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My view: Unlikely allies: Bipartisan support to help Utah's children

By Karen Crompton

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Utah State Capitol Building in Salt Lake City, Utah, Monday, Oct. 25, 2010. (Ravell Call, Deseret News, KSL-TV Chopper 5)

A third of Utah adults currently receiving public aid also grew up in a family that received government assistance. The reality in Utah, and across the United States, is that many children who are born poor are likely to remain so.

The good news is that, even in an era dominated by what seems like unprecedented partisan acrimony, it is possible to come together to tackle even challenges of this magnitude. Recognizing the corrosive effects of intergenerational poverty in our state, Democrats and Republicans in the Utah Legislature recently worked together to pass the Intergenerational Poverty Mitigation Act. Signed into law on March 19, 2012, this landmark policy will track intergenerational poverty in our state for the first time.

This bill is a win for Utah, but it's also a win for the country, demonstrating that efforts to defeat poverty can unite, rather than divide us.

Low-income residents in Utah are facing increasingly hard times. The overall poverty rate is 13.2 percent. The poverty rate for children is higher at 16 percent. People are making the most of key

supports — 131,000 children received Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program aid, and 189,831 people received the Earned Income Tax Credit in 2011 — but this alone is not enough to lift the most vulnerable Utahns out of poverty. To make matters worse, these economic challenges are not confined to a single generation. Persistent poverty means that parents are passing these struggles onto their children.

In light of this challenge, the Legislature, led by Republican Sen. Stuart Reid, recognized that we need accurate data to develop an effective response. The outcome of their effort, undertaken in collaboration with state-level advocates, was The Intergenerational Poverty Mitigation Act, which requires the Utah Department of Workforce Services to build and maintain a system capable of tracking intergenerational poverty in our state. In addition, the law specifies that the data must be used to locate "at-risk children and other groups, identify trends and to assist case workers, social scientists and government officials in the study and development of plans and programs to help individuals and families break the cycle of poverty."

Voices for Utah Children and other progressive groups worked with Reid on this law because we share a mutual interest in collecting accurate data on those in need. While we may disagree about some specific solutions to poverty in our state, we recognize that having quality information on which to base policy is a common aspiration among policymakers and advocates of all stripes.

This kind of data collection is especially essential in the current climate. As states struggle to provide services with limited resources, we need evidenced-based policy now more than ever. The data this law will help collect can guide Utah's policymakers as they participate in sometimes difficult conversations about solutions and generate sound thinking about how to tackle poverty.

And while this law will not solve the problem of intergenerational poverty in our state, it does keep the issue firmly on the agenda. We asked lawmakers to answer one simple question: "Is it good for kids?" as they considered this legislation. In the end, this bill was supported by every member of the Utah House and Senate present and voting in the final votes. Poverty is no longer beneath the notice of Utah's policymakers.

We also hope that this victory for Utah can act as a catalyst for a long overdue national conversation on intergenerational poverty. With all eyes on the 2012 election, we believe this law will provide advocates in other states with an example they can lift up during legislative and gubernatorial campaigns over the coming months.

Yet it's critical to remember that, although this law is a significant victory for Utah's families, it's also just the first step. As the required data begins to become available, we must go beyond simply supporting the law. Advocacy groups in particular have an important role to play in driving policymakers to use the data and develop evidence-based solutions.

Fortunately, Reid's invitation to advocates to continue working closely with him moving forward gives us hope that the law is the beginning of a conversation, not its end. Now we need people like Reid to continue to go down the path they began with this landmark law. While there may be short-term benefits to children from this new law, particularly in the fields of education and

health, the big gains for our communities and families will take additional effort. Only when we have created the conditions for the next generation to escape poverty will we know we have succeeded.

The focus on improved data is an important first step in rescuing our children from intergenerational poverty. Now we must continue to find partners in the fight against poverty, even when they appear in the least likely places.

Karen Crompton is the president and chief executive officer of Voices for Utah Children. This op-ed was originally printed in the Spotlight on Poverty (www.spotlightonpoverty.org).

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