

# Social Support Systems

*Utah Citizens' Counsel Social Support Systems Committee*

***Article 6: All Utahns have the right to the fundamental social support systems that assist in assuring a standard of living adequate for the well-being of both the individual and families, in all their configurations, including timely assistance in case of unemployment, disability, old age, and natural or human-made disasters.***

## **Introduction**

The 2014 Committee Report dealt broadly with poverty among many groups, including the elderly, people with disabilities, racial and ethnic minorities, the working poor, and families with children. Many members of these segments of Utah society fall below the statewide poverty level and have needs that are currently unmet.

This year, our report and recommendations focus more narrowly and even more urgently on poverty among families with young children. It is well established that young children living in poverty have a much higher risk of developing cognitive and behavioral impairments that limit them throughout their lives. Depriving these children of the cognitive and emotional tools they need to succeed is an especially cruel manifestation of the "opportunity gap" mentioned in this year's Education Committee report.

## **The Impact of Poverty on Young Children**

As measured by brain volume in MRI studies, poverty, especially deep poverty, may doom the developing brain to structural deficits. Recent prospective longitudinal studies have shown the profound damage that poverty inflicts on the developing brain. Children from poor families have diminished total gray and white matter and smaller amygdala and hippocampal volume.<sup>1</sup> The amygdala and hippocampus play a critical role in stress regulation and emotional development.<sup>2</sup> Poverty contributes to "atypical structural development" in several critical areas of the brain. These neurological losses may account for a 15-20% achievement gap.<sup>3</sup>

The developing brain requires strong supportive relationships for proper development. Children need adult interactions that focus on their needs. Parents in poverty are often burdened with overtime work, multiple jobs, and long commutes, leaving little time for positive interactions so essential to children's proper development. The stress of poverty can sometimes lead to parenting practices that are more punitive, inconsistent, detached, and less nurturing and responsive to small children's needs. Neglect is considered the most profound of childhood stressors. The response to chronic stress is considered the primary mechanism for the neurological losses.<sup>4</sup> There is a logarithmical relationship between income and brain area with larger differences seen in the most impoverished.<sup>5</sup>

## Poverty Among Utah Children and Families

For purposes of eligibility for government programs such as SNAP (formerly food stamps), Head Start, Medicaid, and reduced-cost school breakfasts and lunches, the federal government has defined “poverty” as \$11,888 annually for a single person and \$18,769 for one adult and two minor children.<sup>6</sup>

In 2013, the percentage of people living at or below poverty in Utah was 12.7%, the tenth lowest in the country. However, for female-headed households with children, the Utah poverty rate was 36.6%.<sup>7</sup> A woman in Utah earns 69.9 cents for each dollar a man earns.<sup>8</sup> A single parent, earning the minimum wage of \$7.25 an hour, would earn \$15,080, clearly far too little to even reach full “poverty” income for herself and her two children.

Approximately 360,000 Utah residents lived below the poverty line in 2013; 130,000 were children (14.6% of all Utah children). The majority of the poor live along the Wasatch Front, but eight of the ten counties with over 20% of children in poverty are rural.<sup>9</sup>

The most recent state Intergenerational Welfare Reform Commission Report identified 234,391 “at risk” children in Utah.<sup>10</sup> These were children whose families received some kind of public assistance during the previous year. Of these, 48,281 were children whose parents also received public assistance as children. Sixty-one percent of the latter group of children lived in single-parent homes, and 88 % of them were under 12 years of age.<sup>11</sup> Nearly 26% of this “intergenerational poverty” cohort are victims of abuse or neglect, as were 29% of their parents.<sup>12</sup>

Many of these impoverished parents and children are both food and housing insecure. Overall, in Utah, 47% of families must pay more than 30% of their income (the rate considered “affordable”) for housing.<sup>13</sup> Between 2011 and 2013, 20% of Utah children belonged to families who experienced difficulty providing enough food because they lacked resources. In 2013, 172,538 children (nearly 30% of all school children) received free or reduced-price school lunches. Only 59,787, however, participated each school day in the free or reduced-price breakfast program (approximately 34.7% of the eligible children). Utah is 51<sup>st</sup> among the states in breakfast program participation.<sup>14</sup>

## Family Poverty in Utah Impacts All of Us

UCC is committed to fighting the blight of poverty because of the suffering it imposes on its victims, young and old. The larger community also benefits when the needs of the poor are adequately addressed. As is pointed out in the most recent *Utah Children's Budget Report*, additional upfront investment in children leads to increased school readiness and educational achievement. That, in turn, increases workforce productivity, enhances economic growth, and reduces social dysfunction. This all leads to increased public revenues and reduced public expenditures to address social dysfunction. Once this “virtuous cycle” is initiated, everybody wins and the increased upfront investment in children more than pays for itself.<sup>15</sup>

Too many efforts to decrease poverty view the needs of children and their parents separately rather than as intertwined and interdependent. For example, child-care is almost always necessary for the adults in the household to enroll in adult education programs and/or to become wage earners. The children and society as a whole suffer if that care is of low quality. Clearly, childhood poverty cannot be effectively addressed without programs to aid their caregivers. The needs of all family members must be addressed through a common lens.

## Commendations

- **Several efforts to alleviate child and family poverty through "Collective Impact" strategies, where a number of public and private agencies work together to achieve a common goal.** <sup>16</sup>Approaches employed by partnerships, including the Intergenerational Welfare Reform Commission, United Way, Housing First, Next Generation Kids, and Promise Partnerships, all appear promising.
- **The work of *Voices for Utah Children* providing accurate, consistent data for the last 25 years on many dimensions of child welfare in Utah.** The annual *Kids Count Data Book*, and other publications measuring the well-being of Utah children provide crucial information for everyone in the child welfare community.
- **The Intergenerational Welfare Reform Commission (established by a unanimous vote of the Utah Legislature) for the research compiled in its *Fourth Annual Report on Intergenerational Poverty, Welfare Dependency and the Use of Public Assistance (2015)*.** Their research exhibits significant progress in analyzing the character of poverty in Utah and outlining the programs needed to alleviate it. <sup>17</sup>

## Recommendations

- **The Intergenerational Welfare Reform Commission (IWRC), representing all the involved state government departments, should focus on getting as much cash and non-cash income as possible into poverty level households, using uncapped existing sources of funds, i.e., the federal Earned Income Tax Credit, food stamps, WIC, school breakfast and lunches.** A greater outreach effort and an investigation of why many eligible clients fail to participate in these programs could increase the use of these and other available resources relatively quickly and without additional state funding.
- **The IWRC should present to the State Legislature a realistic budget that will enable the intergenerational focus to succeed.** The five- and ten-year poverty reduction goals of the IWRC cannot be met without new appropriations. Currently funded IWRC programs reach only about 100 families. New funds need to provide low income families with support for pre-kindergarten programs and child care, adult education and training programs, adequate housing, mass transit fares, and other essential work-related needs.

- **The state needs to move systematically to require its licensed child-care providers to meet its now-voluntary quality rating levels.** Such action is needed to raise the quality of infant and child care to adequate levels.
- **The state should adopt several provisions allowed by the federal Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) statute but currently denied to Utah residents.** These include extending the current 36-month maximum for receiving funds to 60 months, exempting mothers of children under the age of one from the TANF work requirement (because the first year of a child’s life is crucial for bonding and early brain development), and allowing a pass-through of \$100 per child (maximum \$200 monthly) in child support payments rather than the state keeping all these payments up to the amount of the cash assistance.
- **Current home visitation programs proven effective in addressing the needs of poor children from birth to age three should be brought to scale to serve all eligible families.** These include the Nurse Family Partnership, the Parents as Teachers program, and similarly proven programs.
- **Collective Impact programs employing strategies to decrease poverty need to be expanded and strengthened to multiply the impact of the many public and private anti-poverty efforts across the state.** Current piecemeal and uncoordinated efforts are not sufficient to address major system-wide issues. Fully-fledged Collective Impact initiatives have a common agenda, shared measurement systems, mutually reinforcing activities, continuous communication among participants, and backbone support organizations.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Joan Luby et al., "The Effects of Poverty on Childhood Brain Development: the Mediating Effect of Caregiving and Stressful Life Events, *JAMA Pediatrics* 167 (2013): 1135-42.

<sup>2</sup> Pilyoung Kim et al., "Effects of Childhood Poverty and Chronic stress on Emotion Regulatory Brain Function in Adulthood," *PNAS* (Proceedings of the National Academy of Science) 110 (2013): 18442-447.

<sup>3</sup> Nicole.L. Hair et al. "Association of Child Poverty, Brain Development, and Academic Achievement," *JAMA Pediatrics* 169 (2015): 822-829.

<sup>4</sup> Center on the Developing Child, Harvard University (2012). "The Science of Neglect: The Persistent Absence of Responsive Care Disrupts the Developing Brain: Working Paper No. 12," accessed November 16, 2015, <http://developingchild.harvard.edu/resources/the-science-of-neglect-the-persistent-absence-of-responsive-care-disrupts-the-developing-brain/>.

<sup>5</sup> Kimberly G. Noble et al., "Family Income, Parental Education and Brain Structure in Children and Adolescents," *Nature Neuroscience* 18 (2015):773-778.

<sup>6</sup> Community Action Partnership of Utah, "Annual Report on Poverty in Utah 2014," 10.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 24. Utah is ranked 47<sup>th</sup> in the country in wage equality. Institute for Women's Policy Research and the YWCA of Utah, "The Well-Being of Women in Utah: An Overview," May 2014, 2.

<sup>9</sup> Intergenerational Welfare Reform Commission, "Utah's Fourth Annual Report on Intergenerational Poverty," September 2015, 5, 9, 11. In Iron, Washington, Piute, San Juan, Grand, and Carbon Counties, over 40% of the children are "at risk."

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 13-14.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 36.

<sup>13</sup> Put another way, a minimum wage worker must work 84 hours a week, 52 weeks in a year to afford the \$794 monthly fair market rent for a two-bedroom apartment. A single parent must earn \$15.26 an hour, or \$31,741 each year, to actually "afford" a two-bedroom home for herself and her two children. It is estimated that Utah currently has a 42,601-unit shortage of available housing for very low income persons." Utah's Fourth Annual Report," 37, 41.

<sup>14</sup> "Utah Demographics, Poverty and Food Insecurity," *Food Research and Action Center*, accessed October 9, 2015, <http://frac.org/wp-content/uploads/2010/07/ut.pdf>. If the breakfast participation rate reached 70% of the lunch participation rate, Utah would receive an additional \$15,523,057 in federal dollars.

<sup>15</sup> Voices for Utah Children, "Utah Children's Budget Report, 2014," 6.

<sup>16</sup> As John Kania and Mark Kramer point out in a recent study, "Large scale social change requires broad cross-sector coordination, yet the social sector remains focused on the isolated intervention of individual organizations." "Collective Impact," *Stanford Innovation Review* (Winter 2011): 36-41.

<sup>17</sup> Further, the Commission's own Annual Report for 2014 sets forth the 2014 and 2015 activities of the five entities whose executive directors are members of the Commission: Department of Health, Department of Human Services, Department of Workforce Services, Utah State Office of Education, and the Juvenile Court. We applaud their efforts to ameliorate intergenerational poverty.