



## Human Service Summit 2014 Confronting Suburban Poverty

Attendees at the 2014 UCS Human Service Summit were presented with eight questions. During the discussion period, each attendee had the opportunity to join three facilitated dialogues<sup>1</sup>. Each discussion period was 20 minutes, with five to twelve people per table. The discussions were far-ranging and responses often overlapped between questions. This summary reflects some of the comments for each question (two questions were combined due to the similarity of the responses).

While each of the questions had a different focus, common themes emerged. To confront suburban poverty, community leaders and community members alike must better understand poverty and the impact of growing poverty on the county. Data must be readily available and easily understood. Collaboration is key; successful collaboration will require local and regional “champions” committed to the process and funding support.

**How can individual community members effectively counter poverty and its effects? What about civic or faith groups? What will I do to increase knowledge about growing poverty and who it affects?**

- Become educated with the facts. Read UCS newsletter and fact sheet. Visit websites such as [www.halfinten.org](http://www.halfinten.org); [www.talkpoverty.org](http://www.talkpoverty.org); [www.cbpp.org](http://www.cbpp.org); and [www.epi.org](http://www.epi.org).
- Attend a poverty simulation or similar activity.
- Talk to family, friends, colleagues, neighbors about poverty; share the facts. Discuss linkages between wages and poverty; transportation and poverty; childcare and poverty.
- Talk to elected officials about poverty. Find out where they stand on the issue.
- Find out where candidates for office stand on the issue and vote accordingly.
- Encourage regional cooperation and regional solutions.
- Teach children about poverty so they are more compassionate
- Understand connection between poverty and social justice
- Identify ways to assist local organizations and volunteer or make a donation.
- Be an advocate at all times.
- Educate others, employees and volunteers, at my organization about poverty.
- Read UCS newsletter and use data to educate others.
- Help others move past judgment and prejudices about those who are poor by sharing facts and stories.
- Faith groups could lend their support to existing organizations; organize volunteer activities; adopt a school; raise awareness with congregation; find “teaching” moments with people of all ages; educate children and youth to dispel myths; engage with social justice advocacy.
- Civic groups could host candidate forums and ask question about poverty; hold an event with a speaker on poverty.

**Who is not “at the table” when we talk about poverty? What will it take to engage them?**

- Policy makers, including state and local elected officials, and those who make decisions about community infrastructure such as transportation, housing, zoning, tax, and education.
- Those who administer or benefit from public-funded services (DCF, KanCare providers, workforce development).
- People who are in poverty and those with success in fighting poverty.
- Employers, corporations and Chambers of Commerce.
- Civic, philanthropic, faith organizations.
- Health care professionals; educators; criminal justice.
- People of all ages, experiences and income levels.
- People who hold divergent views on the causes and solutions to poverty.

**What will it take to engage them?**

- Education; a clear simple message that helps people understand poverty’s impact on their life and the community, and why they need to be engaged.
- Education; data that presents a clear picture of today’s poverty.
- Creative strategies to get message out through multiple channels.
- Personal advocacy; one-on-one conversations with family, friends, neighbors, colleagues.
- Personal stories from those in poverty.
- Examples of success, even on a small scale, from this community and others.
- Targeted call to action -- messages targeted to specific audiences, with specific action appropriate to the audience.
- Reliable revenue stream to support direct services, as well as support education and advocacy.
- Active engagement of the faith community to raise awareness.
- A coalition on poverty that can increase visibility of the issue and galvanize community action.
- Central coordination of communication and planning around poverty.

**How can we make Johnson County a community where no one who works full-time lives in poverty?**

- Establish a higher minimum wage for the county/cities.
- Use economic development tools to support jobs that pay a living wage.
- Encourage employers to pay higher wages and offer flexible work hours or leave time for family emergencies, court appearances.
- Educate employers about tax breaks available to hiring felons.
- Celebrate/promote employers that actively support employees through wages and benefits.
- Help a household’s income stretch further:
  - Lower housing costs
  - Public transit or creative alternatives to work-based travel
  - Subsidized child care
  - Increased wages
  - Health insurance coverage
  - For those receiving public aid, establish a phase-out system as wages increase
  - Reduce cost of higher education.

**What gets in the way of community organizations collaborating to improve services? How could those barriers be removed?**

- Lack of agreement on common agenda/outcomes.
- Scarcity of resources/funding; competition for resources.
- Inflexible grant guidelines; lack of funding to support essential work to create and sustain a collaboration.
- Challenges with information sharing between organizations.
- Lack of trust; lack of positive working relationships.
- Leadership vacuum; need a “quarterback” to make collaboration happen.
- Lack of communication, both formal and informal between service providers.
- Lack of time to dedicate to building relationships and structures to support effective collaboration.
- Laws/rules/policies across various jurisdictions and organizations can hinder collaboration.

**What could be done?**

- Funders could provide funding to create and sustain collaborations.
- Use existing groups (advisory boards, coalitions, etc.) to advance collaboration.
- Build personal relationships with leaders in other organizations.
- Develop region-wide, systemic approaches.
- Co-locate services; develop memorandums of understanding to facilitate integration of services.

**What would “getting to scale” mean for the existing human services delivery system?**

- Collaboration is essential to “getting to scale”. It requires relationships, a common vision and shared outcomes.
- Consistent and adequate revenue.
- Identify specific need(s), bring key local and regional organizations together to develop a strategy to take it to scale.
- New thinking on the part of funders to allow for innovative funding strategies.
- Leverage existing resources in new ways.
- Organize services in a way that better meets the needs of the consumer – from location of service to scope of assistance provided.
- Offer a holistic approach to working with individuals and families; more emphasis on case management, greater intensity of service.
- Forward-thinking and flexible to respond to changing needs and populations.
- Reliance on local and regional efforts, rather than state, to make improvements.

**Johnson County is made up of 20 cities. What can a city do to respond to poverty? How could cities collaborate to respond to poverty?**

- Awareness of poverty needs to be increased and champions need to be identified to put the issue in front of city leaders. City leaders need to understand that city boundaries do not prevent the community-wide impact of growing poverty.

- Establish mutually agreed-upon benchmarks around poverty indicators to achieve a common understanding of the problem in all municipalities (100% FPL, 200% FPL or some other measure).
- The County can play a key leadership role, identifying gaps in the safety net and encouraging strategic coordination of new services and shelters.
- Cities can help coordinate information about resources, so that people can access existing services more easily. First responders and city personnel could be trained to make good referrals by using United Way 211 and County Government’s MyRC on-line database.
- Cities have strong relationships with local businesses. Find ways to involve them in the conversation.
- Transportation assistance is needed to move people to jobs and services. Cities can work with County on transportation issues.
- Use information available to city to identify residents who need help (such as code violations, utility bills).

**How could cities collaborate?**

- Mayors could get together and begin the discussion about the issue of poverty in our community.
- Mayors could convene a “Call to Action”, engaging all sectors of the community and featuring a speaker from another city to discuss their approach to poverty.
- Recognize that the changing demographics of the baby boomers will change the face of poverty. Seniors are more likely to ask cities to help. Begin joint planning now.

<p><b>How does increasing poverty affect every person living and/or working in Johnson County?</b></p>
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- County image changing – no longer seen as successful county, but one with growing problems.
- The spirit of our communities is hurt – no longer seen as caring community because services aren’t available.
- People not as engaged in community life – attendance at public meetings, school events.
- Increase in adult and juvenile crime, particularly property theft & burglary.
- Childhood poverty increases challenges and costs for education.
- Tax revenue is reduced as more people work for low wages or lose jobs.
- Increases in property and sales are needed to provide essential services.
- Demand for public service increases (law enforcement and social services), fewer dollars to invest in public infrastructure, such as libraries, parks and transit.
- Stress on individuals and families who are trying to make ends meet.
- Stress on community organizations as they try to adapt to growing demand for services, and/or change to way services are used.
- Housing conditions decline, reducing neighborhood stability and property values.

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<sup>1</sup> Facilitators provided by Consensus