

*January is Poverty Awareness Month. In recognition, each January issue of Frederic's e-Gazette will contain a reflection on Poverty from one of the Society's Voice of the Poor Regional Leaders.*

## **The Many Dark Shades of Poverty**

Christine Krikliwy, West Region Voice of the Poor Leader

At its core, poverty is having far too little money to even remotely hope to make ends meet, and the lack of basics, such as clothing, food, shelter, healthcare, education and transportation. Every person, in order to achieve his or her personal dignity as children of God, has a right to these basics, Catholic Social Teaching instructs.

Without these, multiple problems inevitably arise with people in poverty often suffering the devastating and degrading consequences of homelessness and violence, as we know from our Vincentian work on the front-line. People who are poor live from day to day and are unable to think about tomorrow. It is a basic survival mechanism.

There is generational poverty and situational poverty, and, according to *Proverbs 10:15*, "The ruin of the poor is their poverty." Poverty breeds poverty, and the cycle is not easily broken. People who grow up in an impoverished culture usually lack education and nutrition, key ingredients necessary to be a productive citizen.

Children living in families who lack food often go to bed hungry. The only real meal they receive is in school. These children suffer from malnutrition, develop chronic diseases and are unable to function as normal individuals. It is important for these children to receive adequate nutrition because they are first and foremost children of God as well as the future generation of the country.

The following are stunning statistics from the *United States Census Bureau (2013)*.

- In 2013, 45.3 million people lived in poverty. That's the largest number in 52 years since poverty statistics were published.
- Children represented 23.5 percent of the total population and 32.3 percent of people in poverty.
- 19.9 million Americans live in extreme poverty, defined as a family of four living on less than \$10,000 per year. They represent 6.3 percent of the total population and 43.8 percent of people in poverty.

Families with children or individuals who do not have a roof over their head often sleep in temporary motels that are bug infested, in the family car, or under a bridge. As homeless individuals, they lack the basics we take for granted: clean food, sanitary water, decent clothes, good hygiene and a family and neighborhood support system to help and protect them especially in times of crisis. They become extremely vulnerable to violence, sickness and chronic disease. Instead of being removed from their

homelessness (which would be easier on the system), too often our society waits until they become extremely sick before we try to protect them.

A lack of jobs, jobs with wage levels that are not self-sufficient, and insufficient affordable housing lead to disturbing statistics such as these taken from the work conducted by the National Alliance to End Homelessness (2013-2015):

- For January 2015, in the United States on any given night, 564,708 people were homeless.
- Families accounted for 206,286 people, individuals 358,422
- Chronically homeless individuals accounted for 15 percent or 83,170.
- Chronically homeless families accounted for 2 percent or 13,105 people.
- Veterans accounted for 8 percent or 47,725 individuals.

As Vincentians, we have the privilege to serve people in poverty. To really understand their struggle for survival, we must think of it as an endless series of emergencies, especially for those coming from generational poverty.

As Vincentians and Catholics, we believe the right to shelter, food and healthcare is a moral issue. Further, we believe that decisions made by individuals with authority in the public sphere should always consider how it affects “the least of these” (*Matthew, 25*). In the coming 2016 election season, this conviction should underlie our evaluation of the proposals for dealing with poverty put forth by candidates for office at all levels of our government.

Once again, as Catholic Social Teaching instructs, government and even private institutions have a shared responsibility to promote the common good of all, including specifically the poor and marginalized. In an enterprise based economy, those that are qualified and sometimes just lucky by reason of the privilege of their birth circumstances can do extremely well. But the lack of jobs for the untrained individual is devastating. Corporations and lobbyists that are flush with money establish their priorities to include tax breaks and subsidies, but forget to take into concern programs that would help the poor.

The Catholic Social Teaching Principle stressing the Preferential Option for the Poor should always center our Vincentian mission and work. Shelter, food and healthcare are essential for creating a healthy, productive successful family for societies that take seriously the Christian call to promote human life and dignity. This is the way we end Poverty!