

Efforts to Help Children in Poverty

Abstract: Poverty is a difficult cycle to break and may be linked to other social problems in a community. Working with a community foundation allows a donor to make a contribution and make a difference—while taking the tax benefit that year and leaving the administration of the funds to the CF.

In 2006, there were approximately 73 million children living in the United States; more than 12 million (18 percent) of them lived in families with incomes below poverty level, and 28.4 million (39 percent) lived in low-income families, according to the National Center for Children in Poverty at Columbia University.¹ Poverty is a difficult cycle to break and may be linked to other social problems in a community.

“Donors interested in reducing poverty and helping children are facing a big challenge and may not know where to start,” says William R. Levy, executive vice president and regional head for Brown Brothers Harriman, a national trust company. “If a donor is not prepared to take on the work or expense of starting a private foundation, then community foundations (CFs) are a great resource,” states Levy. Working with a CF allows the donor to make a contribution, take the tax benefit that year, leave the administration of the funds to the CF, and decide where to direct the donations later, after learning more about specific community projects, he says. Additionally, by choosing to support a local community-foundation project to reduce poverty, your gift is combined with other donations to increase the impact of the resources over time. Consider the unique approaches of several community foundations focused on reducing poverty.

Educational Supports for Children and Parents

“Studies show that children living in poverty are at risk for diminished emotional development and health problems, and they demonstrate a higher incidence of behavioral issues in school,” says Kent Faerber, CEO of the Community Foundation of Western Massachusetts. These problems make it difficult for children to be engaged in the educational process, he explains, ultimately resulting in underemployment and a repeat of the poverty cycle.

“Research indicates that intervening between the ages of 0 to 5 has a disproportionately large positive impact on breaking the poverty cycle, so we created our 5 and Under Fund,” states Faerber. This fund uses \$600,000 to support 11 projects; most are educational and support the entire family by providing job-skills training for parents and head-start preschool for the kids. “There is a direct relationship between support within the family and the success of the child,” says Faerber. “We believe that if parents learn

¹ http://www.nccp.org/publications/pub_684.html, National Center for Children in Poverty, Columbia University, *Who Are America's Poor?*, 2006

to value literacy, education, and skills training, they will encourage the child to learn too.”

Faerber says the ultimate aim of the fund is to reduce the regional impact of poverty by interrupting the poverty cycle. “Isolation is a major obstacle for families living in poverty, especially in rural areas, and without outreach, people do not know about vital support services,” says Faerber, “We connect people with community resources and build a safety net for families. Without any help, a person who is born and raised poor is likely to remain poor.”

Empowering Youth

The Philadelphia Foundation invests its resources in young people, ages 12 to 21. “They are the future stewards of the community,” states Shawn Mooring, program officer for the Fund for Children. “By increasing the esteem of youth from a variety of economic backgrounds — showing them how to make changes within their own communities — we believe they can change their own circumstances,” he says.

Using a multimillion-dollar endowment from two local sports teams, the Phillies and the Eagles, the foundation funds projects that empower youth through giving them a voice in directing organizations that serve them.

Youth-adelphia is one such project that supports leadership development, self-advocacy, personal empowerment, and participation in a youth philanthropic board, explains Mooring. This youth board is responsible for awarding \$100,000 annually to youth-led programs in Philadelphia. The foundation provides adult advisors and technical support to teach the young board members how to evaluate a proposal, read a budget, improve public speaking skills, and identify and recruit future board members. Some of the benefits for youth include exposure to the greater community of Philadelphia, effecting change through selected projects, and increased self-confidence, says Mooring.

Literacy as a Path to Self-Sufficiency

Arizona has a history of ranking low in educational performance, explains Steve Alley, president of the Community Foundation of Southern Arizona. “Combine a poor school system with a high percentage of Spanish-speaking adults where English is a second language, and the overall state literacy rate is very low,” he explains. Without good reading and comprehension skills, many of Arizona’s children and adults could be locked into low-paying jobs that sustain a cycle of poverty.

When the CF found that more than one-third of fourth graders were reading below their grade level and every adult-education class had a waiting list, they realized that the needs of the community were outstripping its resources. Increasing literacy skills among the local population became a priority goal to help children and adults improve their lives.

The CF is fortunate to be the recipient of a \$5 million endowment from one donor that created a fund to support early childhood education, hospice care, and the Mexican community. Using \$1 million from that endowment and other funds, the CF has undertaken an initiative to address literacy needs.

Next month a community leadership council for the literacy project will convene to set the agenda and priorities for the project. "By involving a diverse group of business leaders, service clubs, educators, and nonprofit groups we plan to design a successful strategy for meeting a pressing need in the community and are optimistic about the impact it will have on people's lives," says Alley.

"Working with a CF is an uncomplicated and fluid way to meet your philanthropic goals," explains Levy. "You have an informed, experienced partner with matching interests." Your CF is in a unique position to know the needs of the community, who is meeting them effectively, and where the gaps in service are. They can also pool resources and creativity to develop exceptional projects to meet evolving needs of a community.

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