

What the Poor Need

We are living in a time when the poor are blamed for their poverty. I read with interest about the early life of Elvis Presley. His family, like many others in Mississippi, lived in abject poverty and relied on the kindness of others. His father spent several years in Parchman Farm Prison for adding a zero to a \$4.00 check, his twin brother was buried in a shoebox, and housing insecurity was a fact of life. Elvis understood poverty and what poverty can do to a family—and how the kindness of family and strangers helped his family survive. For this reason, he gave generously and without blame. So too, public policy needs to be structured within a dispassionate and humane framework.

This past week, branch representatives were invited to the NC Justice Center to attend workshops on issues pertaining to women. One workshop focused on poverty. Poverty is pervasive when one does not earn a living wage—it affects every aspect of life. Issues associated with poverty are best addressed holistically with the following components. 1.) Good public education—it bonds people under one nation and provides opportunities and hope for a better standard of living. Currently, it is under attack. 2.) Affordable and non-discriminatory practices—they help everyone, but especially those mired in poverty. Research from the Economic Policy Institute finds that infrequent adjustments to the federal minimum wage have left many people in poverty despite working two or three jobs. Housing and transportation are a constant struggle for many individuals and families. 3.) Lax laws regulating predatory schemes (payday lending, insurance scams are examples) target the poor who may feel they have no alternative to pay rent, car repairs or other large bills. 4.) Access to good healthcare is often out of the reach of the poor and even the middle class. Medicaid Expansion would greatly reduce the number of people who have no coverage and only receive medical care in emergencies. 5.) Fair tax laws are critical to creating an economy that works across the state. Tax caps and flat tax rates hurt the poor and middle class. Five percent of a \$20,000 salary for a single mother or a retired couple is a burden and benefits the wealthier person who has ample money to cover his or her lifestyle. Lowering and capping the tax rate means less money for schools, emergencies, social programs, healthcare and the public sector. 6.) A cohesive immigration and refugee policy that promotes the fair treatment of immigrants, regardless of race, ethnicity, or country of origin. Unfortunately, immigrants are often excluded from other programs that offer legal services to low-income people. Consequently, immigrants are more likely to become victims of abuse by unscrupulous businesses and employers. 7.) Protection of workers' rights, workplace equity for women, enforcing and expanding policies that ensure safe workplaces, fair treatment, a living wage and a strong safety net in times of hardship are policies that improve the well-being of working families and enable workers to access economic security.

AAUW's mission aligns with all these efforts. Our November program on Poverty in NC will illustrate what it means to be poor in our communities.