

## Breaking the Cycle of Poverty

by Tiziana C. Dearing, CEO, Boston Rising

Statistics about poverty in the United States are alarming. And given the recent history of intergenerational progress among the poor, foundations and philanthropists alike should be asking, "Where's the impact?" For fifty years, we've been investing in anti-poverty programs and initiatives. To what end? If we want to break the cycle of poverty, maybe it's time to re-think our investments.



This year, **Boston Rising** is launching with \$15 million in seed money and a 100 percent focus on breaking intergenerational poverty in the Boston area. Having spent significant time considering the impact question and researching groundbreaking models with the greatest potential to move the needle, we have come to a conclusion. To break the intergenerational poverty cycle, we must invest in **individual choice and control**.

According to *The New York Times*, more people between the ages of 18 and 64 lived in poverty in 2009 than in any year since 1959. Underscoring the crisis, the Urban Institute notes that "Being poor at birth is a strong predictor of future poverty status. Thirty-one percent of white children and 69 percent of black children who are poor at birth go on to spend at least half their childhoods living in poverty." Moreover, a childhood spent in poverty significantly raises one's odds for poor outcomes as an adult.

Our collective idea of America includes the notion that it is a meritocracy. We tend to believe that our free-market system rewards those who help themselves, and that those who are willing to "pull themselves up by the bootstraps" can and will "get ahead." This idea is accompanied by a pervasive cultural conviction that the poor are neither interested in nor willing to change their circumstances. (The top Google search result for "generational poverty" is a Wikipedia quote: "One aspect of generational poverty is a learned helplessness that is passed from parents to children and on down the line.") The data belie both ideas. Our meritocracy is broken. The poor want to, can, and typically do work incredibly hard, but our systems don't give them the freedom to access or leverage the capacity, capital, and social connections the middle class take for granted. Some of the most interesting anti-poverty models in America today are changing that by putting resources, choice, and control directly in the poor's hands.

Consider **Lawrence Community Works** (LCW) in Lawrence, Massachusetts. LCW is a place-based nonprofit organization that supports and is thriving in one of the poorest communities in the state. LCW describes what it does as "building family and community assets" and "providing others with caring and mutual support." Its **Neighbor Circles** model, widely copied around the Commonwealth, provides resources to families that self-organize a series of dinners as a way of building social capital and providing a forum for neighborhood participants to discover and act on common interests and concerns. In Lawrence alone, the program has led to forty community improvement projects driven entirely by residents.

For a national example, consider the **Family Independence Initiative** (FII), whose leader and founder, Maurice Lim Miller, was appointed in December 2010 to President Obama's Council for Community Solutions. Miller launched FII in California after twenty years of toiling in the poverty industry. FII bases its model on the idea that "most low-income families are capable of taking tangible steps toward establishing control and choice in their lives." As the organization's Web site notes, "The common thread is that people turn to family and friends, pool resources, and follow the example of those in their inner circle who have begun to succeed."

The results? In 2007, FII's initial cohort in San Francisco saw a 20 percent improvement in income and a 70 percent improvement in their kids' grades in just fifteen months. Indeed, the success of these sixteen families led two hundred other families in the area to express interest in the program. Today, FII is active in three states and is helping to shape national policy vis-a-vis support for poor communities.

Both of these models, as well as interesting initiatives in Tulsa, Pittsburgh, and other communities, turn the usual assumptions on their head. All start with the idea that the poor, when given opportunities to create and engage with meaningful social networks, can and do work hard, will build and leverage assets, and will do more than anyone or anything to change their own circumstances. It is an approach that invests in and expands both connection-building and individuals', families' and communities' own resources, rather than one-size-fits-all top-down prescriptions.

We at Boston Rising strongly believe in and have begun to invest in this approach. Our goal is to create a new relationship between philanthropy and poverty by pairing this empowering investment approach with new forms of Internet-based giving and activism that also increase *donors'* choice and control. Indeed, we believe the combination of these two ideas can and will help direct philanthropy toward lower-cost, scalable poverty-fighting models that truly leverage the power and potential of the poor themselves.

We believe we have arrived at a crossroads in the fight against poverty, and we hope others, over time, will join us.

*Tiziana Dearing is CEO of **Boston Rising**, a startup fund and grantmaking organization that supports individuals, families, and communities as they chart their own paths out of poverty.*