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Rising to the COVID-19 Challenge Together

Tracy Najera

Marion Wright Edelman, the founder of Children’s Defense Fund, once said that, “Service is the rent we pay for being.” I think about this statement often in my role as the executive director of Children’s Defense Fund–Ohio. What is the “rent” that we are paying, and are we living this commitment? I don’t refer to what we are required to do per rules or laws, but rather what standards we hold ourselves to as moral and decent human beings. I believe that the “rent” stems from fundamental beliefs about right and wrong and that all people are deserving of basic human decency. How we each decide what that “rent” actually manifests in terms of our actions and behaviors can be very particular to our role, resources, circumstances, etc. As a society, our “rent” is measured in how we treat those most vulnerable among us. In my life, my “rent” is service to our children—especially our children living in poverty and who have the odds stacked against them beginning at birth.

Ohio is no exception in terms of challenges facing our children. In 2019, according to the CDF–Ohio’s annual reporting on child well-being, Ohio’s 2.6 million children face challenges on a myriad of fronts:¹

- 53.8% of children are enrolled in Medicaid (2018)
- 32.1% of children receiving SNAP/Food Stamps (2018)
- 6.9% of eligible children are enrolled in publicly funded child-care (2018)
- 8.5% of babies born are low birth weight (2018)
- 10.5 per 1,000 children are in custody of the state through foster care (2018)

Ohio has experienced a steady decrease in child poverty rates over the past several years, with nearly one in five children living in poverty today.² Though encouraging news, we believe that no child should live in poverty, and we must continue efforts to create a just economy where all families are economically stable.

Before this public health crisis grew into a global pandemic, Ohio’s health and human services systems were already under scrutiny. Though a

leader in terms of expanding healthcare for many adults through Medicaid expansion, Ohio experienced a number of setbacks, beginning with criticism for its overly burdensome processes for ensuring coverage for children and families. Furthermore, Ohio experienced spikes in the past two years of child uninsured rates and specifically declines in the Medicaid/CHIP (Children Health Insurance Program).³ This in itself is not necessarily bad news, especially if children are being transitioned to private health coverage, but data indicate that this may not be the case. In fact, many children simply do not have health coverage at all. Research has shown that children's health is fundamental to their well-being. Lack of health insurance coverage puts children, especially children living in poverty and near poverty, at risk of not having their health needs met.

Lack of health insurance will put children at risk. State leaders from the Ohio General Assembly, such as Rep. Allison Russo and Sen. Peggy Lehner, have shown significant leadership in elevating this issue by publicly calling for action.⁴ The DeWine Administration and the Ohio Department of Medicaid responded to ensure children receive the health coverage they need. Similarly, Governor DeWine and the director of Ohio Department of Medicaid, Maureen Corcoran, are also working tirelessly to tackle this issue—acknowledging that good health care is fundamental to so many positive life outcomes.⁵

Times of crisis and national emergency pose unique challenges to our society and our leaders and reveal the best and worst of humanity. It is also during these periods of upheaval and uncertainty when our most vulnerable suffer the most. The COVID-19 pandemic is one of the most significant public health crises in our lifetime and potentially of the last century. It will take not only significant policy changes, but also leadership to enact and implement measures that meet our current crisis. The lessons earned from this public health emergency will better prepare Ohio for the next crisis—whether that be pandemic, environmental, or economic in nature. The pandemic has also uncovered the many shortcomings of our nation's ability to meet the basic needs of our most vulnerable—especially our children.

During national tragedies and crisis, those who lack resources are often times the most affected. For instance, those individuals who lack an income to sustain themselves and their families suffer from lack of housing, food insecurity, and the lack of basic social capital to advocate and secure their needs. A recently published article coauthored by Darrick Hamilton, the executive director of the Kirwan Institute for the Study of Race and Ethnicity,

and Danyelle Solomon, from the Center for American Progress, argues that the racial wealth gap exacerbates the effects of this pandemic in numerous ways.⁶ We must be vigilant in the days and weeks to come to ensure that disparities in health coverage, access to treatment, nutrition, housing, and other basic human needs do not put our families and children in jeopardy.

What is to be done? As a nation and as a state, we must put the needs of our poor and our most vulnerable ahead of individual self-interest. The critical question facing us today is, “What is our responsibility to each other?” We must rise to the challenge and make sure that we emerge from this crisis united. To accomplish this, what is the “rent” we are willing to pay? It must reflect the hope and optimism we have for our future.

Notes

1. Children’s Defense Fund-Ohio. KIDS COUNT Ohio and County Profiles, <https://www.cdfohio.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/6/2019/07/Ohio2019.pdf>.
2. Ibid.
3. Hancock, L. “Number of Uninsured Ohio Kids Increases by 28 Percent—7th Highest Jump in US,” *Plain Dealer*, October 30, 2019, <https://www.cleveland.com/open/2019/10/number-of-uninsured-ohio-kids-increases-by-28-percent-7th-highest-jump-in-us.html>.
4. Paxson, A. Children’s Defense Fund-Ohio. “Covering All Children is an Investment in Ohio’s Future,” March 3, 2020, https://cdfohio.org/cdf_oh_blog/covering-all-children-is-an-investment-in-ohios-future/.
5. US News & World Report, “Number of Children Without Health Insurance Grows,” January 20, 2020, <https://www.usnews.com/news/best-states/ohio/articles/2020-01-07/report-thousands-of-ohio-children-lost-health-insurance>.
6. Solomon, D. and Hamilton, D. Center for American Progress. “The Coronavirus Pandemic and the Racial Wealth Gap,” March 19, 2020, <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/race/news/2020/03/19/481962/coronavirus-pandemic-racial-wealth-gap/>.