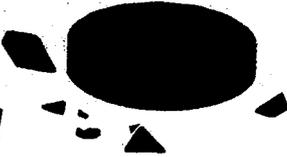


More than \$15 trillion over fifty years has been channelled into top-down, bureaucratic anti-poverty programs, with next to nothing to show for it. It's time to try something new.

Transcending THE POVERTY INDUSTRY



Robert L. Woodson, Sr.

As the 2012 campaign rhetoric heats up both sides are vying to create “sticky bombs”—stereotypes that will cling to their opposition and explode on them in November. The Right characterizes the Left as perpetrators of a socialized nanny state that promotes the massive growth of government intrusion and out-of-control spending with it. Meanwhile, the Left portrays the Right as hard-hearted, tight-fisted and oblivious to the conditions of those in need, not least of whom are the poor.

These days this protracted political tug-of-war is intended primarily for an audience of middle-class voters, many of whom, in these tough economic times, are now increasingly concerned with their stagnant wages and the nation's growing income inequality. Indeed, as the political salience of inequality has risen, concern for those who are actually poor seems to have fallen. The conditions of the poor are thus

Robert L. Woodson, Sr. is the president and founder of the Center for Neighborhood Enterprise.

seldom mentioned in political debates or commentaries except as objects of passing lip service.

Sadly, the poverty optic in the United States is inextricably, albeit perversely, mixed up with race. Liberals have seen a sea of mostly black victims; conservatives of black “others”, if not aliens. But this is wrong. Poverty is not mainly a racial issue, but a class and cultural issue. More non-blacks are poor in America than blacks. The racial prism carries very unhelpful baggage for dealing with poverty; it's an atavistic bias we need to put behind us as soon as we can.

The sooner the better, too, because there is an effective response to poverty that can have a critical impact on such issues as government overreach and unsustainable spending. We can decrease the rolls of welfare dependents, add to ranks of productive citizens and effectively address debilitating social problems while spending fewer taxpayer dollars. We can do all these things, but that means calling a halt to futile political grandstanding, much of which implicitly plays the race card. As the old African

saying goes, "When bull elephants fight, the grass always loses."

What candidates ought to be debating is not which party has crafted a superior *argument* for the sake of political positioning, but which has the superior public policy *agenda*. Alas, we're not there yet, and one of the reasons is that most well-meaning liberals refuse to look objectively at the mistakes they have made over the past fifty years. And conservatives have been mostly unwilling to call them out for fear that their critique of method will be interpreted as a mean-spirited lack of empathy for the poor.

A Failed Paradigm

Yes, mistakes have been made. Over the past half-century more than \$15 *trillion* has been poured into a steadily growing number of anti-poverty programs. Yet even considering the ever-shifting goalposts of official measures of poverty, the ranks of the poor have continued to increase. The reality is that we will never be able to reduce poverty by channeling ever more money into the same failed bureaucratic programs that have yet to make a dent in the problem, and that in some ways have made the problem worse.

As the funding flow for anti-poverty programs has steadily increased, 80 percent of the money has gone to those who service the poor rather than those who are actually impoverished. Since the War on Poverty was launched in the 1960s, a virtual poverty-industrial complex has emerged, staffed by armies of psychologists, social workers and counselors. It is as David Hayes once said: "In a highly advanced society the supply of available advisors increases in geometric proportion to the growth of unresolved problems." We have witnessed a proliferation of Master's degrees and professional certificates tailored to the war's specialized battlespace. Unfortunately, these providers have tended to ask not which problems are solvable but which ones are fundable. Priorities have followed from government grant possibilities, which has meant that providers are rewarded not for solving problems but, in effect, for proliferating them: The larger and more diversified the problem set is, the larger

the grants and salaries must be, and the more extensive the staff to justify it all.

This is not to say that everything that has been done to address poverty has been harmful or solely motivated by self-interest. Those who go into social work certainly don't go into it for the money. But even in the absence of intent to harm, harm may still result. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote in *Letters from Prison*, "Folly is a more dangerous enemy to the good than malice. You can protest against malice, you can unmask it or prevent it by force. . . . There is no defense against folly."

Our massive welfare system has its roots in a failed social engineering paradigm that has unintentionally produced perverse incentives almost too many to count. The system has sapped its dependents of the dignity of reciprocity and it has discouraged effort and initiative. As has been documented repeatedly since the late 1960s, welfare policies have undermined healthy communities by erecting disincentives for work and marriage—key ingredients of progress toward self-sufficiency.

The most debilitating obstacle for the poor, however, is the fundamental and pervasive elitism behind the programmatic aspects of anti-poverty efforts. The conventional elitist approach to solving problems of poverty is to have credentialed professionals design social theories for which they develop programs, access funding and then "parachute" projects into afflicted communities. When the community doesn't respond in a way that is consistent with expectations, the fundamental nature of the intervention is never questioned; instead, the credentialed professionals call for more programs and more funding.

Even when conservatives take control of government, they function within the same paradigm. Rather than seek a fundamentally different approach to address poverty, their strategy is typically to simply cut funding for or tinker within ineffective established policies and programs. Some may have had different and bold ideas, but Republicans by and large have been unwilling to fight political correctness, in which good intentions have always trumped results. Not even George W. Bush's vaunted "compassionate conservatism" broke the mold. So there have been

very few changes, regardless of which political party is at the helm of the social programs.

Elitism also permeates race-based responses to the problems of afflicted communities. Portraying the poor as helpless victims of racism denies them their own capabilities and potential. It places their deliverance in the hands of others who dole out restitution. Racism still exists, to be sure, but it is no longer the determining factor in accounting for poverty. As the late syndicated columnist Bill Raspberry once put it, viewing all problems through the race prism raises the barrier of myopia. What you see may not be inaccurate as such, but you may not be seeing very much.

To say that the conditions of the poor are the inevitable result of racism is to ignore the rich history of the black community in America. Why is it that the black family was strong and black enterprise thrived in earlier eras, even in the midst of legalized segregation and racial discrimination? Why is there such social and economic decline today even in the presence of vastly greater opportunity? In 1954, there were 96,000 blacks in prison, a number corresponding roughly to the percentage of blacks in the general population. That number has soared to nearly 900,000 today, something like triple the percentage of blacks in the general population.

In order to challenge the faulty assumptions of the race-grievance spokespersons, we need to look at black America in past eras. The foundation of the black community in the century between the end of the Civil War and the War on Poverty was the family, a belief in God and an impetus for business formation. Up until 1965, the marriage rate for blacks was over 80 percent. During the Depression, the black marriage rate was higher than that of whites.

In the first fifty years after the Emancipation Proclamation, black Americans had accumulated personal wealth of \$700 million. They owned more than 40,000 business, 40,000 churches and 937,000 farms. The literacy rate had climbed from 5 percent to 75 percent. Black commercial enclaves in Durham, North Carolina, and the Greenwood Avenue section of Tulsa, Oklahoma, were together known as the Negro Wall Street.

Another element of strength was the belief in solid moral and spiritual tenets that guided the black community in the late 1800s and early 1900s. Mutual aid societies were established as part of the National Negro Movement. In every one of these self-help associations moral competency was a requirement. Mother Bethel Church in Philadelphia, for example, had one of the first recorded welfare systems in colonial times, which enforced principles of reciprocity and personal responsibility. Its members were taxed a shilling a week and individuals could not qualify for aid if their poverty was due to their own "slothfulness or immorality."

The continued focus on race and support for those who profit personally and politically from maintaining a grievance industry are keeping this nation from addressing one of its most critical problems. If complete racial reconciliation were somehow to immediately materialize from heaven, it still would not answer the high rates of black-on-black homicide and out-of-wedlock pregnancy. Again, poverty is not mainly about race, and it is frankly racist to insist otherwise.

Identifying Solutions to Poverty

To refocus public and private efforts at alleviating and reducing poverty, we need to answer several crucial questions: Who are the true experts of social and moral revitalization? What principles should guide funding decisions? What qualities are common to all effective programs? The good news is that solutions do exist. Today, even in the most devastated poverty-ridden communities, there are embers of civic health and restoration. The Biblical figures of Joseph and Pharaoh work as a metaphor to describe these grassroots leaders and the relationships and support that can empower them to continue and expand their transformative outreach.

When Pharaoh was troubled by ominous dreams that none of his counselors or astrologers could interpret, he sought guidance from a young Hebrew boy who had been unjustly thrown into prison. Pharaoh followed the boy's guidance and even appointed him to

oversee the strategy he advised so that Egypt could survive the coming hardship. When famine came, Pharaoh's was the only land that was prepared. The Bible recounts that Egypt not only survived the famine but prospered for 400 years, until "there arose a pharaoh who knew not Joseph."

Pharaoh trusted Joseph despite his humble status because he knew that he had a capacity for clear-sightedness and a willingness to speak the truth as he saw it—qualities lacking in his other counselors. Today, in low-income communities throughout the nation, hundreds and thousands of modern-day "Josephs" are at work restoring spiritual health to their neighborhoods, guiding others to lives of value and fulfillment, and helping people who were considered to be hopelessly lost to reclaim and redirect their lives.

Many of these community healers have emerged from the worst conditions. Some have been called to responsibility from jails, from addictions, from crime and from prostitution. They have passion for and faith in the people they serve—in impoverished neighborhoods infested with drugs and crime—because they have personally experienced a transformation in their own lives. Their authority is attested to not by their position and prestige in society, but by the thousands of lives they have been able to reach and change.

They work with individuals that conventional service providers have given up on. They take only the worst cases and they work with meager resources, yet their effectiveness eclipses that of conventional professional remedies. Among the hundreds of neighborhood healers I have met throughout the past forty years were Freddie and Ninfa Garcia, the founders of Victory Fellowship, a powerful San Antonio-based rehabilitation initiative for hard-core drug addicts and alcoholics. Victory Fellowship had, to put it mildly, humble beginnings. Freddie and Ninfa are themselves former addicts. Freddie first met Ninfa when she was driving the getaway car in a convenience-store robbery. In 1966, their lives were reclaimed through the outreach of ex-addicts in the faith-based Teen Challenge program founded by David Wilkerson, author of *The Cross and the Switchblade* (1962).

After their lives were transformed, Freddie and Ninfa could have simply gone on to live happily and peacefully with their children, pursuing their personal goals. But they could not bear to witness the lives of the people in their community being wasted and lost to addiction. In 1972, they launched Victory Fellowship in their one-bedroom home, moving their furniture into the yard to make room for the addicts and alcoholics they invited to live with them. Their ministry continued to expand and, through their personal 24/7 outreach and long-term commitment, thousands of even the most hardened addicts were able to turn their lives around. Today, Victory Fellowship's programs have spread to more than seventy satellite centers with international outreach. The program has transformed more than 13,000 lives. Although Pastor Freddie has passed away, his son Jubal continues his parents' efforts to this day.

Another unforgettable "Joseph" I met is Bob Cote. Bob was a former boxer with some business acumen whose alcoholism had driven him to desperation and homelessness. Once he broke the chains of addiction and achieved sobriety he felt called to reach out to other men who had lost control of their lives to drugs and alcohol. Bob personally knew life on the streets and the ploys addicts use to feed their addictions, so the recovery center he set up for the homeless in a skid-row section of Denver, Step 13, employed a no-nonsense approach that entailed personal responsibility and reciprocity. Bob rejected the conventional homeless shelters and soup kitchens in the city that garnered funding with inflated numbers of people served, describing them as "heads in beds" warehouses that gave drunks a donut in the morning before they showed them the door. In contrast, Step 13's motto was "Real Change, Not Spare Change."

Step 13 established an amazing track record of success in helping people that everyone had given up on. One recovered alcoholic tells of how Bob took him in one winter night after finding him frozen to the sidewalk in his own vomit. Men who came to Bob with no more than a thin flicker of hope left within have progressed through the program—from a bunk room to their own room and, eventually, to independence. Many have emerged as responsible husbands, fathers and homeowners.

There are as many different types of Josephs as there are needs, but there are a number of defining characteristics they all hold in common. Call them the ten commandments of effective grassroots ministrations.

First, their programs are open to all comers. Grassroots leaders do not target their services exclusively to individuals of any particular race or background. Help is offered, instead, on the basis of the need a person has and his or her desire to change.

Second, neighborhood healers have the same zip code as the people they serve. They have first-hand knowledge of the problems they live with and they have a personal stake in the success of their solutions. As in nature, where the antidote is usually near the poison, in society the solutions to problems are very near to their source.

Third, their approach is flexible. They know that every person cannot be reached in exactly the same way. Even where there may be a pervasive theology or philosophy in a program, every person is not expected to embrace it or be affected by it in the same way.

Fourth, effective grassroots programs contain an essential element of reciprocity. They do not practice blind charity, but require something in return from the individuals they serve. They recognize value in the people they serve and expect that they will use their talents and skills productively.

Fifth, clear behavioral guidelines and discipline are an important part of their programs. Outcomes matter more than intentions and process.

Sixth, grassroots healers fulfill the role of a parent, providing not only authority and structure, but also the love that is necessary for an individual to undergo healing, growth and development. Like a parent, their love is unconditional and resilient. They never withdraw their support in spite of backsliding and even in the face of betrayal.

Seventh, grassroots leaders are committed for the long haul. Most of them began their outreach with their own meager resources. They are committed for a lifetime, not for the duration of a grant that funds a program.

Eighth, they are on-call virtually 24 hours a day—in contrast to a therapist who comes once a week for a 45-minute session or social workers

who come in from nine to five and then return to their distant homes. The homes of grassroots leaders are always open to the people they serve.

Ninth, the healing they offer involves an immersion in an environment of care and mutual support within a community of individuals who are trying to accomplish the same changes in their lives. Social context is critical; individualism is avoided.

Tenth, these Josephs are united in a brotherhood of service. They are eager to share ideas and strategies. They offer earnest support to each other in times of struggle and sincerely celebrate one another's victories.

Our nation's grassroots Josephs usually go unrecognized, unappreciated and certainly underutilized. They work with the hardest cases, yet their effectiveness eclipses that of conventional professional remedies. So why haven't we heard more about these community leaders? Why isn't their success common knowledge?

Elitism has caused us to dismiss the possibility of remedies emerging from low-income neighborhoods, led by people who have not graduated from college and, in many cases, even from high school. The professional poverty industry and the elite press won't have it. With silent prejudice, faith-based strategies are dismissed out of hand despite their consistent track records of effectiveness. Even in instances where recognition is given to the transformations accomplished through the outreach of grassroots leaders, praise often comes with a caveat that those cases are anomalies and can't be brought to scale to address the enormous societal problems facing our nation. Almost by definition, it is hard to amass data on the effectiveness of bottom-up efforts, but two examples provide evidence that, with well-earned support from both the public and private sectors, neighborhood programs can be both duplicated and scaled up to the state and even the national levels.

Resident Management of Public Housing

As early as 1973, a handful of trail-blazing women living in public housing projects were frustrated by the neglect and opportu-



ism that typically characterized the public housing authorities created to manage their properties. They were determined to reclaim their crime-ridden, drug-infested and dilapidated housing projects, and they organized residents to take action. They understood that, if housing officials were to be compelled to improve the way they managed the properties, then the residents, too, must improve their conduct so as to earn the necessary trust, respect and support of the public in the struggle to determine their destiny.

One of the earliest groups of residents to take action lived in the Bromley Heath housing project in Boston and was led by a woman named Mildred Hailey. One of this group's first initiatives was the formation of a resident security patrol in the neighborhood, which had been virtually abandoned by the police. The group next sought to supply social services to the residents, given that the city took no responsibility for supplying these services in federally owned housing developments. The residents received a grant to open a maternity and infant-care clinic, which was later expanded into a comprehensive family health

facility. In addition, the group revitalized a community recreation facility and established a baby-sitting service, day care centers and even a radio station.

Public housing residents in St. Louis likewise rose to action when lax management by the bureaucratic housing authorities allowed conditions to deteriorate to the point where the project looked like a war zone. Hundreds of windows were missing (many had flown from their frames during high winds due to poor structural design) and the top four floors of a 12-story high-rise had been uninhabitable for more than 12 years because the maintenance crew had gutted those 250 units to make repairs on other floors. In the midst of this squalor, crime, vandalism and drug-related killings soared. Under the leadership of Bertha Gilkey, residents organized to create a volunteer maintenance crew. Having exhibited the effectiveness of community action, the resident group went on to secure a grant from the city as well as both public and private funds to create a comprehensive plan for revitalizing the development. In 1976, the group negotiated a contract with the city's

housing authority to become the Cochran Gardens Tenant Management Corporation.

A leader among leaders, Kimi Gray of the Kenilworth-Parkside public housing development in Washington, DC, became the face of the resident movement. Neglected by the public housing authority, that housing project had deteriorated to squalid conditions, even going without heat and water for a three-year period. Roofs were collapsing, while drugs and crime infested the community. A no-nonsense, fast-thinking/fast-talking mover, Kimi was determined to reclaim her community. In 1974, she launched a College Here We Come program for youth in the development, providing tutoring, guidance with college applications, and even college site visits for students who showed effort and commitment. Kimi believed that if young people could be exposed to different environments they would expect more out of their lives and communities, and work to improve conditions when they returned home from college.

Kimi was right. Many graduates of the program returned to the development to take part in programs that enriched the lives of the residents. An architectural student supervised a major building rehabilitation program and townhouse development funded through a HUD grant. The neighborhood established its own co-op market, laundromats, barber and beauty shops, a catering company as well as a health clinic and a day-care facility. In addition, an innovative "reverse commute" project was launched to provide transportation to enable inner-city residents to take jobs in the suburbs. Within four years, teenage pregnancy and welfare dependency were reduced by half and crime fell by 75 percent, while rental receipts rose by 77 percent. A cost-benefit analysis conducted by one of the nation's largest and respected accountancy firms projected that resident management would bring the DC government a savings of \$4.5 million over ten years.

In the mid-1980s, my organization, the National Center for Neighborhood Enterprise (NCNE), brought resident leaders together in a series of meetings to exchange ideas and

information, strengthen their capacities and clarify their goals. The idea of resident management and entrepreneurship attracted the attention of then-Congressman Jack Kemp, who liked the idea of an anti-poverty agenda based on empowerment and market principles. Kemp became an ardent advocate of the movement and played a key role in its progress in the policy arena.

The Amoco Foundation was impressed enough with the initiative and accomplishments of the public housing leaders to provide \$1.9 million for a three-year Public Housing Resident Management Demonstration to be conducted in 12 public housing sites in eight cities. The project included training in four arenas: community organization and board development; fundamentals of management and supervision; business and real estate development; and home ownership. In addition, NCNE supported enterprise development in the public housing neighborhoods.

To connect resident leaders with those who could influence public policy, NCNE arranged for busloads of residents to travel to Washington to brief their representatives on their accomplishments and the barriers that confronted them. In 1985, the first legislative hearings on resident management were held. Two years later, landmark resident management and homeownership amendments were introduced with the Housing and Community Development Act of 1987, with bipartisan sponsorship in the House and Senate.

The legislation passed 419 to one in the House and was unopposed in the Senate. In 1988, President Reagan signed the bill into law, flanked by public housing resident leaders, establishing the right of public housing residents to manage their properties. By 1991, a National Association of Resident Management Corporations was established to raise up fledgling resident groups. More than 1,300 residents from thirty cities throughout the nation attended its annual conference in Boston. The resident management movement was a slowly rising tide that scaled up to a national level. Given support from the policy arena and funding sources, bottom-up solutions can expand their reach.

Violence-Free Zones

In 1997, shockwaves reverberated in the wake of a crisis in the Benning Terrace public housing project in Washington—a city that had become calloused to youth violence and gang warfare. A rash of gang-related homicides climaxed with the discovery of the body of a 12-year-old frozen in a ravine, the victim of a retaliatory execution.

A group of adult males who had grown up in the neighborhood stepped forward to intervene. Members of this Alliance of Concerned Men knew the street culture and were able to identify the leaders of the warring gangs and approached each one individually. After a period of continuous and consistent investment, the youths began to trust and respond to them. As they began to change direction, their gang members followed. A peace council was held at my office for the gang leaders and their deputies. The youths filed in to our conference room after checking their guns in the reception area. A truce was reached and the challenge then was to find opportunities for them to engage in productive activities.

We turned to the acting head of the District of Columbia's Housing Authority, David Gilmore. A street-smart and impassioned individual, Gilmore arranged to provide training and employment opportunities for the kids who had pledged to turn their lives around. The youths, once the scourge of their neighborhood, began to work for the community, doing landscape work, clean-up and graffiti removal. The violence subsided, and for 13 years there was not a single homicide in the community.

Key components of this remarkable intervention were the outreach of indigenous community leaders and the role of former gang leaders and members as peer mentors. In violence-plagued schools throughout the nation, similar initiatives have taken root in newly established Violence-Free Zones. In each, a local community group worked with representatives of the police, school staff and administrators and, most importantly, youth advisers—young adults who had redirected their lives and reached out to their counterparts to do the same.

Violence-Free Zones have been established in communities and schools across the country. Although the initiative targets schools with the

highest levels of violence, three evaluations by university experts have found that the Violence-Free Zones had a measureable impact not only in reduced violence and crime but also in improved safety, and reduced suspensions and truancy as well as increased academic performance. School administrators and law enforcement officers have testified to the initiative's remarkable impact in changing the schools' culture.¹

A Powerful New Paradigm

Although today's Josephs deserve to be heeded by modern-day Pharaohs (political leaders and leaders of the business and philanthropic community), their effectiveness is not dependent on such recognition. Long before support or acknowledgement came from others, our nation's neighborhood healers committed themselves to lives of service, and they engendered miraculous changes in the lives they touched. Though these grassroots leaders accomplished extraordinary feats with little support, an alliance between today's Josephs and Pharaohs, supported by both private and public resources, could transform efforts to expand and further develop these specialized grassroots skills to benefit the entire society.

This type of partnership, however, requires a major overhaul in how we view the poor. Many policymakers on both the Left and the Right see the poor as hopelessly lost in a sea of pathology. They assume that their only hope is to be rescued by professionals from outside their communities. Our credentialed experts and intellectual elite typically do not recognize the capacities that exist within America's low-income communities. Unfortunately, as a nation, we are prone to place our trust in irrelevant authority. Just as commercials lead consumers to believe that sports stars are experts on nutrition or footwear, there are those who would have us believe that the MBAs and sociologists in distant universities can provide expert advice

¹See, for example, Byron R. Johnson and William Wubbenhorst, "The Center for Neighborhood Enterprise Violence-Free Zone Initiative: A Milwaukee Case Study", Baylor Institute for Studies of Religion (January 2009).

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in salvaging inner-city neighborhoods and impoverished communities. But the solutions to the problems of our nation's Harlems will never be found in its Harvards. Ultimately, self-help is not enough; institutional change must happen too. But it needs to start from within.

Policymakers and philanthropists should recognize, support and strengthen the assets that already exist within these communities. Hundreds of grassroots leaders throughout the country are social entrepreneurs who have the vision, creativity and commitment needed to forge innovative, workable solutions to the societal crises that permeate not only our nation's inner cities but many rural and suburban communities as well. Their bold social entrepreneurship lacks only one thing: support from policymakers and venture capitalists who recognize their potential and are willing to invest the capital necessary to strengthen their organizational structure and management skills so that they can expand and export their outreach work.

Just as there have been geniuses to lead this nation forward in the areas of science and industry, there are thousands of dedicated and inspired geniuses who can guide the nation in solving even its most entrenched and devastating social problems. An effective strategy does not begin with credentialed professionals' analysis of the

problems but with a comprehensive and sustained effort to maximize the impact of proven solutions.

We must understand that "impoverishment" cannot be measured exclusively by economic status. That is itself an impoverished way of seeing the challenge. Financial wealth is not the same as a life of value. In an era of spiritual hunger and moral disarray, today's Josephs are a source of both spiritual and economic renewal who together can enrich America well beyond the boundaries of inner-city neighborhoods. Grassroots leaders who have proven that they can engender substantial and lasting transformations, sometimes at only a tenth of the cost of less effective "credentialed" programs, have much to bring to the table.

If America's grassroots leaders can heal the heart of a hard-core drug addict and ex-con, imagine what they can do for those who, without purpose and meaning, have fallen into addiction in spite of enjoying material wealth. Today, among the most devastated economic and social conditions, the fresh shoots of spiritual renewal are alive in the work of thousands of grassroots leaders. If these fresh shoots can be nourished by those with wealth and influence in our society, their fruits can revitalize a sense of purpose and meaning throughout the nation, bringing life and hope to places where there is now only cynicism, confusion and despair. ⑥