

Many Problems Face the Poor, Task Force Told

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The problem is homelessness. The problem is education. The problem is too few programs for ex-offenders.

The problem is there are no community-based lending institutions. There's not enough money, and not enough awareness of the social services that are available. There is no transportation for the working poor to get to better-paying jobs.

Maybe it is all of those things, and more. And maybe, as homeless veterans advocate Dorella Winston told the 50 social activists, clergy, homeless and public officials who attended the Virginia Poverty Reduction Task Force meeting in Richmond yesterday:

"People don't care. That's the biggest problem we have here in Richmond, Virginia."

The conversation on how to reduce poverty in Virginia expanded across the state yesterday, as the task force commissioned by Gov. Timothy M. Kaine held public meetings at two dozen community college campuses and Richmond's City Hall.

The aim was to listen, and come up with a list of ideas on ways to overcome poverty in the specific localities hosting the meetings.

Statewide, the challenges are formidable.

According to the Virginia Department of Social Services, nearly one of every 10 Virginians lives below the federal poverty line of \$10,210 for an individual and \$20,650 for a family of four. While the statewide poverty rate is among the 10 lowest in the nation, the state has historically been among the stingiest with its benefits.

One in four out-of-work Virginians don't qualify for unemployment benefits, and only four states provide fewer benefits, according to a DSS video shown at the meetings.

Only three states spend less per capita on Medicaid benefits, and only six states have higher thresholds to qualify for benefits. And taking into account sales and excise taxes, Virginia's working poor pay more in tax as a percentage of their income than its wealthy.

Judging from the comments in Richmond, the task force will have plenty with which to work.

"We have vacant housing, vacant buildings that are not being used that could be rehabilitated," said homeless advocate Cora Hayes.

Harry Bradley proposed a diesel mechanic training program for ex-convicts and a charter school focusing on work-force training.

"We really need to address how we are handling ex-offenders," said Gregory Davenport, adding that the few agencies that really help seem like they are "hidden" to those who need them the most.

Don Cowles proposed focusing investment in community schools that would embrace the entire neighborhood by offering extended hours, social services and parenting education. Cowles is a board member for the United Way of Greater Richmond and Petersburg.

"We're missing real financial tools," said Christina Cain of the nonprofit organization New Visions New Ventures. She proposed establishing community-development credit unions to build wealth.

A number of local officials attended the morning conversation, including Del. Jennifer L. McClellan, D-Richmond, and City Council members Ellen F. Robertson and E. Martin Jewell.

Kaine has asked the task force to provide a preliminary report to him later this year as he wrestles with decisions in crafting the 2011-12 budget before he leaves office.

"We have great expectations every time we do something like this," said Richmond attorney Robert J. Grey Jr., co-chairman of the Virginia Poverty Reduction Task Force, calling the problem a "multifaceted, multidimensional, multigenerational issue."

The challenge, Grey said, is prioritizing the resources and solutions available, and "and with that, seeing what we can do to make a difference."