

The New York Times

Opinionator

JANUARY 12, 2012, 7:21 PM

In the Fight Against Poverty, It's Time for a Revolution

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Fixes looks at solutions to social problems and why they work.

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Is it time to rethink our basic assumptions about the way we fight poverty?

When Michael Harrington's landmark book on poverty, "The Other America," was published in 1962, Harrington startled the nation's leaders, including President John F. Kennedy, by shining a spotlight on the deep poverty that remained hidden in America. Harrington's

book became an underpinning for the War on Poverty. Half a century later, the United States Census bureau has produced what may become another landmark reference. Based on an updated method for assessing poverty, the bureau has found that **far more Americans are scraping by** than was previously known: 100 million Americans — one in three — are “**deep poor,**” “**poor,**” or “**near poor.**”

Adding to the impact of this analysis is the growing realization that American society has become more calcified. The decline of social mobility in the United States is now acknowledged as a serious problem by Democrats and Republicans alike. As Jason DeParle **reported** recently in The Times, new research indicates that if you start off near the bottom of the income ladder in the United States, you’re far more likely to remain there than if you’re in the same situation in Canada or Europe. And if you start off poor in Denmark or Britain, for example, you’re much

more likely to reach the top fifth in income than if you try to make the same climb in the United States. It seems that the Danish Dream and the British Dream are currently more alive — at least for the most disadvantaged — than the American Dream.

That dream has never been just about income, of course, but about self-determination. As Harrington observed, poverty is more than lacking minimum standards of health care, housing, food and education. “Poverty,” he wrote, “should be defined psychologically in terms of those whose place in the society is such that they are internal exiles who, almost inevitably, develop attitudes of defeat and pessimism and who are therefore excluded from taking advantage of new opportunities.”

In recent years, economists and policy makers have shifted toward this view. Amartya Sen, who won a Nobel Prize in economics, has argued that economists should think of

poverty as that which deprives people of the opportunity to develop and use their **capabilities**. Others argue that the goal in anti-poverty efforts should be to help poor people increase their “**capacity to aspire**” and navigate toward self-defined goals.

Researchers in the United Kingdom have developed tools to measure “**well-being**,” looking at such things as material goods, relationships and self-beliefs. The focus is also shifting from addressing individual poverty to stabilizing families. Last year, the British government began an ambitious new **child poverty strategy** based on many of these ideas.

Much of this makes intuitive sense. But there is a problem: the system of social services that has been built up over past generations isn't designed to increase poor people's “capacity to aspire” and pursue their goals. Social services aren't treated as part of an integrated process of human development. Just the opposite. Services are fragmented and clients are

regularly shunted from agency to agency. Caseworkers serving people who are applying for public benefits don't have the time, or the discretion, to get to know their clients, let alone brainstorm with them about problem solving.

But that's what's required.

Many Americans struggling in poverty today need more than financial assistance; they need help figuring out how to plug into a changing economy. They need help devising a plan forward. One of the most innovative organizations working to re-imagine poverty alleviation along these lines is called **LIFT**. It was founded by college students in 1998, and most of the work is still conducted by student volunteers. Last year, LIFT mobilized 674 volunteers who contributed 126,000 volunteer hours and assisted about 10,000 families. If the American Dream is to be resuscitated for many of nation's poor, there is a great deal

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that we can learn from them.

LIFT's approach is grounded in the principle that change happens through relationships. "The sheer act of two people coming together, sharing their strengths in a trusting relationship, is the most important first step in creating transformation," explains Kirsten Lodal, LIFT's chief executive and co-founder. "It's the portal from which people are able to access opportunity in all its many dimensions."

If this sounds soft, it isn't. LIFT has spent more than a decade systematizing what amounts to a social technology. It has developed a set of working principles — among them, be humble, transparent, and friendly, focus on strengths, beware of your own biases — for working with clients. The advocates all use technology (like the digital natives they are) to track every meeting, as well as clients' progress on their goals.

They have looked closely at the human qualities required to address poverty. Above all, LIFT looks for volunteers who have demonstrated empathy. “We believe the capacity for empathy is the primary indicator of how successful volunteers will be in building strong relationships with their clients,” explained Lodal. They look for evidence in past behavior that applicants are genuinely motivated to fight poverty. This isn’t the way government agencies usually do their hiring.

Advocates are trained to treat clients with courtesy, to value their time, and to listen to their stories (while maintaining clear boundaries). They are not to push their ideas or judge others for their failures. (They also know when they have to refer clients to professionals.) The job is to help people stabilize their lives so they can begin thinking about, and committing to, longer-term goals. This takes time and continuing effort on the

part of advocates, who fight for months and sometimes years to help clients find housing, jobs, skills training, education, public benefits and emergency assistance.

Another difference is that LIFT, which is a nonprofit and whose services are free, locates its offices within the communities it is serving, and makes special efforts to recruit advocates from the same background as the majority of its clients. Patricia Perez, a former advocate in LIFT's Bronx office who now works for the United States Treasury, was motivated to help when she was a Fordham student because she had experienced homelessness herself as a youth.

“Seeing how helpless my mother felt when she couldn't get us housing, I wanted to do something to help others,” Perez told me. When she applied for food stamps, she recalled being yelled at and feeling as if she were doing something shameful. “A lot of our

clients come into the office feeling very discouraged,” she said. “When they sit down they’re slumped over. They keep their coats on. Their faces are suspicious. At the end, they’re sitting up straight and they seem excited or hopeful about next steps. It’s something that’s not a solid ‘deliverable’ — but it always felt like a big deal to me.” She added: “Being treated politely is for many people a new experience.”

Many LIFT clients engage with the organization on a continuing basis because it is an enjoyable experience for them. Some are tearful when recounting the kindness with which they were treated.

Maria Gilbert, an advocate in LIFT’s West Philadelphia office, came to the program because she was pregnant and couldn’t afford to continue attending Temple University. Her advocate, Tanisha Walker, who also attended Temple and had a young daughter, helped her

find government benefits and then worked with her to figure out a manageable educational pathway through Delaware County Community College. Now Gilbert plans to transfer to West Chester University and become a social worker. In the meantime, she's volunteering at LIFT, helping clients build resumes, get immigration papers, apply for jobs, find food banks, and so forth. "People helped me, and it's my obligation to help others," she said. "And I realize I'm well suited for this job."

Before, she never imagined that so many different people needed so much help and that so many resources were available. One of her clients was a registered nurse with a degree from a major university who was pregnant, unemployed, recently divorced, and had another child to support. "I never imagined that someone with those credentials would be in a situation where she needed help," Gilbert said.

In fact, LIFT is seeing more people in the “near poor” or “newly poor” category. In some cases, clients came in who had been employed for 20 or 30 years and lost a job. Some had no idea how to do an Internet job search, or even how to put together a résumé. After repeated rejections, some found their confidence shattered. Advocates help these clients acquire new skills, rebuild résumés and use online tools to identify opportunities. Most important, they encourage them to send out applications and *keep* sending them out — 50, 75, 100 — as many as it takes. “Sometimes I think our most important job is just keeping people from giving up,” says Lodal.

Listening to stories of LIFT clients, it becomes abundantly clear that efforts to address poverty and social problems with fragmented, short-term fixes make no sense. LIFT is now part of a partnership with the city of Boston called the [Circle of Promise](#) that is linking schools with community-based efforts to

stabilize poor families.

Within the Circle, the city has identified 12 “turnaround schools” with 6,000 students and 600 students who are “most at risk.” Each school has a liaison whose job is to get to know the kids and the issues their families are facing, and when necessary, refer parents or guardians to partner organizations like LIFT. “As we were working with the children, we realized that you have to help the whole families,” explained Marie St. Fleur, the city’s chief of Advocacy and Strategic Investment. “It’s not about case management. It’s about equipping parents with the tools they need to move towards economic stability. That means navigating a very complex human services system we’ve built.”

Over the past 11 months, LIFT-Boston’s Roxbury office has assisted 564 families within the Circle. Approximately 80 percent requested housing services. More than half

requested employment assistance. A third spoke no English. A third sought job training. One in five had no health insurance. (In Massachusetts, only 2 percent of the state's population was uninsured in 2010.) To date, the student advocates have helped as follows: 19 families averted eviction; 23 obtained stable housing; 11 got into emergency shelters; 23 found jobs; 9 enrolled in job training; 61 received public benefits they were entitled to; 34 completed personal budgets; 47 were connected to community health resources; 43 were connected to child care, after-school and tutoring programs; and 118 received basic resources like food and clothing.

“It’s a beginning,” notes St. Fleur. “We’ve seen absenteeism dropping. Families have gotten stabilized with housing, jobs, skills.” It will take time to see how this affects student learning. It’s hard to imagine it won’t help. [Research](#) indicates that students who go homeless, move frequently, or experience

turmoil at home are far more likely to fail in school.

As part of LIFT's volunteer training, advocates are asked to reflect on the question: "Why I LIFT?" The idea is to help them reconnect to the meaning of their work – and to think critically about how they are doing it. Given the new landscape of American poverty and near poverty, the country should do the same.

"When we start dealing with poverty," notes Lodal, "we turn off our brains about what has worked over time for the middle and upper classes in America." It's not just benefits and material resources – but plans, relationships, beliefs and aspirations – the kinds of things LIFT helps its clients to think about for themselves every day.

Looking ahead, LIFT plans to bring in outside parties to evaluate its work. The goal is to accumulate a body of evidence – building on its work with 50,000 families to date – to

challenge the existing assumptions in the human services system. “We’d like to advance this very simple concept,” says Lodal. “That two people — neighbors, students, retired professionals, it can be anyone — can come together voluntarily and help someone identify their goals and achieve their potential.”

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