

From Poverty to Opportunity: Realizing Human Rights in Illinois

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Several months ago I was meeting with a group of people who had the common experience of being forcefully evicted from their homes. All of them were living near or below the poverty line at the time. One of the questions asked of the group was, “What do you believe?” Without hesitation, one man said, “Everybody should be able to put a roof over their heads.” The rest of the room nodded emphatically in agreement. This was not a “human rights” conversation; this was a conversation about their lives, what they have experienced and what they believe. It was grounded in a basic vision of fairness and a faith in the promises of our nation.

Conversations like this, along with many others I have had over the years, make me a firm believer that the human rights framework is a powerful tool with which to end poverty both in Illinois and throughout the United States. The promises of this nation are built upon the notion that all people have the opportunity to lead a decent, dignified life. People believe in exercising our civil and political rights, which are designed to protect that opportunity. They believe that everyone, regardless of where they are born or what they look like, should have a fair chance to succeed.

This American value of opportunity is also a human rights value. I have spent many hours poring over human rights documents, and one thing is clear: They embody the spirit of opportunity and reflect a collective vision for what is right and just. However, there are serious threats to opportunity and human rights in this nation. When barriers such as homelessness, unemployment or low-paying work, and hunger threaten the stability of our lives, we cannot fully exercise our civil and political rights and participate in society. Consequently, the absence of economic security is the absence of human rights.

Living in extreme poverty (defined as living below 50% of the federal poverty line, approximately \$10,000 a year or less for a family of four) is an acute example of the deprivation of opportunity – the deprivation of human rights. In Illinois, more than 700,000 people live in extreme poverty – a number equivalent to the entire population of Washington D.C. *plus* another 150,000 people. Though Illinois is one of the richest states in the nation, 36 other states have a lower rate of extreme poverty. To put this number in context, if a family of four in extreme poverty was renting a two-bedroom apartment at the current fair market average rate of \$802 a month, they would have \$376 left for all other expenses *for the entire year*. And those with \$376 left are at the top of this income group. More than 30 percent of those living in extreme poverty are children. One in five African Americans in Illinois are living in extreme poverty. Every county in Illinois has families living in extreme poverty, including the wealthiest.

The reality of extreme poverty in Illinois and the promise of the human rights framework have come together in an initiative called **From Poverty to Opportunity Campaign: Realizing**

Human Rights in Illinois. Heartland Alliance for Human Needs & Human Rights launched this campaign as an outgrowth of our human rights mission and our anti-poverty work. We see a very real need to catalyze a broad and robust conversation about poverty and to shift the discourse from a focus on charity to one of fundamental obligations. The goal of this conversation is to create measurable, substantive plans that will halve the extreme poverty rate in Illinois by 2015.

The human rights framework is firmly embedded in this campaign. Heartland Alliance for Human Needs & Human Rights has established a working group to guide and inform its work. The group comprises those living in poverty as well as advocates throughout Illinois who work with a variety of issues and constituencies. Their work will be guided by seven core campaign principles:

- 1) Freedom from extreme poverty is a basic human right.
- 2) Education on human rights and access to opportunity is a necessary component to removing existing barriers.
- 3) All human rights – civil, political, economic, social, and cultural - are indivisible, interrelated, and interdependent.
- 4) Inequality and discrimination play a central role in the existence of extreme poverty.
- 5) Those living in extreme poverty must be engaged in the development, adoption, and enforcement of policies that grant freedom from poverty.
- 6) Poverty eradication will be progressively realized and is subject to the availability of resources.
- 7) Poverty eradication requires specific, measurable plans and policies.

In the coming months, the campaign will work with elected and appointed officials to establish a legislative task force on extreme poverty and human rights. This body will be charged with holding hearings around the state on the causes of and solutions to extreme poverty. The information gathered in the hearings will form the basis of a Poverty Eradication Strategy that will address myriad basic rights that lead to the eradication of poverty: available and sustainable access to safe and adequate **food**; available and equal access to safe and adequate **housing**; access to affordable and quality **healthcare**; access to quality **education**; opportunity to participate in decent and stable **work**; and protection, security, and **well being**. The plan will have specific benchmarks for measuring progress toward the end goal.

As we move forward with our work, it is important for us to remember that realizing the notion of freedom from poverty as a human right will not be easy. The term “human rights” has many different meanings for different people. A few years ago, during a campaign to add “source of income” to the Illinois Human Rights Act – essentially codifying freedom from income-based discrimination – a moderate legislator opposed to the amendment gave a fiery, desk-pounding speech about the audacity of the bill when it came up for a vote in the state House. The codification was soundly defeated; apparently a conversation about income and discrimination was too far afield from most legislators’ definition of human rights.

Though Americans embrace opportunity and human rights, too often there is a divide between what we believe and what action we are willing to take. Consequently we have our work cut out for us, but it is very important work. Our resolve is strengthened by the broad range of individuals and organizations throughout the United States and the globe who are building a human rights movement. As we collectively look to apply the letter and spirit of international documents guaranteeing the full range of human rights, we know that we are reflecting basic beliefs we hold in our hearts. And for that reason, we will prevail.