

**Remarks by  
Douglas W. Nelson, President  
The Annie E. Casey Foundation  
at the  
Spotlight on Poverty and Opportunity Launch  
The National Press Club  
Washington, DC  
October 30, 2007**

Let me begin by thanking all of you for joining us this afternoon. I am particularly grateful to our panelists who have set aside time to share their views on the issues of poverty and opportunity in America as well as on how those urgent matters might fare in the coming political season. I would also like to thank our board of distinguished advisors, who have tried hard to help us frame this initiative fairly and creatively. The names of our advisors are in your materials . . . and I think the breadth of their perspectives accurately reflects a growing concern about poverty across the political spectrum.

That concern is well grounded. Despite considerable evidence of growth and strength in our nation's overall economy, the problems of poverty along with corrosive gaps in economic opportunity persist in this country with an alarming tenacity. Just last week, for example, a new report by the Fiscal Policy Institute showed that while much of Washington, D.C.'s economy is thriving, one in five of the district's residents are living below the poverty line – that's a higher poverty rate than the city has faced in a decade. Equally disturbing, the study revealed that the employment rate of two groups of D.C. residents – African Americans and individuals with only a high school degree – are approaching 30-year lows.

Unfortunately, there's nothing exceptional about D.C.'s numbers and trends. In fact, in many of America's cities, an even larger share of households are poor; an even greater share of neighborhoods are plagued by the problems of concentrated poverty; and an even wider opportunity gap is distancing their advantaged families from those without sufficient opportunity.

Looking at the nation as a whole, there are now more than 36 million Americans living in poverty – about one in nine. That means 36 million folks living on \$20,000 or less to meet the needs of a family of four. Add to that another almost 54 million Americans who many observers describe as the “near poor.” These include families of four who are trying to make ends meet and provide a modicum of security and opportunity to their kids on total annual incomes between \$20,000 and \$41,000.

And speaking of kids, let me emphasize that we now have over 13 million American children living in poverty. That's one in six kids, and the percentage appears to be inching up again after falling significantly in the 1990s. As many of you know well, the child poverty rate is an enormously consequential indicator. There is overwhelming evidence that a kid growing up poor has a vastly higher likelihood of compromised health, of entering school unready to learn, of falling behind by junior high, of failing to graduate, of parenting before they're

prepared, of getting into trouble with the law, and of failing to become a productive and competitive participant in the nation's mainstream economy. When you face up to all these oft-observed correlations, you realize that for poor kids the sometimes useful distinction we make between poverty and opportunity is an almost meaningless one for them. Indeed, increasing opportunity for our most-at-risk children may simply be inseparable from reducing the poverty of the families and communities in which they are growing up.

Thankfully, the concern about these issues appears to be a growing one. In the Zenger Room, which I hope you'll visit after the briefing, you will find materials and exhibits that convey the actions and initiatives relating to poverty of an expanding legion of organizations. I want to highlight just a few of these.

A growing number of faith-based organizations, including Catholic Charities, the Catholic Conference, Sojourners, and the Jewish Council for Public Affairs are all taking on the mission of raising up the problem of poverty and mobilizing the public will to address it.

Across the country, more and more cities and towns are putting a priority on the poverty problem in an effort to secure their municipal futures. New York City, Los Angeles, Savannah, Georgia, and Miami have each embraced high profile poverty reduction initiatives. The National League of Cities and the U.S. Conference of Mayors are advancing initiatives designed to help their members close the employment, earnings, wealth and opportunity gaps that exist in their communities.

States like Alabama and Oregon have recently formed high profile Task Forces and visible tracking initiatives to frame statewide anti-poverty campaigns. Connecticut has enacted legislation committing the state to halving its poverty rate by the year 2014.

I'm also relieved to say that an increasing number of U.S. foundations are awakening to the urgency of poverty reduction – seeing it as central to their missions of improving human and community conditions. Big foundations, United Ways, family and community philanthropies are directing more dollars to research, demonstrations, and policy analysis aimed at increasing opportunity and real economic security for the poor.

All of this is heartening, but all of this is still not enough. Poverty is not just charity's problem; it's not just an urban problem . . . or a rural problem; it's not any single state's problem; it's not a Republican problem; it's not a Democratic problem; it's not even really a poor people's problem. This is America's problem.

Our national values, our cohesion as a society, our commitment to fairness, our domestic prosperity and our global competitiveness all require a truly national resolve to do much more to expand opportunity and shrink poverty – and to do it soon.

A critical step toward that resolve is elevating and sharpening a genuine political dialogue around effective anti-poverty strategies. That's why I am so enthusiastic to join with others in launching this important new initiative: "Spotlight on Poverty and Opportunity: Foundations Ask Presidential Candidates What They'll Do for America." This initiative, which

my colleague, Andrea Silbert, will describe in greater detail, is designed to move the issues of poverty and opportunity to center stage in 2008 and to maintain the momentum for national policy action as one of the first orders of business in 2009.

In closing, let me say that I believe this effort can make a difference. I think that both parties (and candidates within each) embrace promising ideas and approaches for addressing poverty – approaches drawn from solid evidence and experience. There are, of course, distinctions in content and emphasis among the candidates, but these differences need not leave us with only unaccountable rhetoric or policy gridlock. On the contrary, given the right dialogue, the right voter expectations, competing ideas can become complementary components of a critical consensus on approaches, investments, and policies that, together, could dramatically alter the opportunity landscape for low-income Americans in the decade ahead.

It is that hope that inspires our commitment – and we hope many of yours – to support the Spotlight Initiative.

To give a little more detail about Spotlight, I'm delighted to introduce our founding partner, Andrea Silbert, President of the Eos Foundation.