

## AN UPDATE ON THE CHILD POVERTY INITIATIVE

What is the status of "The Child Poverty Initiative" that was launched last year? At the Community Issues Forum at Christ Church Cathedral on March 2nd, Ross Meyer, Vice President of Community Impact for the United Way, provided an update on where things stand concerning this major effort to reduce the high poverty rate of children in Greater Cincinnati. Meyer reviewed what has happened in recent months including the areas chosen for current and future emphasis by the Child Poverty Collaborative.

Sparked initially by the Urban League report, "The State of Black Cincinnati 2015," and 2012 Census data that showed Cincinnati to have the second highest municipal child poverty rate in the nation (53 percent), the formation of the Collaborative was supported by a number of local leaders. It began with the lofty goal of reducing the child poverty rate by 22-percent by 2020. The first step was establishing a Collaborative Task Force housed at the United Way and charged with planning how to achieve this goal.

"We don't have it figured out yet!" These were the opening words of Ross Meyer at the Forum. This declaration captures the realization by Collaborative leaders that child poverty is a complex issue that defies simple solutions. "There is no silver bullet," emphasized Meyer. Almost from the start, he noted, we realized that children aren't by themselves, and we needed to grapple with all the factors causing families to experience poverty.

The year-long learning process embarked on by the Child Poverty Collaborative Task Force included eighty community conversations with diverse neighborhood and civic representatives and two summits that attracted more than seven hundred participants. Out of these meetings and the already available data on poverty in Cincinnati emerged some key findings or what Meyer described as insights.

A key finding, according to Meyer, is how pervasive poverty is in this region. Using more up to date numbers to define families in poverty, the Collaborative found that one/ third of the families in the Tri-State Area are not self sufficient. The percentages jumps to 70-percent for Cincinnati and 50-percent for Hamilton County.

Another finding is the fact that a majority of people who are in poverty are working. In Cincinnati, 50-percent of the families in poverty have a parent who has a job. This stark finding reveals the growing income inequality that now exists here and in the country as a whole.

As "The State of Black Cincinnati" so graphically shows, racial inequality is another major cause of poverty in the Queen City. That report found the median income for white families was \$57,481, while it was \$24,272 for African-American families. Furthermore, 76-percent of the 14,000 families in poverty are African-American.

Poverty's impact on children is devastating. Meyer cited studies that show the trauma that children suffer when living in the unstable conditions caused by poverty. Such trauma makes it difficult for young students to learn in school and experience normal development.

Meyer went on to depict the long and short term initiatives that the Child Poverty Collaborative's Task Force is currently undertaking. One step is to convene all the human service agencies in the region in order to collectively forge family centered approaches for their work. This approach will be targeted initially to 5,000 families.

The Task Force also realizes it must be involved in advocating for more effective public policies at the state and local level. Meyer listed as priorities promoting more affordable housing and developing a public transportation systems that effectively connect people from neighborhoods to jobs. Making child care available to poor families is another priority, and the Collaborative is currently working with the Kasich Administration on a child care subsidy policy. Meyer admitted that all the talk about tax credits will not help families in poverty unless these credits are actually paid out in cash.

Another public policy on the Task Force's agenda is reducing mass incarceration. This trend has had a devastating impact on poor Black families, and Meyer noted that the Governor and many members of the

Legislature are beginning to realize both its high costs and its negative social and economic impacts.

Finally, Meyer emphasized that the United Way itself is transforming its goals and allocation guidelines. With the goal of reducing family and child poverty, it will promote and fund human service delivery that focuses directly on these families. Meyer concluded by saying that he and other members of the Task Force plan to conduct an open process that invites the participation of concerned citizens such as the attendees at the Forum.