



Time to Jump Start the Anti-Poverty Debate

BY: RICK COHEN - November 19, 2012

There is a burgeoning debate happening about how to eradicate poverty in the U.S., with perspectives from the left and right. At OregonCatalyst, a politically conservative website, Steve Buckstein from the free market-oriented Cascade Policy Institute recommends a distinctive approach for helping the 46 million people below the poverty level. He says that the Cato Institute estimates that the federal government spends \$668 billion on 126 anti-poverty programs and state and local governments spend an additional \$284 billion. Buckstein contends that you could simply take that money and “just cut checks to the poor and be done with it.” By his calculation, governmental anti-poverty spending is \$20,610 for every poor person or \$82,440 for a family of four. Replacing the anti-poverty programs with these one-time checks “could raise every poor person out of poverty and still return hundreds of billions of dollars back to the taxpayers. And if we hurry, it could all be done by Thanksgiving.”

At Right Side News, another conservative outlet, Tom DeWeese joins Buckstein in his criticism of the anti-poverty programs, suggesting that they actually “make the situation worse”, even though he admits that programs to provide anti-poverty relief are “perhaps necessary in the short run, to assure the poor are at least kept alive.” He argues that, “poverty can never be eradicated – and will actually increase – until government gets out of the way and everyone has the equal opportunity to own and benefit from the wealth associated with private property ownership.”

Taking a diametrically opposed view of poverty reduction, Erik R. Stegman and Melissa Boteach argue in the summary of their report for Half in Ten (PDF) that unemployment insurance, earned income tax credits, child care tax credits, food stamps, and full implementation of the expansion of Medicaid under the Affordable Care Act are crucial elements of a national anti-poverty strategy. Andrew Wainer of the Bread for the World Institute argues that legalizing immigration would end the “wage penalty” that employers place on undocumented workers, which might help raise incomes for people who because of their status are kept in an underpaid and underassisted legal status. One might guess that some of us at *Nonprofit Quarterly* don’t quite buy simplistic solutions to complex, multi-faceted problems like poverty. Nonetheless, the emergence of a national debate on poverty is much needed in the aftermath of the radio silence given poverty during the presidential election. In Kansas, for example, Republican governor Sam Brownback has convened a task force on child poverty that is holding public hearings on the problem and potential solutions. Being ready to acknowledge, talk

about, and confront poverty is a crucial step that has been missing in public policy debates this past year. We want to see more talk and more analysis, but it has to lead to action. —Rick Cohen