

Now is the time to bail our poor children and families out of poverty

Written by Marian Wright Edelman, NNPA Columnist
Monday, 02 February 2009 15:38

As the current recession has turned into what may be the worst economic crisis since the Great Depression of the 1930s, we all witnessed televised coverage of the CEOs of big banks, investment houses, mortgage companies and auto makers testify before Congress and plead for financial bailouts.

They argued that bankruptcy of these corporate behemoths would result in a national economic catastrophe. So American taxpayers got strapped with bailing them out to the tune of hundreds of billions of dollars. Never mind that many of those corporate executives presided over colossal business failures while receiving multi-million dollar compensation packages.

President Barack Obama and Congress are preparing economic stimulus legislation to jump start the economy, a desperately needed measure to help the millions of American families heading for the jagged shoals of financial disaster as a result of job and home loss.

Even before the dramatic growth in unemployment, now at 7.2 percent, more than 37 million low-income Americans scrambled to survive one day at a time, including about 13.3 million children—one in six. Among poor children, 5.8 million live in extreme poverty—in families with incomes below half the poverty line (in 2008, that was \$10,600 a year for a family of four).

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These are households struggling to hold on to the basics, from a minimally adequate diet to keeping a roof over their heads.

Working poor families are among the hardest hit by the current recession. But working families did not start losing economic ground with the onset of the recession. Median family incomes in the United States have declined for several years since 2000. The Center on Budget and Policy Priorities has projected that between 2.6 and 3.3 million children will fall into poverty during the recession—and 1.5 to 2.0 million children will be counted among those pushed into extreme poverty. Research from CDF's new State of America's Children 2008® Report, reveals that Black children are more than three times as likely to be poor as White children.

How deeply poverty poisons the lives of children varies widely from state to state. A Black child is two and a half times as likely to be poor in Louisiana as in Maryland. A White child is three times as likely to be poor in West Virginia as in Connecticut. The 10 states with the highest poverty rates are Mississippi (29.3 percent), Louisiana (26.8 percent), Arkansas (25.8 percent), New Mexico (24.3 percent), Alabama (24.3 percent), Kentucky (23.9 percent), Texas (23.2 percent), Tennessee (23 percent), West Virginia (22.8 percent) and Oklahoma (22.5 percent). The rate for the District of Columbia was (22.7 percent). (25.5 percent),

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Isn't it time to end the lottery of geography on child survival and provide every child a national safety net of decency? Isn't it time to end child poverty in America, which costs our country hundreds of billions in lost productivity every year? Sadly, our nation's poor children don't have a team of bank presidents or investment house CEOs to plead for an economic bailout for their families in the corridors of power in Washington. That's why I strongly encourage all of us to urge and support the incoming Obama Administration to work with Congress to ensure that there are provisions in economic stimulus legislation, the budget and other legislative initiatives that resuscitate our very sick economy and aid our nation's most vulnerable children and families. Giving the poor buying power will certainly stimulate the economy and help families hold themselves together.

Can we achieve these changes? Yes we can! During the mid-1960s and early 70s, the federal government effectively instituted programs that reduced poverty. The number of poor children hit its lowest in 1973 at about 9.6 million.

What we had over the last eight years of the Bush Administration was a leadership ideology of taking from the poor to enrich the wealthy while lacking a strong advocacy and citizen voice to change these unjust budget priorities.

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I am confident that with President Obama at the helm, we've turned a corner, and there is now the will to do what is right and necessary to help our children in need. But we must all help by raising a loud and sustained voice for investing in our children—our human capital for the future.

Marian Wright Edelman, whose latest book is *The Sea Is So Wide And My Boat Is So Small: Charting a Course for the Next Generation*, is president of the Children's Defense Fund. For more information about the Children's Defense Fund, go to www.childrensdefense.org.