

From Your Servant Leader

May 21, 2015

What at first seemed to be yet another poverty summit in Washington, this time at Georgetown University, was actually quite unique. Maybe it was the bringing together of Catholic and Evangelical faith and service leaders. Perhaps it was the backdrop of the impending U.S. visit of Pope Francis, which has energized people of many faiths to leverage that visit into greater deeds and results. Or maybe it was the accepted invitation of the President of the United States to appear on a panel – a panel! – to discuss poverty and its solutions.



David W. Barringer, CEO

Whatever the reasons, the energy and focus were positive and intense. While several aspects of poverty in America were discussed and analyzed, the one that got to me the most was poverty among children in our country and the reasons for it. Based on the book “America’s Kids: The American Dream in Crisis” by Robert Putnam, author of “Bowling Alone” who was a keynote presenter on the summit’s first evening, we learned how children succeed based in large part on the activities of their parents.

For example, children are more likely to succeed in life if their parents spend more time at the dinner table with them. Parents who allow (and often must pay for) for their child’s extracurricular activities such as sports, music, Scouts, school and church clubs also contribute to the success as these experiences teach skills such as relying on team members and knowing how to work toward goals as a group. And as we have heard but can now validate thanks to the book’s research, having an adult male role model – usually a parent but it could be someone else as a mentor – is critical to the development of children and a major factor in their success in school, college and in life. Consider this in light of mass incarceration...

The summit presented very good information on the contributing factors to poverty, some of which we have learned in developing the Society’s systemic change program. These factors include the results of massive incarceration, the difficulties of prison re-entry such as getting a job, and the challenges of having a family member in jail not able to earn an income or to spend time with the children. Other factors included income inequality, immigration challenges, family structure with divorce and never-married couples with children, school curriculum not leading to paying jobs and several others.

Mostly we heard from politicians, pundits and policy wonks. We practitioners didn’t have much time to do more than listen and absorb, but we did have a few minutes at the end of the Conference to share takeaways and any thoughts on next steps. We did not have time, nor was it the intent of this Conference, to look at what we might do together,

commit to further joint activities or plan future meetings. That's okay by me as most of these don't pan out anyway.

With the consent of President Sheila who was with me through the Conference, I promised as a leader from an on-the-ground, walking-with-the -poor organization, the following recommendations that I would return and share with you:

1. Set the example in our own employee wage fairness, "banning the box" removal of job application criminal history information, and hiring of returning citizens and others in need.
2. Be a stronger link between the community's available jobs and the people who need them but don't know how to find them or have the skills to get them. Create with partners the internships and training opportunities to prepare the people in need for these jobs.
3. Consider Conference sponsorship, in time and dollars, of extracurricular activities at our parishes, church schools and CYO programs.
4. Consider how we might leverage our visits to homes with children into youth mentoring opportunities (following proper youth protection guidelines).
5. Can we twin or otherwise reach out from suburban Conferences to urban Conferences and parishes for more assistance where the contributing factors and need are often greater?
6. Collaborate locally with PICO, CCHD-organized programs and others to combat poverty even more than at present while the energy on this subject is so high.
7. Work with our own Voice of the Poor group and others in your community to advocate for social justice regarding mass incarceration, re-entry support and other systemic root causes of poverty.

I can't dictate to your Council or Conference what you should keep doing or start doing, but if every Conference could ramp up in just one activity presented above, then among our more than 4,000 Conferences we can activate the research to make a big impact on the lives of people and families. The Society of St. Vincent de Paul is highly respected as a directly operational solution to poverty across the U.S. Now that so many new eyes and ears are open to poverty, its challenges and its solutions, we will have new partners with dollars and energy to work with us.

Let's take the first step toward these new collaborations and not just those within the Catholic community. Poverty favors no religion and we already assist families from every faith and no faith. We can still work together, and pray together, for solutions.

Yours in Christ,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Dave B.", with a stylized flourish at the end.

Dave