



Wider Opportunities for Women

## For Immediate Release

July 18, 2008

Contact: Joan Grangenois-Thomas  
212-627-2404 or  
[joan@makewavesnotnoise.com](mailto:joan@makewavesnotnoise.com)

### **National Organization Calls *Measuring American Poverty Act* "A Measure Whose Time Has Come"**

#### **Cites Federal Poverty Level as "Unrealistic"**

Washington, DC - **Wider Opportunities for Women (WOW)**, a national organization, and its executive director, Joan Kuriansky, had this to say on the introduction of the **Measuring American Poverty Act** into the House of Representatives by Rep. James McDermott (D-WA).

*"Representative McDermott's proposal is one whose time has come. It not only calls for using current data, but also includes food, clothing, shelter, and other necessities in its calculations. The present Federal Poverty Level is based only on the cost of food, which is completely unrealistic,"* said **Kuriansky**. *"Most important, the calculation proposed in the bill also allows for geographic differences in the cost of living. This is something that my organization has been supporting for years on behalf of families through the **Family Economic Self-Sufficiency Project** and more recently, on behalf of older Americans through the **Elder Economic Security Initiative**."*

The Act updates the current measure of U.S. poverty, which is based on a formula designed in the 1960s and antiquated data from the 1950s. For years, elected officials have been reluctant to update the official measure of poverty for fear that new data would give the appearance that the number of impoverished Americans had increased during their terms of office. **Now there is evidence of a trend in the opposite direction.**

For instance, in the past few years cities from Chicago, to Los Angeles to Santa Fe have passed ordinances providing guidance on wage standards during a time when the federal government avoided updating the national minimum wage. This past May, Gov. Ted Strickland of Ohio convened a Poverty Summit in Columbus, the state capital. On July 14, New York City's Mayor Bloomberg announced his intention to update the poverty level for that city.

During tough economic times such as those now being experienced in the U.S., people over 65, many of whom rely entirely on Social Security, have an especially hard time making ends meet. That is the primary reason Wider Opportunities for Women developed the Elder Economic Security Initiative, a multi-year advocacy project to promote the economic well-being of elders. The cornerstone of this nationwide initiative is the Elder Economic Security Standard™ Index (the Index) created by WOW in conjunction with the Gerontology Institute of the University of Massachusetts Boston. The Index gives a realistic, geographically based measure of income adequacy, which can be adjusted to reflect the needs of specific living situations.

Based on reliable public data sources, the Index is a tool that quantifies the actual costs of basic expenses for older adults. It measures how much income a senior requires to adequately meet his or her basic needs, without public or private assistance. The Index shows that many older Americans still struggle to make ends meet, even though they are in the technical sense "not poor" because they live above the Federal Poverty Line.

The Index has been introduced in five states so far this year. They are California, Illinois, Massachusetts, Pennsylvania and Wisconsin. The response has been significant. For instance, the Massachusetts legislature raised the asset limit for Medicaid home and community-based services from \$2,000 to \$10,000 by illustrating the significant cost of long term care through use of that state's Index.

In the first part of 2009, Wider Opportunities for Women, in partnership with the Gerontology Institute of the University of Massachusetts, expect to release Indexes for four additional states: Connecticut, New Jersey, Michigan, and Minnesota.

*Wider Opportunities for Women (WOW) leads two national networks promoting economic security within the United States: the Family Economic Self-Sufficiency Project (FESS) focusing on the needs of low-income working families and the Elder Economic Security Initiative™ program, addressing what income seniors require to age in place. WOW works in 35 states, the District of Columbia, and at the federal level to promote programs and policies that accurately measure the income and assistance needs of families and the elderly. For more information, please visit [www.wowonline.org](http://www.wowonline.org).*

