

Make Poverty an Issue This Election Year

ByCarolynn Race

August 30: On August 26th, the U.S. Census Bureau reported that, in 2003, 35.9 million people were living in poverty and 45 million people lacked health insurance coverage.

In 2003 alone, 1.3 million more people fell below the poverty line, the majority of whom (733,000) are children. Now 17.6 percent of children in the United States-nearly one in five-are living in poverty. Of the 35.9 million people living in poverty, 15.3 million are living in deep poverty - with cash incomes below half of the poverty line. Forty-three percent of all people living in poverty now have incomes this low, the highest share on record.

In 2003, 1.4 million more people entered the ranks of the uninsured, with a record number (45 million) now uninsured. Because of increased participation in Medicaid and the State Children's Health Insurance Program, the proportion of children without health insurance coverage remained constant at 11.4 percent. Were it not for those public programs, levels of uninsured children would have increased, as employer-based health care coverage declined in 2003.

In this election year, contact your Members of Congress, the Administration, and candidates for office. Senators and Representatives normally read the newspaper from their district to keep tabs on issues of concern to their constituents.

Write a letter to the editor of your local newspaper to remind your elected officials of your concern regarding an increase in poverty and the ranks of the uninsured.

Through the Presbyterian Legislative Action Center, you can e-mail a letter directly to your local newspaper. Use the sample letter provided as a guide for your letter and include personal examples of the issue of poverty in your community. For more information about how to write a letter to the editor, go to the Letter to the Editor section of How To Be an Effective Advocate, at <http://www.pcusa.org/washington/christiancitizen/effectiveadvocate.pdf>.

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Sample Letter:
To the Editor:

As the U.S. Census Bureau pointed out in August, there are now almost 36 million people living in poverty and 45 million without health insurance.

In 2003 alone, 1.3 million more people fell below the poverty line, the majority of whom (733,000) are children. Now 17.6 percent of children in the United States-nearly one in five-are living in poverty. Of the 35.9 million people living in poverty, 15.3 million are living in deep poverty - with cash incomes below half of the poverty line.

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As a Presbyterian, I am writing to urge Members of Congress, other elected officials, and others running for elected office to respond to the needs of people living in or near poverty. A past General Assembly of our denomination called on congressional representatives to insist on a government that follows ethical values of justice for the poor, welfare for children, hospitality to the stranger, and assistance to the disadvantaged.

I urge my elected officials to lift up a vision of justice for these issues this year. To me, such a vision would allow everyone to have the tools to meet their basic needs regardless of income, geography, citizenship, or other condition. Basic needs include access to nutritious food, comprehensive and affordable health care, high quality education at every state of life, and accessible and affordable housing. A vision of justice would allow the opportunity for everyone to work, be compensated fairly, earn enough to meet their basic needs, and be treated with dignity. In this vision, families will be given respect and support for their care-giving responsibilities and will have access to child care and improved family and sick leave policies.

As candidates for office continue their campaigns, I urge them to remember this vision and respond to the needs of the tens of millions living in and near poverty. We have a collective responsibility to care for one another.