

New Numbers Show Grim Truths

Sue Berkowitz

A favorite thing South Carolinians love to say about our state is we are always at the top of the list for things that are bad and at the bottom of the list for things that are good. On Tuesday, August 27th the United States annual state-by-state statistics on health and poverty were released. While South Carolina was not number one on the list, as usual, we excelled—in a negative direction. While many applaud the reduction in our welfare roles, it has come at a price—the increased number of hard working families living in poverty. With struggling incomes we see increased hunger, health problems, homelessness and lack of productivity at work.

The number of our citizens living at or below poverty is now 15%, up over 1.5% from 2001. More shameful still is our Child Poverty rate which is almost 21%. That is 213,858 children we have let down.

Many of our citizens may not be among those in poverty, but are certainly feeling the tension of making their paychecks last all month. That is because South Carolinian's Median Income has not increased...It has decreased since 2000 by approximately \$2000. And these numbers were calculated before the recent recession hit our pocketbooks.

While the rest of the country saw a slight decrease in the numbers of healthcare uninsured, South Carolina's increased 4.3% from 11.8 to 16.2% of our population. At the same time our state Medicaid agency saw a decrease of approximately 150,000 beneficiaries over the last two years. It is hard to understand how our citizens are making less and fewer South Carolinians have health insurance, yet our Medicaid program, which should be a safety net for our neediest, has seen a record decrease in participation. Our current system is not doing its job.

This is a leadership problem which doesn't grasp the idea that poor economic growth is a direct byproduct of the poor care of their citizens. No industry will be attracted to a state that is raising generations of children in poor health, lacking medical attention; suffering poor nutrition; living in less than acceptable circumstances and unable to learn due to all these factors. That might happen in a third world country, but not here in the most prosperous nation in the world. And the downward economic spiral continues unless we prioritize our children and those who need help to become productive citizens.

Since the majority of families are only three paychecks away from homelessness, the idea that volunteers can bear the brunt of the needy is archaic. It will take our leaders generating new industry and resources, and legislating to inspire and help citizens stay strong. It will require our state to reach out to those seeking change and support those who need help in reaching their self-sustaining goals.

While I praise the recently announced efforts by our state's legislative leaders to develop incentives that will attract jobs that pay a living wage, we cannot ignore the immediate needs of our citizens. We cannot continue to let our sickest and neediest citizens lose Medicaid benefits due to needless changes to our eligibility retention programs. Resources are needed to ensure that our state can reach out to the tens of thousands of working poor who are eligible for food assistance through our state's first defense against hunger, the food stamp program. We need greater investment in child care vouchers for working parents who need affordable, nurturing and

safe environments for their children while on the job. These are the children who are eligible for SCHIP, South Carolina's children's healthcare insurance program, when parents can no longer afford healthcare. These working families need to know what is available to them, so they can apply. Most of all we need the development of affordable health care insurance for employers and their staff who work so hard, but who are unable to purchase these benefits. All of these basic needs must be met while we work to bring higher paying jobs to our state.

On a federal level, Congress needs to implement child tax credits for poorer families and an economic recovery packages for short-term boost, which include food stamps and other nutrition aids. We can only grow as a state if we allow our citizens to grow strong. That takes providing programs to teach job skills, allow children to thrive and be healthy, and provide shelter in time of need. If this were a hurricane we would provide shelter and recovery funds. This is a storm that won't go away until our leaders commit themselves to legislating solutions.

Costs go up, but our state can no longer afford to ignore the cost of neglecting these moral problems. All South Carolinians will pay with our state's decline, and our statistics will continue a dismal spiral down to the shame of us all.

Sue Berkowitz, Director
SC Appleseed Legal Justice Center
PO Box 7187
Columbia, SC 29202

Ph: 803-779-1113 ex: 101
sberk@scjustice.org