

BANGOR DAILY NEWS

How to start a constructive dialogue about poverty

By Joel B. Russ, Special to the BDN

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Lawmakers in Augusta have the chance to find a bipartisan path forward to improve the lives of Maine people who are struggling financially. At the same time, they can help to strengthen our state's economy.

Regardless of our political affiliation or beliefs, we should all be able to find common ground in the idea that assistance programs should move people from poverty into more stable, healthy and productive lives.

Once we get past hurtful stereotypes and efforts to shame or humiliate low-income families, we all agree providing a pathway to a good-paying job should be our ultimate goal.

That's why [LD 1268](#), An Act to Reform Welfare by Establishing Bridges to Sustainable Employment, is so important.

When I think about reform in the context of public benefit programs, I believe it is about improving lives and creating opportunities. That means reducing poverty and the barriers that prevent families from full and successful participation in our economy.

The bill does a number of important things, including offering strategies that are tested and that we know work: improved access to child care, transportation and education help low-income people to find steady employment.

It removes programmatic disincentives that set families back when a parent goes to work. It gives parents the helping hand they need to move up the career ladder to better and more stable jobs and recognizes education is the key to success and opportunities. Perhaps most importantly, the reform acknowledges that moving out of poverty requires systems changes, time and support.

I have been very fortunate to have been raised and found meaningful work in Maine. My work has been interesting, varied and largely community based.

Years ago, I served as executive director of Greater Portland Landmarks, was general counsel for the Maine State Chamber of Commerce and CEO of the Greater Portland Chamber of Commerce and the Maine Science and Technology Foundation.

I have created two private companies, one of which I still maintain, Legacy Philanthropy Management.

For the past 10 years or so, I have worked for organizations that serve youth ages 16 to 24 who are experiencing severe challenges in their young lives.

They include students from Good Will-Hinckley, LearningWorks and Seeds of Independence.

These last 10 years have been the most rewarding, because I saw what great progress people can make when they combine their personal skills, talents, energy and aspirations with well-defined, coordinated and workable networks of support.

The common denominator in all my work over the years has been an interest in improving the quality of life for all Maine people — a vision for a better Maine, a Maine where families can realize their dreams and their children can grow up to be proud of who they are, where they're from and what they contribute to the state.

To effectively combat poverty, we need systemic changes that focus on success, not failure, and work to improve the well-being of all our citizens. Not some, but all. We can't leave anyone behind. No one is disposable.

As important as LD 1268 is, however, it is just a start.

What Maine needs today is a broader community dialogue about poverty, with full representation of all interested parties, especially those who are most affected by policy decisions.

The time has come for communities to honestly reflect on the condition of our collective civic engagement, to examine how we talk to one another and to explore new ways of engaging those whose opinions differ from our own.

We need to think about the conditions that have led to an atmosphere of disrespect — toward each other and those who have little voice — and put in place processes that foster well-informed conversations about the complicated issues facing our communities.

Constructive civic dialogue is difficult. Problems such as poverty are complex.

However, the default, if we fail to change the nature of our discourse, is continued divisiveness and stalemate with no real progress. I have learned over the years that if we are to accomplish large-scale social change, we must engage in broad, inclusive community conversations.

We have an opportunity to put politics aside and to implement a well-informed, inclusive approach that will move more people out of poverty, bring stability to their lives and allow them to give back to the communities where they work and live.

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