



Wider Opportunities for Women

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New Poverty Data Shows Need for Expansive Job Creation

Recession Threatens to Leave Millions of Families Behind

WASHINGTON, DC – New 2009 poverty numbers from the Census Bureau released yesterday show that, as unemployment remains stagnant, 43 million Americans live in poverty and the recovery has not arrived for millions of American families who continue to struggle for basic economic security. This staggering statistic is only the tip of the iceberg of how many are actually struggling to make it in this volatile economy. It was the largest poverty number ever calculated and would have been larger had it not been for the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act.

“Clearly the bottom rungs of our economic ladder are still growing by the month,” said Joan Kuriansky, Executive Director of Wider Opportunities for Women (WOW). “Any recovery has not materialized for the millions of American families who are still unable to find quality work, and are left struggling to pay bills and put food on the table.”

WOW has called for the implementation of a measure that more fully captures the number of Americans struggling in the current economy. According to WOW’s Family Economic Self-Sufficiency Standard, the annual median income for a one-parent household with one pre-school child is over \$25,000. WOW worked with Dr. Diana Pearce, founder of the Women and Poverty Project at WOW, and a professor at the University of Washington, School of Social Work, to design the metric.

WOW also measures the true cost of living for seniors, age 65 and older. The Elder Economic Security Standard™ Index shows an elder renter needs \$20,326 a year to meet her basic food, housing, health care and transportation costs. The Elder Index was developed by WOW in collaboration with the Gerontology Institute at the University of Massachusetts Boston.

New public opinion research conducted for WOW by Lake Research Partners on American’s attitudes toward the economy and what it takes to be economically secure show the majority of Americans think a family of four needs more than \$50,000 to make ends meet and an elder living alone needs at least \$30,000 a year. The official poverty threshold for a four-person family was \$21,954 in 2009.

“Americans know that it takes more than simply living above the federal poverty level to make it and our findings show that across gender, age and income levels people think that much more is needed in this economy to get by than even what WOW’s economic measuring tools show,” said Kuriansky.

New data also showed the extent of the recession’s impact on seniors. The number of elders living below the federal poverty level decreased by 300,000 due to the positive effect of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act’s \$250 one-time payment and an unusually high cost-of-living adjustment.

“Despite this decrease, no one has been safe from this economic crisis, including the elderly. Americans who’ve played by the rules all their lives are entering retirement without any real economic security, despite a lifetime of work. This rude awakening underscores that it’s time to put jobs at the top of the priority list. Congress and the Obama administration must quickly invest in job creation,” she continued.

“Extending the emergency jobs program from the federal stimulus is a critical first step – and a win-win that simultaneously trains low-income and unemployed Americans and helps businesses and local economies meet their need for a skilled workforce,” said Kuriansky.

The Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) Emergency Fund program has employed nearly 250,000 low-income parents and youth, but expires September 30 without Congressional action. The program funded subsidized jobs in 37 states at a time when employers were holding off on expanding their workforce.

“While this year-to-year data helps show just how fast and how far Americans are falling behind, unfortunately, the Census Bureau numbers fail to account for the millions of Americans who live above the federal poverty level, but are still unable to meet their basic needs,” said Kuriansky.

“Americans do not want a hand out, they want to earn a living – but cannot do so without a good-paying job that allows them to meet their basic needs and save for retirement,” said Kuriansky. “A good-paying job is crucial to building economic security for families and seniors who must work in retirement.”

Wider Opportunities for Women

Wider Opportunities for Women (WOW) works nationally and in its home community of Washington DC to achieve economic independence and equality of opportunity for women and their families at all stages of life. For over 45 years, WOW has been a leader in the areas of nontraditional employment, job training and education, welfare to work and workforce development policy. Since 1995, WOW has been committed to the self-sufficiency of women and their families through the national Family Economic Security (FES) Project. Through FES, WOW reframed the national debate on social policies and programs from one that focuses on poverty to one that focuses on what families need to make ends meet. Building on FES, WOW expanded to meet its intergenerational mission of economic independence for women and families at all stages of life with the National Elder Economic Security Initiative.

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