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In the News COMMENTARY

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Welfare reform hasn't made a dent in poverty

By Robert Wharton

Every year as cold weather approaches, I am reminded daily of the economic fragility of millions of individuals and families. I oversee a program that helps both renters and homeowners with winter heating bills and furnace repairs. We have been in this line of work for 40 years, and in those decades we have seen one constant: Low-income families can't afford the basic necessities of food, clothing and shelter. And that includes heat.

Ten years into welfare reform, caseloads may have decreased, but the number of people living in poverty has not. At the same time, the safety net of services and support that once protected the poor lies in tatters. Today, working parents in ill-paid jobs often work themselves right out of eligibility for desperately needed assistance.

So it's good news that the freshly empowered Democrats have promised to introduce legislation that would raise the federal minimum wage from \$5.15 to \$7.25. The minimum wage has not risen since 1997, and its buying power has shrunk alarmingly. The Economic Policy Institute, a nonpartisan think tank in Washington, D.C., figures that the minimum wage is at its lowest value in 50 years when measured in inflation-adjusted dollars.

Yet even in their importance, both welfare reform and raising the minimum wage are mere prelude to the real discussion our country must have about poverty. A higher minimum wage is just a beginning, not even a panacea. Families can't improve their quality of life at the minimum wage.

I see this every winter. While we search for cheaper alternative fuels, the cost of fuels rises. And the sad truth is that many people won't be able to afford the cheaper alternatives, either.

The safety net that once protected the poor lies in tatters.

After four decades of bearing witness to the lives of the working poor, I am compelled to insist that we face the facts

and begin to take better-planned, more deliberate action to alleviate poverty.

Such an effort will require a federal agency charged with mounting a coordinated, nation-wide attack on poverty.

The agency must be independent, reporting only to the Congressional masters who will have to create it, because this White House won't. The model should be the old Office of Economic Opportunity, created in 1964 to administer most of the programs within President Lyndon B. Johnson's War on Poverty.

We must also include as a priority in budgeting -- from the federal level down -- some sort of entitlement to basic necessities, including shelter, food, health care and education. These programs should be run on a sliding scale, so that the working poor are not penalized for earning what they can.

We need scholars, social analysts and politicians courageous enough to shepherd us in this national discussion of poverty. We must commit to the philosophy of providing for the neediest, or we will continue -- unconscionably -- to tolerate intolerable poverty at home and in the larger world.

When Hurricane Katrina struck, for a moment we began to talk again about poverty. But in too short a time, we turned our attention elsewhere.

It is time to answer some fundamental questions: How much profit is decent, and how much is too much? What do we as a society believe is a measure of a decent standard of living?

Let the dialogue begin -- and, one hopes, a consensus emerge -- before another winter passes.

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