

Anti-poverty program relegated to backburner

By Charlene Muhammad
Special to Sentinel-Voice

(NNPA) — The number of Americans living in poverty increased last year, but advocates for the poor say the situation is more desperate than the rising numbers.

Poverty is increasing as the country's social safety net continues to erode and the government uses outdated measures even to determine poverty levels, experts said.

The poverty threshold is based on a hypothetical market basket of food that a family needs to sustain health, explained Roderick Harrison, an expert with the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies. Harrison explained. Today, however, housing and transportation costs would make up a much larger share of the budget and would be better indicators of poverty, he said.

The Los Angeles Regional Food Bank has been feeding people in L.A. County for 35 years now and gives out 35-40 million pounds of food each year. According to communications director Darren Hoffman, the food bank is strained — new cases of families seeking food are up five to 50 percent depending on which of 900 agencies is reporting developments over the last eight months.

Financial donations are close to last year, but more product donations are needed, he said.

"Demand is outpacing supply a great deal. We have lot of wholesalers or manufacturers that would give an overrun of products in exchange for options like a tax write-off before, but now we see lots of second-hand retail markets coming in and offering them 30-40 cents on a dollar to get their products put into their stores. That's cut into food that once got donated to the poorest of the poor," Hoffman said. He hopes recent passage of the federal farm bill will help increase availability of Dept. of Agriculture commodities over the next couple of years and positively impact food banks.

In future years, Hoffman predicted, supermarket retailers will further reduce the amount of donated food by tracking monthly consumer spending with club cards and increasing efficiency. "Five- or 10-years-ago they had to guess a lot more and some overestimated. What they couldn't move they donated to food banks," he explained. The food bank now relies largely on salvage products

donated by supermarkets, products like cereal boxes bent on the corners or dented canned goods.

Food banks also try to convince restaurants that prepare foods, such as pizza restaurants, to donate food at the end of the day rather than tossing it out.

"The safety net is shredded. Food banks, people who are there to assist, are getting hit from both ends because they have customers they never used to see before and the stores that used to donate food and clothing to them are donating less because they're tight," Harrison said. Harder times mean relatives or neighbors who were once better off and could help don't have anything to spare, he said.

"This is part of the failure of the society and it is not something that government can expect nonprofit organizations, charities, civic groups, churches, mosques to help each other out of because they're all under stress," Harrison added.

The U.S. Census Bureau recently reported that official poverty in America increased from 12.3 percent to 12.5 percent between 2006 and 2007. According to the agency's "Income, Poverty, and Health Insurance Coverage in the United States: 2006 Report" about 1 in 4 poor people are Black. The poverty rate for Blacks is higher than any other ethnic group. Hispanics represent 21 percent of Americans in poverty, Asians, 10 percent, and non-Hispanic Whites, eight percent. Seniors 65 and older ranked lowest among those in poverty at (nine percent), followed by children younger than 18 (17 percent) and people 18-64 at 11 percent.

Rep. Jim McDermott, D-Wash., has drafted the Measuring American Poverty Act of 2008, which would improve and update the current poverty measurement. The bill would continue to track deprivation but based on current consumption patterns, rather than those of the 1950s.

Rev. David Beckmann, of the anti-hunger group Bread for the World, said the numbers don't reflect the continued bad economy.

"The current way we measure poverty in the U.S. is out of date. It assumes that food consumes a third of a family's budget, which does not reflect the realities and fails to capture the true extent of hardship experienced

by American families," he said.

According to the Department of Labor, unemployment rose from 5.7 to 6.1 percent in September, representing one of many factors driving people into debt and ultimately poverty. There were 605,000 jobs lost in the first eight months of 2008, including 84,000 in August.

The Center for American Progress, a Washington, D.C.-based think tank, blames flat wages, fewer people with pensions and health insurance, higher family debt, a deepening housing crisis, inflation, and credit card debt as obstacles families face as they struggle to make ends meet.

According to Julia Isaacs of the Brookings Institution, a lack of income growth for Black men and low marriage

rates within the Black community has meant poorer households. Blacks also hold a precarious place in the ill-defined American middle class: While children of White middle-income parents exceed them in income, a majority of Black children will fall below their parents in income and economic status, she said.

Talk of the "working poor" and those in poverty dropped from the presidential race when Sen. John Edwards did, though President-elect Barack Obama, has touted a plan to tackle concentrated poverty. Obama emphasizes creation of 20 Promise Neighborhoods in high crime and high poverty areas with low levels of academic achievement in cities. The program would bring together a network of services, including early

childhood education, youth violence prevention efforts, and after-school activities from birth to college.

Obama has pledged to work with community and business leaders to address economic development barriers. He also wants to invest in rural small businesses to improve schools and attract more doctors.

Advocates say poor people have to find their own solutions while waiting for government to correct the problem, or risk spiraling into greater poverty.

"I don't think that their broad policies to help everyone will help those who have been traditionally impoverished, but I do hope the help includes the homeless, single parents trying to get on their feet, but we'll see," said Omar Montgomery, a professor of

ethnic studies at the University of Colorado at Denver.

In a year where change has been the mantra of both parties, uprooting poverty hasn't taken center stage. All of the focus in this year's presidential race has been on the middle class, largely because of their voting bloc power, unlike Rev. Al Sharpton's advocacy for poor people when he ran in 2004, Montgomery said.

"A lot of people don't give him credit for not running to win, but running to bring things to light, like poverty in rural areas and urban communities.

Of course some people thought his candidacy was a joke but truly he was trying to highlight these things, and I give him credit for that."

Charlene Muhammad writes for the Final Call.

Your Horoscope Says... Nov. 27-Dec. 3

ARIES

Work. You like work. You have faith in the results it produces. Luck is important, but getting the job in front of you done to the best of your ability will put you ahead of the game this week. Work at love, or rather work for those you love.

Soul Affirmation: Facing down challenges makes me feel good about myself.

Lucky Numbers: 1, 45, 50

TAURUS

Don't ask yourself when the answer will come. It is on its way, but it will not get here this week. Yield not to frustrations. Don't fly off the handle and create problems for yourself later on. Chill. Time will provide the best medicine for anything that ails you this week.

Soul Affirmation: I smile and trust in the powers beyond myself.

Lucky Numbers: 22, 30, 53

GEMINI

This week is excellent for being still and letting the wealth inside yourself produce emotional dividends. Get in touch with the forces that work behind the scenes that produce the bright facades that everyone enjoys. Take comfort in the fact that you know these forces are eternal.

Soul Affirmation: I let the outer world and inner world change places this week.

Lucky Numbers: 27, 35, 41

CANCER

Did external circumstance allow you to get into your true soul vibration last week? Well, last week was good for getting into a positive way of looking at what is happening. This week you'll be called upon to express that positive way to the entire world around you. Enjoy being yourself.

Soul Affirmation: What I need to be is fully present inside of me.

Lucky Numbers: 15, 23, 55

LEO

If you feel blessed this week, don't be surprised. With last week's soul vibration you were able to see a wonderful truth about yourself. Did you look? If you did then this week that truth will shine in everything you do.

Soul Affirmation: The earthiness of my being reflects the sunshine of my soul.

Lucky Numbers: 8, 10, 47

VIRGO

You may feel a bit frustrated that some of the miscellaneous items from your "to do" list reappear for this week. Chill. Find ways to exert excess stress positively. Everything you need to get done will be done. You've got what it takes! Continue to shine!

Soul Affirmation: Another week in which to rejoice is upon me. Ah-h-h-h!

Lucky Numbers: 3, 4, 14

LIBRA

The sincere emotions that should have flowed through you last week will begin to glow more brightly this week. No matter what the emotions were, you can find the good in them this week. If you have to search deeply, do so. The good is there in abundance this week.

Soul Affirmation: My emotions provide me a pathway into the sunshine of my being.

Lucky Numbers: 5, 9, 17

SCORPIO

Energy is higher than it was last week. You might feel like the sunshine inside yourself provides blinding light. Walk into it. There are no dangers. Put dark glasses on your soul vibrations and be cool. These days are too light, too bright.

Soul Affirmation: I love myself when I am laughing!

Lucky Numbers: 12, 33, 42

SAGITTARIUS

You might get negative answers to an important question this week so you should have a backup plan. And you should know that in the long run it is better that the answer was not yes. Be daring! Make efforts to move beyond your comfort zone. You'll be glad you did.

Soul Affirmation: I will ask joy to marry me.

Lucky Numbers: 19, 22, 36

CAPRICORN

Don't waste your shine on solitude. Get out and let other people see it this week. The cheerfulness that should have come into your life last week is looking for places to express. Find them. Your winning ways can win big this week.

Soul Affirmation: People love me, yes they do.

Lucky Numbers: 1, 2, 4

AQUARIUS

You like to shine. Everyone might not know it but you like to be a little superficial and playful. That side of your soul vibration is pleading for expression this week. Listen to the plea. Give it a chance but be careful of the sensitive feelings of those who experience you in another way.

Soul Affirmation: Light from my soul shines in many directions.

Lucky Numbers: 25, 40, 55

PISCES

Some say optimism is fantasy. Suppose the good thing you're optimistic about never comes. This week you'll know that the joy of anticipating it is joy enough. Just the certainty of coming goodness is present goodness. The joy of tomorrow is available this week.

Soul Affirmation: The certainty of coming goodness is goodness.

Lucky Numbers: 26, 21, 30