



Ending poverty in Minnesota

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Prior to the official opening of the 2008 Minnesota State Legislature on February 12, there is still the hustle and bustle of committees and regular staff personnel in preparation for the sounding of the gong. One of the most active is in an obscure office located in the basement of the State House Office building.

This column begins Matthew Little's biweekly reports on the 2008 Minnesota legislative session, which will continue until the session closes.

It is the space designated as the office of the Commission to End Poverty in the state of Minnesota by the year 2020. The obscurity of the office location stands in sharp contrast to the size of its mission — eliminating poverty.

Its mission is still being referred to by some as “mission impossible”; but for the two legislators who have taken on the job of co-chairing the commission, it is totally within the realm of possibility if given the priority that it deserves. The commission’s responsibility is to portray an accurate picture of the existence of poverty throughout the state and enumerate measures that would rectify it.

But both of the co-chairs — Rep. Carlos Mariani (DFL-St. Paul) and Senator John Marty (DFL-Roseville) agree that the mission is difficult but totally doable if the community and legislature would provide total cooperation. As a matter of fact, Marty stated that he felt the deadline was too long; it should have been shorter. In other words, he felt that poverty could be ended before 2020.

The commission’s executive director, Gregory Gray, a former legislator himself, echoes those views very forcefully. He states, “History has shown us that whenever it reaches the point where overwhelming demands are applied, ways are found to complete the mission.”

Gray cited the case of the Great Depression era when people were literally starving; it resulted in the Great Society programs of food stamps, school lunches, and a host of other programs that served as a safety net against the extreme effects of devastating poverty.

Putting it more bluntly, Gray stated, “We will definitely present a plan as we have been charged to do, but it will be up to the public to see that it is implemented. If they like the plan, then it is incumbent upon them to light a fire behind the legislature to see that something happens.

“Too often,” said Gray, “it is expected that the legislature will do the job without provocation, but they are there to serve the people and ultimately must listen to them. Often the public must create a groundswell and force elected legislators to act.”

Working since the conclusion of the last session, the commission is in the process of completing the first phase of its mission. It involved getting an up-to-date look at the picture of poverty throughout the state of Minnesota.

During the past six months, the commission, breaking up into groups of three or four members, has traversed the state interviewing and having conversations with individuals, organizations, elected officers and religious groups, establishing accurate profiles and visions of poverty throughout the state.

The commission will now begin work on the second phase of assembling the information and data that has been compiled. It will be carefully analyzed as to

how it compares or differs with other parts of the state, as well as with the existence of poverty in other states. The commission will then, with the aid and recommendations of experts in the field, examine potential solutions and modifications in keeping with the mandates of the legislature's charge.

The third and final phase is the actual creation of a viable plan that will meet the goal of eliminating poverty in Minnesota by the year of 2020. This is "where the rubber meets the road," so to speak.

With so many experts predicting a downturn in the economy, it will be interesting to see how the full legislature will respond to the plan of the commission that it has established. Speculation is that the legislature will be reluctant to act if final recommendations involve generous spending.

The other biggest happening on Capitol Hill at this time is Governor Pawlenty's mighty bonding request of over one billion dollars, most of it dedicated to bridge repair throughout the state. Many legislators, including some members of his own party, are balking at the size of the request and the choice of priorities listed in the request.

It all seems to be setting the stage for another stormy session. We will be watching and reporting.

Matthew Little welcomes reader responses to mlittle@spokesman-recorder.com.

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