

The Tidings, June 27, 2008

Conference 'reframes' poverty, debunks 'myths'

By Paula Doyle

Poverty is not an intractable problem that society is powerless to overcome, speakers declared during a June 18 conference at San Fernando Valley's largest anti-poverty agency started over 35 years ago by Catholic and Protestant volunteers.

Non profit executives from close to 50 different social service agencies around the Southland gathered in Pacoima at MEND (Meet Each Need with Dignity) for its inaugural poverty conference, "Reframing Poverty." Last year, MEND provided over 40,000 people each month with emergency food, clothing, medical, vision and dental care, job skills training and employment assistance, ESL classes, youth activities, and a homeless shower program.

In her opening remarks, Marianne Haver Hill, MEND's executive director, outlined the effects of a depressed economy on the poor. "Those of us here know firsthand by the growing number of clients we are serving that poverty is increasing dramatically," said Hill.

"At the same time, revenues are drying up from almost every governmental entity as well as certain private sector organizations [and] foundations that are impacted by decreasing financial revenues and investments."

In his keynote address, "Re-Thinking Poverty," Frank Gilliam, PhD, vice chancellor and director, Center for Communications and Community at UCLA, said people's perception of poverty is affected by dominant cognitive "frames," and for decades now, poverty and race have been linked together.

In the 1920s, '30s and '40s, Gilliam noted, it was acknowledged that many white Americans struggled with poverty during the Depression, pre- and post-war years. A variety of successful government social programs, such as Social Security and the GI Bill, were created to lift people out of poverty.

Over the past few decades, however, according to Gilliam, there's been a shift in people's mindset about which racial/ethnic groups are poor and what, if anything, can be done about it. People's cognitive connection of race and poverty, he said, began in the aftermath of the civil rights movement and the development of programs for the urban poor who were overwhelmingly black.

Failure of the '60s War on Poverty campaign to stamp out poverty combined with widely-reported media stories of welfare cheaters in the early '80s has led to some dominant frame perceptions guiding people's thoughts about poverty today. "Poverty," as framed in many people's minds now, said Gilliam, "is about the deserving and undeserving poor. Poverty is tied up with race. Race is determined --- as is poverty --- by 'self makingness.' And, [some] people don't control their own fates."

Based on the findings from an 18-month research study done with focus groups around the country, Gilliam said he and his colleagues "finally found something that did work" in changing people's perceptions about poverty: the concept and value of opportunity and citizens' access to the "prosperity grid."

"It's about accessibility, getting the individual plugged into networks where he/she can succeed," explained Gilliam. "It's a system or network of support that matters, not just my own individual adherence to 'self-makingness.'"

Setting the record straight

Los Angeles City Councilmember Richard Alarcón, speaking on "The Myths of Poverty," told the luncheon audience that facts have to be set straight concerning the rates of poverty in America. According to Alarcón, the federal poverty guidelines defining poverty as income below \$21,600 for a family of four do not reflect economic reality in many cities across the country.

In Los Angeles, he noted, a family of four making it on their own without assistance needs between \$54,000-73,000 annually. "A majority of people who live in Los Angeles are poor because they are not self-sufficient...We need to change the federal poverty guidelines to adjust them up," said Alarcón.

The L.A. City Councilmember and former state senator and state assemblymember, who heads an Ad Hoc Committee to End Poverty in Los Angeles, next proceeded to list and debunk other poverty myths:

---Poverty is a long-term state. "Poverty is temporary. The vast majority of people who find themselves in poverty are there on average for two to three years," said Alarcón.

---Homeless men are most at-risk for poverty. "Women and children have a higher rate of poverty," said Alarcón, who noted that 21 percent of women and children in the northeast San Fernando Valley are living in poverty.

---Poor people are poor because they don't work. "The fact is," said Alarcón, "the vast majority of people in poverty are working full-time. They're just not making enough money to be self-sufficient."

---Poor people are uneducated. "That's not always the case. There are homeless people going to Cal State University Northridge...[Unemployment] can happen to anybody," at any time in their career, declared Alarcón.

Link to health care

Ending poverty will require tackling fundamental issues, such as increasing accessibility to health care for those medically un- and under-insured, said Alarcón. He pointed out Ben Bernanke, chair of the Federal Reserve, recently said that the economic problems of the U.S. cannot be fixed without doing something about the health care crisis.

"We have to [also] deal with the reality that people, to be self-sufficient, have to have an asset that they can rely on through the tough times, like owning their own home," said Alarcón, who noted that home ownership in Los Angeles is just 31 percent. "That means 69 percent of the population does not have the resilience, the capability of resurging from a tragic event and using that asset, temporarily, as collateral to defend themselves against [financial setbacks], he explained.

The corporate sector, he added, has to do a better job, but he acknowledged that corporations are limited by law from engaging in philanthropic projects that diminish investors' financial returns. "We've moved from a capitalism in the early 1900s that talked about philanthropy as a core value of corporatist thinking to a system that is completely shielded from that responsibility," said Alarcón.

"If we are truly going to end poverty, we have to change some of the fundamental notions that were created in the 20th century," he stated. "Let's make it a mission of this century to end poverty in America."