



# END CHILD POVERTY

## Reducing Child Poverty in Wisconsin

*End Child Poverty* is a collaborative initiative launched in the spring of 2014 by the Wisconsin Council of Churches, WISDOM, Citizen Action, and the Kids Forward (formerly Wisconsin Council on Children and Families) to mobilize Wisconsin's faith communities to address the growing reality of poverty in our state. Twenty-four regional forums with over 1,200 local religious leaders raised awareness about the breadth and depth of Wisconsin's poverty, looked at root causes, and gathered grassroots input on messaging, policy solutions and long-range poverty reduction goals for our state. The next phase is a broad-based interfaith public education and civic engagement effort to establish goals to significantly reduce childhood poverty and racial disparities over the next decade.

### I. Why is reducing childhood poverty an urgent priority for people of faith?

*This statement was drafted by participants in the Wisconsin Faithful Citizenship Initiative (now "End Child Poverty").*

#### Our Commitment as Faithful Citizens to Reducing Child Poverty in Wisconsin

As leaders of Wisconsin's faith communities, we commit ourselves to this goal:

**The people of Wisconsin need to set a goal of cutting childhood poverty by half in the next ten years. To guarantee greater equity, we also need to cut racial disparities in childhood poverty in half. These goals need to be accompanied by a commitment to evidence-based evaluation of progress.**

The persistence of poverty is a moral crisis that calls us to action. Poverty is not limited by race, ethnicity, or age. However, children are the poorest members of our communities, and growing up in poverty has lifelong damaging consequences. Economic disparities among racial groups in Wisconsin are greater than in the U.S. as a whole. It is therefore imperative that we work to ensure a healthy, thriving future for all our children.

Our religious teachings about loving our neighbor and seeking justice demand that we commit ourselves to reducing poverty. We hold in common the conviction that God has created all people in God's own image and for life in community. Our lives are knitted together in a network of mutual care, respect, and

responsibility. God's abundant gifts of creation are enough to meet the needs of everyone, and are meant to be enjoyed by all. Our scriptures tell us that we are to share God's special concern for the vulnerable and the marginalized. Therefore justice, inclusion and compassion for every person in need lie at the heart of individual and social morality:

*If there is among you anyone in need...do not be hard-hearted or tight-fisted toward your needy neighbor. You should rather open your hand, willingly lending enough to meet the need, whatever it may be. – Deuteronomy 15:7-8*

*[Jesus] unrolled the scroll [of the prophet Isaiah] and found the place where it was written: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." – Luke 4:17b-19*

*It is not righteousness that ye turn your faces Towards east or West; but it is righteousness . . . to spend of your substance, out of love for Him, for your kin, for orphans, for the needy, for the wayfarer, for those who ask, and for the ransom of slaves; to be steadfast in prayer, and practice regular charity; to fulfil the contracts which ye have made . . . . Such are the people of truth, the God-fearing. – Quran 2:177*

This is not only an individual responsibility. Unjust economic structures and social practices can create poverty. Thus the whole community, acting through its laws and governing authorities, is charged with ordering society so that people are not trapped in poverty. In ancient Israel, the law of Jubilee in ancient Israel was to ensure that no one would be trapped in debt, slavery or poverty forever (Leviticus 25) and caring for the poor was an essential quality of a good ruler (Ps. 72). Jewish, Christian, and Muslim societies from ancient times to today have had laws to protect vulnerable persons from economic hardship.

When we turn away from the needs of our communities out of indifference or because greed and anxiety cause us to cling to comfort and privilege, God calls us to repentance – as individuals *and* as a society. At the same time, God draws us forward with visions of relationships healed in a community of dignity, justice, and well-being for all, a world in which every child has a bright and promising future (e.g., Isaiah 58).

Realizing this vision in our state is a shared responsibility. Many in Wisconsin today are working to lift children out of poverty: parents and other caregivers, educators, congregations and faith-based programs, community centers, charities, government agencies, service providers, businesses, and social justice organizations. None, however, can solve this problem by itself. Nor can children escape poverty apart from the adults on whom they depend. Families and individuals living in poverty are not simply the passive recipients of private charity or government assistance, nor can they be expected to raise

themselves, unaided, “by their bootstraps.” Rather, as bearers of God’s image and members of our communities, their voices, their efforts, and their insights must be fully part of the common effort to overcome poverty.

The goal of reducing poverty is shared by people of many different faiths and philosophies, and we invite all people of good will to join this effort. On behalf of our religious communities, we commit ourselves to help lead constructive, inclusive, civil conversations among the people of Wisconsin. Together we can find common ground and agree on effective strategies for both public policies and community efforts.

We further commit ourselves to being part of the solution, in partnership with all persons of good will. We will follow through on these conversations, educating ourselves about poverty and racial disparities, supporting sound public policies and undertaking sustained and effective action in our communities to help cut child poverty in half within ten years.

As people of faith, we must respond now to God’s call to justice, community, and compassion. The need for action is urgent. If our children, and our state, are to realize the great promise and potential with which God has blessed us, this work must begin today.

*Signed,*

*Rev. Sarah Moore Nokes, President, Wisconsin Council of Churches*

*Rev. Willie Briscoe, President, WISDOM*

## **II. Where does Wisconsin go from here?**

***The following statement was prepared for discussion at the 2016 Faithful Citizenship Initiative forums on poverty. It describes the provisional conclusions that emerged from the previous dialogues about the nature and causes of child poverty in Wisconsin, our shared moral obligation to take action to reduce child poverty, and how we can act to reduce poverty in Wisconsin through broadly agreed-upon, evidence-based policies.***

### **End Child Poverty Campaign: Poverty Reduction Goal**

**Our Shared Goal: The faith community believes that the people of Wisconsin need to set a goal of cutting childhood poverty in half in the next ten years.**

In 2014 the Wisconsin Council of Churches, WISDOM, Citizen Action of Wisconsin, and the Wisconsin Council on Children and Families (now Kids Forward) launched a dialogue on poverty with faith-based leaders and congregants across Wisconsin. Our dialogues reached several provisional conclusions:

- (1) Deepening poverty and economic inequality is a moral crisis that calls us to action. We must confront our pretension of having a level playing field while 500,000 Wisconsin adults and 250,000 Wisconsin children live in poverty.

- (2) High and rising rates of poverty are primarily a result of broader economic and social structures, not individual moral failings. Most poor children live in working families.
- (3) There is a collective moral obligation not only to assist individuals, but to change the social and economic conditions which cause poverty and racial inequities.
- (4) It is unconscionable that children are the poorest segment of our society, and that severe inequities based on race and ethnicity continue. The long term negative impacts of childhood poverty and racial inequities create intergenerational cycles that threaten us all.
- (5) Effective solutions are more likely to be adopted and succeed if we focus on finding common ground across the ideological divide, adopt evidence-based solutions from across the political spectrum, and hold ourselves collectively accountable to measurable outcomes rather than particular policies.

### Our Shared Moral Obligation

We have all seen how a sense of moral responsibility and compassion can drive individual and group charitable efforts to alleviate the physical, psychological, and spiritual suffering which flow from poverty and racial disparities. These are praiseworthy acts that should be commended, at the same time we have the responsibility not only to treat the symptoms, but to transform the broader social and economic context that traps so many in poverty, beginning when they are children.

We also believe that it is essential that this work be done in relationship and partnership between those experiencing racial disparities and poverty and those living with abundance. People who endure poverty and racial inequities have unique understanding of the challenges they pose and have a critical vantage point for seeing and implementing solutions. Working in partnership is not only the right thing to do, it is the only way we will be successful.

### A Fresh Approach: Accountability to Outcomes not Policies

There is a growing consensus across the political spectrum that government has an important role to play if we are to take effective action to dramatically reduce poverty. Both progressives and conservatives accept that government is essential to creating a social and economic context where poverty is far less prevalent. Despite this seeming agreement, ideological divisions over policy create a standoff that blocks effective action.

The big idea that emerged from our discussions is that we should flip the script by holding ourselves and our elected leaders mutually accountable to outcomes, rather than support for any particular set of policies. Tracking progress towards our goals can become the organizing principle for our poverty and racial equity work going forward. This will put us in a position to invest more in policies that are working, abandon those that are not, and initiate new evidence-based policies in real time. This outcome-based approach makes it possible to include the private sector (corporations, charities, faith-based institutions, and foundations) as well as governments at all levels (federal, state and local) in the plan as contributing to measurable parts of the outcome. This approach can also make it possible for other policies not usually associated with anti-poverty efforts, like state and local economic development and tax policies, to be part of the plan with measurable contributions to the outcomes.

Common themes emerge from a number of poverty reduction plans that span the political spectrum, including: 1) American Enterprise Institute/ Brookings – Consensus Plan to Reduce Poverty and Restore the American Dream; 2) Community Advocates – Pathways to Ending Poverty; 3) Paul Ryan’s A Better Way: Our Vision for a Confident America; 4) the UK Child Poverty Reduction target, and others. Based on those themes, we propose that four main strategies are adopted in Wisconsin:

1. **Set child poverty reduction goals, equity goals, and timelines.**
2. **Develop accountability mechanisms:** A robust and independent tracking and evaluation capacity, trusted by all sides, which will make clear assessments of what is working, and what needs to change. (e.g. the creation of a Legislative Child Poverty Bureau)
3. **Implement multi-sector, evidence based strategies** at the scale capable of achieving the poverty reduction goal, including:
  - a. Employment and Income: help people get well-paying jobs;
  - b. High quality education: Increase public investment in underfunded stages of education, particularly in the early years;
  - c. Strengthening families: deepening relationships and building social capital.
4. **Measure progress** and adjust strategies as necessary.

The first major step of our public campaign will be a faith-led effort to inspire policymakers, elected officials, and other opinion leaders and stakeholders to publicly commit to a concrete ten year goal of cutting childhood poverty and racial disparities in half. We need to hold all components of Wisconsin society collectively responsible to achieving these goals. It is the moral, just, and economically sound action to take.

*Signed,*

*Robert Kraig, Executive Director, Citizen Action of Wisconsin Education Fund  
Rev. Scott A. Anderson, Executive Director, Wisconsin Council of Churches  
Ken Taylor, Executive Director, Kids Forward  
David Liners, State Director, WISDOM*

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## **To Endorse the Goal:**

*The people of Wisconsin need to set a goal of cutting childhood poverty in half in the next ten years. To guarantee greater equity, we also need to cut racial disparities in childhood poverty in half. These goals need to be accompanied by a commitment to evidence-based evaluation of progress.*

**Go to: [www.EndChildPovertyWI.org](http://www.EndChildPovertyWI.org)**

Or contact: Wisconsin Council of Churches,  
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608-837-3108  
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## Sponsoring Organizations

**Citizen Action of Wisconsin Education Fund** is a social and economic justice organization founded in 1983 which develops and implements long term strategies to transform the issue climate, make concrete interim advances, and open new possibilities for realizing the full promise of American life. By focusing on transformative issues that reveal the dissonance between our nation's ideals and its economic and social realities, Citizen Action WI believes average people are empowered to see their stake in the public sphere and to fully participate in their democracy. To achieve this vision, Citizen Action WI works on big picture issue that directly impact the lives of most Americans such as guaranteed access to quality affordable health care, bold action to reshape our economy to reverse economic inequality, and building a more robust form of democracy with deeper civic participation.

**Wisconsin Council of Churches (WCC)** is a community of 18 Christian denominations that covenant to engage in a common ministry focused on peacemaking, human rights, and social, economic and environmental justice. The WCC is the largest ecumenical organization in the state. The Council was incorporated in 1947 and now encompasses approximately 2,000 congregations and over one million church members statewide. The Council's network of individuals and congregations reaches every corner of the state. Recent civic education and advocacy initiatives have focused on creation care, civil conversation in the public square, immigration reform, racial equity, poverty, and food security.

**Kids Forward (formerly Wisconsin Council on Children and Families)** works to ensure that every child in Wisconsin grows up in a just and nurturing family and community. The Wisconsin Council on Children and Families was established in 1881 as the Wisconsin Conference on Charities and Corrections. For well over a century, the organization has focused on improving conditions for families and children through policy change, expanded public investments and public education that lead to improvements in outcomes and practices in the delivery of health care, education, workforce development and social services. The Council is a multi-issue child and family advocacy organization, providing research, policy analysis, public education, engagement and advocacy that lead to improved outcomes for children in the areas of health, education, juvenile justice, child welfare, economic security, and racial equity .

**WISDOM** is an interfaith organization comprised of twelve local organizations around Wisconsin (Milwaukee, Racine, Kenosha, Beloit/Janesville, Fox Valley, Manitowoc, Waukesha County, Green Bay, Madison, La Crosse, Eau Claire and Wausau). WISDOM members come from 19 different religious denominations. We work together to give voice to our shared values and to promote the common good, including matters of racial and economic justice. WISDOM's local organizations work on issues of concern to their community. As a statewide collective, WISDOM is dedicated to work on Criminal Justice Reform and ending mass incarceration, transit availability for all, and the Civil Rights of immigrants.