

What Would It Take To Seriously Reduce Poverty Series Ends With The Final Community Issues Forums Of The 2015-2016 Season

The Community Issues Forum ended its 2015-2016 season with the final two forums of the "What Would It Take To Seriously Reduce Poverty" series. The Peaslee Neighborhood Center hosted the May 5th Forum where attendees heard how Over-the-Rhine residents organized an effort to save a basketball court and green space from elimination by a new development of expensive, upscale housing. The final Forum on May 19th featured small group discussions of initiatives that could really make a difference in reducing Cincinnati's high poverty rate.

The first five forums in this series dealt with systemic ways of reducing poverty, while the Peaslee Neighborhood Center session focused on how people at the grassroots level can organize to take on developments that threaten their quality of life. The lives of residents living in low income neighborhoods and neighborhoods in transition are often disrupted by commercial and housing projects that ignore their needs, and organizing citizens to either shape or oppose these developments is often an effective process for providing the powerless with the necessary clout to protect their rights.

Jennifer Summers and Jennifer Arens of the Peaslee Neighborhood Center led a panel that described the background of the current grassroots initiative to save the public land across the street from Rothenberg Elementary

School. The property, 76,000-square feet of City owned land, houses basketball courts, a community garden, and green space. "The Save the Courts" movement was launched over a year ago when residents heard about the proposed project that would eliminate this community space. A developer, NorthPointe Group, sought to use this land to build four single family houses costing \$500,000 a piece. The initial deal was for the City to sell the property, now under the auspices of the Recreation Department, to the NorthPointe Group for one dollar (and with a long period of tax abatement thrown in). This high end project would take away the recreation area of residents who live below or just above the poverty line.

News of the project triggered a series of community meetings, cookouts, rallies, demonstrations, and one presentation at a City Council committee meeting. Young people, their parents, OTR-residents and activists organized and took part in these events. Attendees at the Forum watched a video produced for "Save the Courts" that featured the art work and writing of neighborhood children who are involved in this effort.

Although Forum attendees were heartened by the tenacity and pluck of the Save the Courts initiative, they were also told that victory or even some type compromise is far from assured. This grassroots movement needs support from other concerned groups and citizens in Cincinnati. Forum panelists invited the audience to join them in what Jennifer Arens describes as "one small fight against the crushing

feeling that poor folks have to lose in order for economic wealth to be invested in their communities."

Views on How to Reduce Poverty

The wrap up Forum on May 19th began with several of the previous speakers highlighting their views about reducing poverty.

1. Affordable Housing

Elizabeth Brown, former Executive Director of HOME, stressed the loss of affordable housing units and the necessity to both increase such housing and rent assistance programs. Agreeing with Brown that adequate affordable housing is essential for reducing poverty, Josh Spring of the Homeless Coalition also emphasized the need to promote a minimum wage that comes close to being a "living wage" for all workers. He noted that so many people who go to work every day are still living in poverty.

2. "The Save the Courts" initiative

Citing "The Save the Courts" initiative, Jennifer Arens pointed to the need for citizens to support low income people when they organize to preserve or improve the quality of life in their neighborhoods.

3. Child Poverty Collaborative

Finally, Ross Meyer of the United Way urged Forum attendees to come up with some recommendations to present to the Child Poverty Collaborative that is currently

looking for the best approaches for making a significant dent in Cincinnati's high child poverty rate.

These brief presentations were then followed by small group sessions to brainstorm some specific recommendations.

Recommendations from small group discussions

1. **Affordable housing** emerged as a priority for all four small groups. Both increasing the supply of units and providing more rental assistance such as housing vouchers were promoted. At the local level, inclusionary zoning that includes a mandatory percentage of affordable housing in large developments was recommended.
2. **Livable wage** A second priority that was touted by three of the four groups was pushing for a livable wage for low-income workers. A start, said one group, would be lobbying at the local level for a higher minimum wage. Promoting more jobs connected to adequate training was another recommendation.
3. **Racism** Addressing existing racism as a cause of poverty was brought up by two of the groups, and one group focused on the incarceration of young Black males as a major factor causing economic hardship for many African-American families.

4. **Preschool Promise** Two groups advocated for quality preschool programs that would be free and available to all children of low-income families, while support for the "Preschool Promise" initiative was voiced by one group.

Beyond specific recommendations, two groups focused on changing public attitudes. Not only do people need to be educated to see the real causes of poverty, but they need to be prepared to support public programs and needed tax increases to pay for safety net services. In fact, one group clearly stated: "we need to create the community will to change the inequities in our society."