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John Florez: Bureaucracies perpetuate poverty

By John Florez, Deseret News

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All too often, we are quick to save children from poverty by breaking up families, instead of shoring up the family's ability to care for the child. And rather than continuing the practice of simply providing information and referral to a client, there needs to be a method for the actual delivery and resolution to a person's problem which prevents the cycle of poverty. (AP Photo/Pilar Capurro)

Fighting poverty is a growth industry that perpetuates the cycle of poverty. We have created a vast network of specialized social service bureaucracies that help people based on symptoms rather than causes. It's like giving a patient an aspirin when they need surgery.

Furthermore, if the individual's problem doesn't match the agency's service, the case is closed or referred to another bureaucracy. Either way, the bureaucracy counts the contact as a service for budgetary purposes. In the meantime, the individual's problem continues to worsen until it becomes chronic and the client loses hope. And that may be the greatest disservice to an individual.

"It is exceedingly difficult to have dignity without food ... But it by no means follows that the provision of services and the supplying of material wants will yield a sense of self respect ... And this is perhaps the most serious cost of a service orientation: It neglects the poverty of the spirit in ministering to the needs of the flesh," (Cahn & Cahn, "The War on Poverty," Yale Law Journal, July 1964).

Our social service industry is based on a donor-donee relationship where the agencies' representatives decide what is good for the client and either give or deny the service, which the client must accept. Furthermore, the social service industry has become too complex, impersonal and specialized where individuals who are hurting must navigate through a gauntlet of agencies to get help with their problem. Such a relationship and experience fosters dependency and a sense of futility, the beginning of the cycle of poverty.

Sen. Stuart Reid, R-Ogden, in the last Utah legislative session, passed SB53 that established a commission to study and recommend ways to end the cycle of intergenerational poverty. The effort is timely and important. As the commission carries out its charge, it ought not to focus on the traditional solutions experts might offer — coordination, collaboration, communication, more money, non-duplication of services and more studies. Keep in mind, public bureaucracies are monopolies and people in them fight for the status quo.

The commission ought to consider the family as the unit to help. Diagnose and treat the whole person in the context of family and community, rather than the individual. All too often, we are quick to save children from poverty by breaking up families, instead of shoring up the family's ability to care for the child. And rather than continuing the practice of simply providing information and referral to a client, there needs to be a method for the actual delivery and resolution to a person's problem which prevents the cycle of poverty.

For each case, under the current network, there may be three or more professionals working with members of the same family — workforce services, human services, corrections, juvenile court, health department, schools — with different plans and administrative costs. It is confusing, wasteful and allows for manipulation by individuals. Agencies should have a policy where only one professional has responsibility for the total family, and all other agencies simply receive periodic progress eligibility reports. This would allow for one agency to coordinate the treatment effort, and be held accountable for results. Currently everyone and no one is accountable for results.

Most important, agencies should end the donor-donee relationship, and involve clients in planning and having expectations for their own success. It is only then that "poverty of the spirit" will end, dignity and hope will begin, and the cycle of poverty end.

A Utah native, John Florez has been on the staff of Sen. Orrin Hatch, served as former Utah Industrial Commissioner and filled White House appointments, including Deputy Assistant Secretary of Labor and Commission on Hispanic Education. Email him at jdflorez@comcast.net.

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