

Declaring a New War on Poverty in Alameda County

By Alameda County Supervisor Wilma Chan

In 1964, as the U.S. poverty rate grew to 16%, President Lyndon B. Johnson declared a nationwide priority to address the issue of the growing poor in America. In his State of the Union address, he launched a War on Poverty and pledged to build “a nation free from want” and proclaimed that “we shall not rest until the war is won.”

The nation rallied behind his call with programs such as the Civil Rights Act, Voting Rights Act, Medicaid, Medicare, Head Start, expanded Food Stamps and the Higher Education Act.

Today, 50 years later, persistent poverty again plagues our nation. While the nation has been slowly recovering from the recent five-year Great Recession, many have not found a way out.

Increase in Poverty

The U.S. Census Bureau, using a new calculation that takes into account factors such as the cost of living, estimates that today 16% of the nation lives in poverty – the highest percentage of Americans in poverty since 1965. By that same calculation, California has the highest poverty rate in the nation at 23.8%.

In Alameda County, there were 197,283 residents living in poverty in 2011 – an increase of 40,000 individuals in just two years. During that same time period, the number of children in Oakland who were living in poverty grew from 18% to 29%.

Even more staggering, there are 15 neighborhoods in Alameda County with child poverty rates above 50% and another 42 neighborhoods where the child poverty rate exceeds 30%. In addition, there are 50 neighborhoods in Alameda County with overall poverty rates – including both adults and children – that exceed 25%.

It is clearly time that we declare a New War on Poverty and launch a campaign that examines both the legacy of the past 50 years and opportunities for moving forward into the future. Our pledge will reflect a cross-generational commitment – from Baby Boomers to Millennials – and an urgency to protect democracy through the eradication of poverty.

Lessons Learned

During the past 50 years, we have learned many valuable lessons and waged countless partisan battles. Some anti-poverty programs proved to be very successful. Others were not. But one undeniable fact remains: far too many Americans live in poverty 50 years later. And the challenge to lift families out of poverty has become even more difficult with the staggering rise of income inequality during the past three decades.

The New War on Poverty in Alameda County will address critical elements that lead to economic security including nutrition, education, employment, housing, transportation and child care. To ensure that we make a significant impact, we will focus our initial efforts on jobs, early childhood education and food security.

The campaign will rely on proven strategies that combine the best elements of self-reliance, community engagement and government support. We also will deploy the latest technology and call upon the entire community to become involved in helping individuals and families lift themselves out of poverty.

For example, the Human Impact Budget, an innovative process adopted by the Alameda County Board of Supervisors in 2012, utilizes digital media to both educate and mobilize communities around the local impact of multi-year budget cuts on our most vulnerable populations. Residents can access the latest county-level data, share their personal impact stories as well as connect with policy makers and advocates with only a few clicks of the mouse.

Our multi-pronged approach – self-reliance, community engagement, government support, and technology solutions – combines the best strategies that have been put forth by liberals, moderates and conservatives. This New War on Poverty should and must be a bi-partisan effort.

Role of Government

We want to be clear that there is a critical role for government in providing the resources for lifting millions of Americans out of poverty. Many of the larger programs from the War on Poverty – such as the Civil Rights Act, Medicaid, Medicare, Head Start, and Food Stamps– helped millions move from poverty to the middle class.

At the same time, we know that many families did not escape persistent poverty, and they would have benefited from strategies that promoted individual responsibility, self-sufficiency and community-based support systems.

No political party holds the key to eradicating poverty. We must work together. We must put aside our differences and find common ground. Millions of families are depending upon us, and we cannot afford to wait another 50 years to deliver on the bold and noble promise made by President Johnson.