away magically, but those who have participated in the groups say they have benefited.

Smith also does research, testing ideas that she hopes to adopt more widely. An experimental social networking app connects new mothers around the common experience of childbirth to deal with the isolation and internal depression that often comes from that experience. The initial purpose of the app was to help with postpartum depression, but it has developed to promote relationships on a larger
scale. Very quickly, the moms began exchanging information and advice, building new friendships. Part of the experiment was to send out challenges to the moms – activities they could do with their baby out in the community, like meeting other moms at an art museum. The mom would receive a certain number of tokens for accomplishing a task, and a batch of those could be cashed in for Walmart cards. Counselors would be available to help with emotional issues, and for a biweekly screening for depression.

A social cessation app, Momma Live Long, is designed to decrease the chances of a mother returning to smoking after delivery. Each mom receives a cell phone and a sensor for carbon monoxide that can be read remotely by a technician. Moms who don’t smoke get monetary rewards. If they crave a cigarette, they can press “I crave” and get a supportive quote and social support other from mothers on the app.

As one satisfied customer at the Partnership said, “I would tell the world about MOMS.”

The Alameda Health Consortium in California is part of the community health centers that were and are one of the most important components of the War on Poverty going back to the 1960s. To say the national program is thriving is an understatement. It now serves about 28 million people in 1,300 health-center organizations, with a total of 9,200 delivery sites.

Community health centers are a model of partnerships nationally, and the Alameda Health Consortium is an outstanding example of a partnership. The consortium has eight centers with 75 clinic sites, and serves almost 200,000 people.

A group of school-based health centers that help children and families operates as a partnership within the Consortium. In all, there are 160 school-based clinics in the county. Staffing at each clinic ranges from three to ten people. All offer medical, dental, and behavioral health services, health education, and youth development – a far cry from the school nurse of my childhood.

A student who comes in for first aid is often testing the waters about the clinic’s other programs, and a visit for first aid generally leads to broader participation. The Consortium’s aim is that all students should graduate healthy and ready for college academically, physically, socially, and emotionally. Thus, each school-based clinic also strives to change policy and atmosphere in the school and to help families outside of school. The volume of their work is large. For example, just one of the eight school sites run by La Clinica de la Raza handles 25,000 individual visits annually.

Trauma that students have experienced constitutes a major theme of the work. La Clinica school sites conduct a universal screen for depression, substance abuse, and trauma on students who come into the clinic. The sites then offer 10-week group sessions and one to three individual sessions with a licensed clinician to parents and children who want to participate. The staff also offers training for the teachers to help them understand what trauma looks like and how to respond in nonpunitive ways. The incidence of trauma is widespread: a study of 23 students found that 19 had experienced at least at least one traumatic event, and the average was four.
La Clinica also has gender-specific culturally based healing circles. Boys and girls of African descent and girls of Latino descent benefit the most. They start with a daylong retreat that begins with sharing the trauma they have experienced, then identifies the similarities among them, and finally sets standards for how they will interact. This creates a safe space for resolving situations, using a restorative model to analyze what harm has been done and how to repair it. As a consequence, school disciplinary actions have decreased significantly.

Of particular note are the medical-legal partnerships that La Clinica has begun with the East Bay Community Law Center. Lawyer Rosa Maria Loya Bay rides circuit among four of the school-based health centers and even makes house calls when needed. When a student comes to the school-based clinic, the health professional asks questions to ascertain if the student or his or her family have legal issues. The health professional might uncover education or juvenile justice issues facing the student, or housing or immigration problems confronting the family.

The clinic staff then refers the matter to Bay. There is a steady flow of students, often because of behavior in school that results in arrest but stems from trauma. Immigration problems are a growing category of referrals. Bay may represent the youth or their families or refer the case to her colleagues or other attorneys. A student younger than 18 needs permission from a parent to undertake a full intake and be represented. The organization also runs general civil legal clinics and immigration clinics every two weeks at each school, which parents can attend.

The community health clinic partnerships are long-standing and differ based on local needs. The school-based clinics in Alameda County are an outstanding example among such clinics and an example of the power of hubs and spokes in the health world generally.

Dixon Slingerland, the founder of the Youth Policy Institute (YPI) in Los Angeles, is significant to me personally beyond the superb work of YPI. Before coming to Los Angeles, Slingerland worked for many years in Washington, DC for David Hackett, Robert F. Kennedy’s best friend. RFK would be proud of him.

YPI, now containing one of President Obama’s Promise Neighborhoods, is all about families, especially young people. YPI has been operating since 1996 and it was a success long before it was designated a Promise Neighborhood. YPI works in 18 schools, runs three charter schools, and also manages two Los Angeles Unified District schools. It also operates family centers outside of schools, offering job training and a multitude of other services. YPI has nearly 1,600 employees, of whom three hundred are full-time, and a total yearly budget of almost $50 million. It has 137 program sites and annually serves more than 115,000 children and adults.

Slingerland has long pursued a place-based saturation strategy, understanding that success is possible only if education, health, and employment are addressed simultaneously. The heart of the work is child-centered and nested in a family-centered frame.
“There is no silver bullet,” he says. “You have to do it all and do it well, do it with partners both in schools and elsewhere, track it well, and measure outcomes for children and families in combined ways. It’s enormously complex. We have to spend a lot of time on relationships.” He says YPI runs schools only when necessary; they partner with more than a hundred schools (beyond those connected with the Promise Neighborhood) and have at least five staff members in each. They have a full-service community schools coordinator, a family advocate, tutors (before and after school and in the summer), college and career advisers in the high schools, and instructors for specific subjects. They provide resources that the school district cannot provide and help support the priorities of each principal.

Slingerland is passionate about structural change, always thinking and acting on a big scale. He is making a difference and it goes without saying that he will keep at it.

CONCLUSION

Reducing poverty, racism, and inequality in our nation requires more space than I have been allotted here. I left out discussion in depth of many relevant subjects – education, housing, health and mental health care, mass incarceration, and more. I have, however, tried to address what I think are three vital aspects of moving forward.

The first was to pursue a larger frame for our work. Two was to pull together our thinking about issues of income, jobs, and cash assistance. And three was to look at our efforts from a perspective of place.

Against this background, we need to reexamine the roles of lawyers, advocates, organizers, journalists, and academics, including collaborative work among the various groups. If the actors broaden their outreach into a larger frame, will it add value to the outcomes they obtain? If we retool the modus operandi of each actor both in her own work and in collaborating with people with different skills, will it make a difference? If we use a wider lens, will we create a more effective politics and better substantive results?

We have accomplished more than many think. Yet after a half century of explicit effort, we have much more to do. We have to do better.