

How to Help Vt. Families in Need?

WCAX TV – April 6, 2009 – Kristin Carlson



Edna Fairbanks Williams

"My first husband left me with five kids," said Edna Fairbanks Williams of Hubbardton. Fairbanks Williams knows what it's like to live in poverty. "I wouldn't call it for me stressful because I was very strong-minded person," she said.

She turned things around and now her mission is to help the poor. So Williams attended the governor's summit on poverty and economic stability.



"We've structured this summit not to focus on the problems of poverty but the solutions," said Gov. Jim Douglas, R-Vermont.

About 10 percent of Vermont families are living in poverty. For a single parent with two kids, that means they're making \$18,000 a year.



Gov. Jim Douglas

State officials say there can be disincentives to work, as some state and federal benefit programs decrease dramatically with any slight pay increase. So a family could actually do better working less. Changing the system is one goal.

"This is a difficult economic time to be talking about any of this; part of it is about restructuring, part of it is about maximizing federal resources and part of it is long term there could be areas where we should make investments," said Steve Dale, the commissioner of the Dept. for Children & Families.



"We're bringing the resource to our employees," said Elizabeth Madigan of Fletcher Allen Health Care.



Steve Dale

Employers also brought new ideas. Fletcher Allen Health Care has a 40 percent turnover rate for new employees, as many are fired for being late or not showing up. Fletcher Allen looked into why and found many low wage earners were dealing with problems with child care and housing. So a United Way worker now comes in to help employees access services. Three other businesses are taking a similar approach and have all seen improvement with attendance, morale and productivity.

"As an employer there is certainly the return to not spend the money training, hiring and being able to have a stable workforce and a sustainable community,"

Madigan said.

After the summit the group will put together recommendations for the governor and Legislature to address poverty, but Edna Fairbanks Williams says the approach can also be simple. "Look around you and see what you can do to help," she said.

Statehouse summit seeks way to gain jobs

By Peter Hirschfeld Vermont Press Bureau - Published: April 7, 2009

MONTPELIER – Public investments in private-sector economic development offer the surest long-term path to prosperity for the approximately 60,000 Vermonters living in poverty, Gov. James Douglas said during a Statehouse summit Monday morning.

More than 100 people representing businesses, nonprofits and state government convened in the House chamber for the "Vermont Governor's Summit: Pathways to Economic Stability." In a half-hour introductory address, Douglas said state government ought to fund programs ensuring food, clothing and housing for the state's most vulnerable residents. However those efforts will ultimately be in vain, according to Douglas, if Vermonters working to escape poverty are unable to find good jobs.

"We need to ensure that our safety net includes economic development," Douglas said.

He said a recent proposal to use federal stimulus money for targeted economic-development initiatives is a good step. "We need to be sure we do all we can to create new employment opportunities," Douglas said. "That's the surest path to economic stability."

But Rep. Anne Pugh, chairwoman of the House Committee on Human Services, said that Douglas' focus on "upper-middle class" business ventures consumes resources that would otherwise fund vital services for low-income Vermonters.

"I heard the governor talk today about the importance of continuing economic supports," said Pugh, who co-chairs the Vermont Child Poverty Council. "I think we differ on the means."

She said differences between Douglas' budget proposal and the version approved last week by the Vermont House spotlight the competing ideologies. Douglas' budget, according to Pugh, eliminated some earned income tax credits and cut funding for "micro-business" ventures intended to help struggling Vermonters launch small-scale entrepreneurial ventures.

"I think when the governor speaks about economic development, he's talking about business incentives for upper-middle class Vermonters, and for traditional business enterprises," Pugh said. said.

Pugh argued those priorities are misguided. "He balanced the budget on the backs of the poor," she said.

Vermont Secretary of Human Services Rob Hofmann said both sides have valid arguments, and that differing schools of thought can work together to achieve the same desired end.

Statehouse summit seeks way to gain jobs (cont...)

"People of good will are going to have very different ways of how they approach this," Hofmann said. "Some people think benefits are not generous enough to blunt the conditions they're in, and therefore we need to do more direct assistance. Other people will think ... that the main way Americans over the years have gotten out of poverty is through employment, and we need to make the state more affordable and more hospitable to employers. I think both camps have a valid point."

The summit, one of 12 nationwide funded by the National Governors Association, asked a spectrum of Vermont leaders to craft new solutions to the economic problems facing poor Vermonters.

So-called "benefit cliffs," many experts said, comprise the single-largest impediment for low-income residents. As impoverished Vermonters find jobs and climb pay scales, they no longer qualify for the government resources propping up their household finances.

"We've come to find out that one step forward is two steps back, because of lost benefits," said Sen. Doug Racine, a Chittenden County Democrat and co-chairman of the Child Poverty Council. "That's a perverse disincentive to work, a perverse disincentive to folks getting ahead."

The Douglas Administration, according to Hofmann, has worked to alleviate some of those cliffs. He pointed to eligibility expansion in areas such as fuel assistance, food stamps and childcare. But Hofmann said significant challenges remain.

"There are people right now who actually may be worse off financially if they accept a promotion or get a raise," Hofmann said.

Finding the revenue necessary to eliminate those barriers, Hofmann said, is a difficult balancing act.

"We want to make sure that in finding a remedy we don't take steps that make this state less hospitable to the employers who can give people the best chance of emerging from poverty," Hofmann said.

Vermont Searches for Solutions to Poverty

Fox 44 News – April 6, 2009

Vermont leaders hope an innovative approach will help fight poverty across the state. On Monday, more than 100 people took part in a governor's summit on poverty. The goal is to find short term and long term solutions to a problem which affects about 10% of the state's population.

The one day summit brought together a unique collection of state and business leaders, and people from non-profit agencies.

"One state agency can't solve the problem, one county can't solve the problem, it requires multi-faceted approaches to address this insidious problem," said Vermont Agency of Human Services Secretary Rob Hofmann.

Organizers say solutions include increasing job opportunities for low income families, and to relax standards on state assistance.

Vermont: Summit on Poverty Addresses Working Poor

("Faces in poverty in Addison County," Addison Independent News, March 14, 2005)

Misty Davidson, Tiffany Zappulla and Kari Aube live and work in Middlebury, but can't make ends meet. They spoke about their lives at a recent summit on poverty in Middlebury. "It means not having enough money for diapers or even food," said Aube. The women are faces of the working poor -- people who work 40 hours a week but still do not have enough money to support their families. Workers need to earn \$13.70 per hour to be able to cover their basic expenses, but most are not making more than \$8 to \$10 per hour, according to Rep. Bernie Sanders, I-Vt. "We are not a poor country," Sanders said. "While poverty is going up, the wealthiest people in the country never had it so good," as the gap between rich and poor has grown larger.