

# POINT OF VIEW

## The Time to Fight Poverty is Now!

It is hard to recall a time when the economically vulnerable appeared to be so close to the financial precipice. As CEO of the largest Jewish human-service philanthropy in our country, charting these turbulent economic waters requires enormous commitment and creativity from our senior volunteer and professional leaders. As we approach the Jewish High Holidays, a period of reflecting on where we are in relationship to where we want to be both individually and communally, these tumultuous economic times present new challenges.

After an unprecedented period of economic growth — which did not slow the growth of poverty in New York — we are beginning to see the impact of the present economic slowdown. With daily reports of increasing costs for energy, food, health care, and housing, the impact on those who were already encountering severe day-to-day economic challenges is

evident. At the same time, the United States Bureau of Labor Statistics reported in July that both unemployment and underemployment — a situation in which people would prefer to work but cannot find full-time employment — have increased.

As but one example, increasing housing and energy costs are creating dramatic pressures. The median rent burden — the proportion of income dedicated to rent — faced by the poor and near poor is now approaching the 50 percent mark, well beyond the federal affordability threshold of 30 percent. With a growing gap in its budget, the New York City Housing Authority announced a rent increase for some tenants, with the possibility of further rent increases later this year. Likewise, increased energy costs are likely to make the cost of heating beyond the reach of a growing number of New Yorkers. One of our agencies anticipates a 25 percent increase in energy costs this winter.

At UJA-Federation, we have also long been concerned about the vulnerability of the “working poor,” or those who do not earn enough to afford living in our city. Mayor Michael Bloomberg brilliantly elevated this issue to national prominence by calling for the federal government to adjust its poverty measure to reflect the realities of the contemporary working poor. His proposed definition of poverty is an income of \$12,114 or less for a single adult and \$26,138 or less for a family of four. Under Mayor Bloomberg’s metric, the city’s poverty rate is at 23 percent, compared with 18.9 percent as defined by the federal rate, representing significantly more individuals who should be eligible for such entitlement programs as Medicaid, food stamps, and Head Start for children, which they do not currently receive.

UJA-Federation’s experience is that the poor and vulnerable need a safety net

of services now more than ever. As one measure of the need, 1.3 million New Yorkers live in households lacking an adequate supply of food. For the poor within the traditionally religious Jewish community, the higher costs of kosher food exacerbates this problem. One of our agencies responsible for a number of food pantries is reporting a shortfall of almost half a million dollars this year. We are closely monitoring the extent to which UJA-Federation’s affiliated agencies, such as the Hebrew Free Loan Society, the Metropolitan Council on Jewish Poverty, and others, are receiving additional calls for cash assistance from Jewish and non-Jewish clients struggling to pay their rent and put food on their plates. Unfortunately, the working poor aren’t eligible for many entitlement programs, or aware of their eligibility if they slide below the poverty scale, placing them at greater risk.

It seems likely that as revenues decrease, government services will ultimately fall short of serving the need we all see in New York. Federal funding for affordable housing and social services has in fact decreased in real dollar terms. Governor David Paterson has already indicated that the current state budget needs to be cut by as much as a billion dollars in order to meet lower revenues. Since New York City’s economy is disproportionately dependent on the financial and real estate sectors, our local budget is naturally hard-hit, as evidenced by the 2008–2009 cuts to a number of programs, ranging from literacy and legal services for immigrants to case assistance for the frail and isolated elderly. The city’s cut to community services may be at \$42 million and possibly as high as \$75 million if the public-housing shortfall is not fixed. For people living in poverty, this results in more economic insecurity.

The need is compelling for government and philanthropy to closely collaborate and leverage resources to ensure that no one falls between the cracks. As we cooperate, service providers must bring their ground-level experience to inform and shape public policy, and government must meet its obligation to ensure a broad enough safety net even when finances are strained.

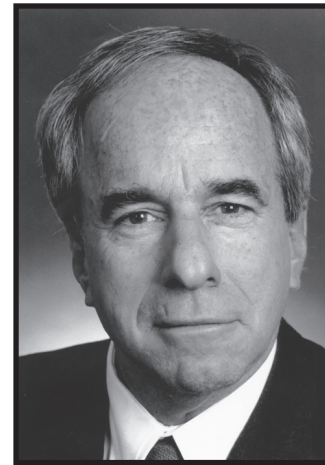
As we address the fundamentals, we must continue to invest in the future. While such basic needs as housing, food, and medical assistance must be met, we must also make hard choices to continue the down payment to help our youth obtain education and vocational skills, to improve opportunities for all New Yorkers to gain jobs and promotions, and to help integrate those with disabilities. It is essential that despite economic challenges we continue to invest in services that help people rise out of the cycle of poverty and help those with developmental challenges integrate into the broader community, or we will simply face

escalating problems in the future.

UJA-Federation continues to invest in our health and human-service agencies and help them maintain core services and quality. We provide those resources that government does not, such as unrestricted operating funds and technical assistance to strengthen their services. We strive to fill in the gaps left by government during a time of constrained resources ranging from food distribution and case assistance to helping those with developmental disabilities. But, as the need increases, philanthropy cannot fill all gaps.

We complement our philanthropy with advocacy, bringing the attention of policy makers to the needs of vulnerable populations. To this end, UJA-Federation is taking part in a national interfaith project, led by the Jewish Council for Public Affairs and Catholic Charities USA, to elevate the issue of poverty in the 2008 elections. As its centerpiece, *Fighting Poverty With Faith: A Week Of Action* will take place September 10 to September 16, 2008, in the days approaching the Jewish holidays and concurrent with Ramadan, when both the Jewish and Muslim communities are acutely aware of their obligations toward the needy.

Across the country, faith-based organizations are coordinating actions to focus local, state, and national candidates and elected officials on how to address poverty in their first 100 days in office. Together, our goal is to show elected officials that we are both mobilized to hold them accountable and commit-



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ted to helping them address poverty through a citizen-driven movement. The tools to support all efforts, large and small, can be found at [www.fightingpovertywithfaith.com](http://www.fightingpovertywithfaith.com).

I hope my colleagues throughout the nonprofit community will join this effort in any way they can. *New York Nonprofit Press* ([www.nynp.biz](http://www.nynp.biz)) is participating by hosting a calendar of events around this antipoverty week. We should all be taking steps throughout the year to draw the government’s attention to the critical issue of poverty. The present challenges require no less.

*John Ruskey is Executive Vice President and CEO of the UJA-Federation of New York, Inc.*

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