

## **The Juggling Act: First in a Series of Articles**

*By Peggy Morrison-Curtis*

A thorough understanding of the barriers facing Alexandria's children and their parents is the foundation for creating strategies to help them overcome those obstacles. Our goal for this article is to share information about poverty in Alexandria, especially the challenges preventing working poor parents from meeting the needs of their children.

Future articles in the series will focus on other important issues, such as mental health, and in each issue-specific article, we will aim to identify the scope of a problem in Alexandria, describe existing programs and responses, and highlight unmet needs.

Poverty, like many issues, is one about which people have very strong opinions - why people are poor and what should be done or shouldn't be done, but as we know there are no easy answers or solutions. David Shipler, Pulitzer Prize winning author and journalist, authored a seminal book on the working poor, [The Working Poor: Invisible in America](#), in which he urged his profession (and by implication all of us) to "*transcend the liberal-conservative political dispute about who's at fault and see clearly the intersecting factors of personal failure and societal failure that create the ecology of poverty.*"

Shipler went on to write "*Good coverage would also connect the dots by demonstrating the influence of one problem on another and the links among problems and policies. Such sophisticated, nuanced, and complex portrayals of poverty would enrich understanding beyond the conventional left-right debate.*" We hope that these articles on a much smaller and more humble scale, combined with the WGCA's Educational Forums and other shared learning, will help inform and invigorate our work to help Alexandria's children.

Inspiration for exploring the different issues faced by working poor families came from the experience of our varying personal juggling acts - raising children, caring for elderly parents, dealing with health challenges, managing work obligations, and more. While parallels exist, the disparities are more striking. In a crisis we have the know-how to identify solutions, the confidence and resources to pursue and secure what we need, and support systems to help us keep all our balls in air. Others do not and are confronted by additional challenges.

### ***Continuation of article:***

Poverty in Alexandria is a number. 8.8% of Alexandrians are poor. One in six children in our city live in extreme poverty, and many more are in low-income families. 54% qualify for subsidized school lunches. According to the Urban Institute, nearly one fourth of the U.S. labor force earns \$9.00 or less per hour. The 2007 Poverty Guidelines published by the U. S. Department of Health and Human Services places the poverty line for a family of four in the lower 48 states at \$20,650. However, the recommended ration to income to housing costs stipulates that no more than 30% of an individual or family's

income should be spent on housing. In Northern Virginia, rent for an average two-bedroom apartment is \$1,288, thereby requiring an income of more than \$50,000 per year.

Poverty in Alexandria is also face. Every day we encounter people whose income and other life factors makes them poor and in need of assistance -- restaurant and retail workers, maintenance workers, housekeepers, home health aides, and construction and lawn workers. Some of the working poor have moved from welfare to work recently; others have worked steadily but have been unable to move beyond severe economic hardship. One definition describes the working poor as lacking the ability to escape personal and economic contingencies. These families are often dealing with daunting histories, e.g., domestic violence, substance abuse, mental illness, serious physical illness and disabilities, job loss, language and cultural barriers, lack of education, and homelessness.

Just meeting the most basic needs for food and housing can be a tremendous challenge. Contrary to popular belief, many homeless parents work, but gentrification, which has produced spiraling prices and decreasing rental stock, has pushed basic two-bedroom apartments beyond the reach of a workers making less than \$22.83 an hour (*Washington Post, May 2005*). For this reason, affordable housing developers are aiming to develop more two, three, and four bedroom units. Those of us who helped distribute food at ALIVE's last Saturday food distribution personally experienced one aspect of how families struggle.

Such glimpses into the lives of those less fortunate are rare. It often seems that only when dramatic and shocking things happen does the plight of the working poor grab the headlines such as the five children home alone in appalling conditions while the mother worked at a health care facility or young boy who died from an infection for lack of dental care. However, two recent Washington Post stories, while not as gripping and gut wrenching, offered a sobering view into the vulnerability of the working poor. One told of how a young working couple ended up in a homeless shelter for a variety of reasons including the high cost of housing and other expenses, including medical care, and the volatility of contract work that is an increasing segment of the regional economy

The other article explored how changes in federal law have caused Virginia to shift child care subsidies to families just moving off of welfare away from low-income parents who have been working longer. The City of Alexandria did not have a waiting list for these vouchers before the law changed; now there's a waiting list of 240. These parents are left with unhappy choices, such as forgoing medical care and other necessities to pay for child care, taking additional jobs at night leaving older children to care for the younger ones, using adults unqualified to care for children or substandard child-care centers, or even quitting their jobs.

To end this piece with the juggling analogy, dropping one or more balls can be the tipping point for these parents into worse situations and even a matter of life and death. A few weeks ago, members of the Gift Committee heard the compelling story of a woman overcoming great difficulties, including depression and substance abuse. She told us that

if her children's teachers and social services agencies had not intervened she would have lost her children and quite possibly her life. She and her eldest son, who relayed how he took care of his siblings and the toll his mother's depression and substance abuse had on him, were quite moving. Once she realized the seriousness of her situation and how much she needed help, she was tenacious in getting help for herself and her children. Her story was also instructive as it gave us an indication of the enormity and intensity of the need of Alexandria's children and families for services, and in the next issue of the newsletter we will focus on mental health services, one of the most critical needs.

## **Suggested Readings and Resources**

### **Books**

David Shipler, *The Working Poor: Invisible in America*, Albert A. Knopf, New York 2004.

Jason Deparle, *American Dream: Three Women, Ten Kids, and a National's Drive to End Welfare*, Viking, New York 2004.

Barbara Ehrenreich, *Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting by in America*, Owl Books, 2002.

### **Monographs, Briefs, and Testimony**

*The Economic Costs of Poverty in the United States: Subsequent Effects of Children Growing Up Poor*, Harry Holzer, Diane Whitmore Scharzenback, Greg Duncan, and James Ludwig, Center for American Progress, 2007

[http://www.americanprogress.org/issues/2007/01/poverty\\_report.html](http://www.americanprogress.org/issues/2007/01/poverty_report.html)

Testimony of Ron Haskins before the Committee on Ways and Means, January 24, 2007  
<http://waysandmeans.house.gov/hearings.asp?formmode=printfriendly&id=5400>  
commenting on the above study

There are many excellent informational resources on the Internet about this topic, including:

The Annie E. Casey Foundation: <http://aecf.org>

The Family Strengthening Policy Center of the National Human Services Assembly  
<http://www.nassembly.org/fscp/practice/practices..html>

