

**Flipping the Script**  
**Keynote Address to 35<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Welfare Advocates Conference,**  
**November 20, 2014**  
**Michael Reisch, Ph.D., MSW, University of Maryland**

**Good morning, everyone. Thank you, Lisa, for your gracious introduction. Congratulations to Welfare Advocates on your 35<sup>th</sup> anniversary.**

**When I first arrived in Maryland 35 years ago, Harbor Place did not exist. The Downtown Renaissance had not yet occurred. The Orioles played at Memorial Stadium and the Colts still played in Baltimore. Sparrows Point was the largest steel mill in the world. Maryland had never elected a woman Senator or African American Governor and Baltimore had never elected a Mayor who was either African American or a woman. Much clearly has changed in our state, but many things are little changed.**

**35 years ago, the state had yet to establish an official Standard of Need for impoverished Marylanders. Like many states, Maryland had long neglected the condition of its poorest residents, attributing their poverty to personal failings rather than societal dysfunction. It took the efforts of groups like Welfare Advocates to awaken policymakers and the public to the enormous gap between people's needs and the programs our government created to address them. Welfare Advocates prodded the legislature to**

**establish a Maryland Standard of Need. It heightened public awareness of the woeful condition of our welfare system. Its advocacy helped increase the state's AFDC grant by 35% during the early 1980s and it persuaded the General Assembly to pass a non-binding resolution that committed the state to increasing welfare benefits over time to reach the official standard of need. More recently, Welfare Advocates has worked to mitigate the effects of welfare reform in an era of intense political and fiscal conservatism.**

**While much has changed during the last 35 years, much clearly still needs to be done. As you all know, the monthly TANF benefit for a family of 3 in Maryland is now \$636 – up 11% since the passage of welfare reform in 1996, but up slightly over 6.2% during the past decade. The state's TANF grant is only 3/8 of the Federal Poverty Line, a fraction which, ironically, matches the percentage of children in Baltimore currently living in households with incomes below that poverty line. Combined with the maximum SNAP (or food stamp) allotment, the income of this typical 3 person TANF family is 68% of the Federal Poverty Line. Individuals on General Assistance in Maryland are considerably worse off. The maximum GA grant is \$185/month which they can only receive for a fraction of their time in need.**

**It is also widely recognized that the official poverty line is an inaccurate measure of people's economic condition. This is particularly true in expensive**

states like Maryland. One statistic is especially revealing in this regard: TANF benefits now equal 48% of the fair market rent for an apartment. The picture is even starker when you consider that over a quarter of all families in Baltimore are officially poor, that the number of Marylanders receiving food assistance has nearly tripled since the beginning of the century, that less than 2/5 of impoverished families in Maryland receive TANF at all, and that under 30% of the state's TANF block grant is spent on cash assistance.

What then, is to be done? How can we – individually and collectively – “flip the script” as this year's conference theme suggests? How can we change the prevailing narrative about poverty, welfare, and TANF recipients, reawaken a sense of compassion in this, the richest state per capita in the U.S.? How can we refocus our attention from fiscal deficits to social deficits?

One thing we can do is to make sure policymakers, the media, and the general public get the facts right. In my experience, the level of misinformation, misunderstanding, and myth-making about poverty and welfare among allegedly responsible and educated persons in our society is staggering. Fictions and prejudice have triumphed over data and reason, both out of ignorance and malice. One pervasive fiction is that our limited efforts to alleviate poverty and human misery have always failed and are doomed to fail. In fact, during the past three years alone almost half a million

**Marylanders, including over 100,000 children, were kept above poverty by public benefits – nearly ¼ million people by means-tested programs alone.**

**Another thing we can do is to refuse to frame our arguments within the agendas crafted by so-called policy pragmatists. We will never obtain justice for our constituents by arguing on the turf of those who do not share our values or concerns. In our advocacy, we need to focus on the root causes of people’s poverty rather than on rationalizing the behavioral responses of impoverished people to their situation. We need to cultivate a philosophy of resistance to the status quo among ourselves and our constituents instead of promoting resilience in the face of morally unacceptable conditions.**

**This requires us to analyze how societal institutions – the media, policymakers, politicians – construct and reproduce their versions of “truth” and highlight the falsehoods and contradictions in this discourse. We need to subvert these various rationalizations of poverty and inequality by challenging and, ultimately, destabilizing the status quo, and not adapting to its constraints. This requires us to promote structural and institutional change and not merely to enable our constituents to participate more successfully within existing inadequate and largely unresponsive systems.**

**I realize these challenges contain more than a modest share of idealism; perhaps you even consider them wishful thinking. Yet, in an environment in**

**which capital's power over labor is greater than ever, in which there are fewer decent jobs and a heightened insecurity of employment among both the working and welfare poor, in which already vulnerable communities are more destabilized and isolated, in which chronic, severe poverty has grown, in which inequality is at record levels, and in which people's faith in the ability of government to address any of these issues has been seriously diminished and deliberately undermined, what other choices do we have?**

**Without engaging in excessive rhetorical appeals, we need to analyze the underlying political-economic and ideological forces that are transforming the lives of the poor and near-poor and justifying the neglect of their plight. We need to posit an alternative vision of what our society, our state, our communities could be, a vision that reflects new forms of social solidarity and a new, dynamic concept of citizenship. We must refuse to accept the inevitability of the neo-liberal agenda and the rationalizations employed to cut already insufficient social benefits.**

**Because of the unprecedented and interlocking nature of the current economic, political, and social crises, there are no clear road maps to follow. It may be difficult for advocates to acknowledge that policies and strategies that worked in the past may no longer be effective because the context has changed so dramatically, or that past approaches may not be feasible in**

**today's acrimonious political climate. We must recognize that we are in a new context which requires us to develop a new vocabulary to engage people's attention. Clearly, the old language and our old means of expression are not working. I am not suggested we abandon either our values or our goals. Rather, that we need to forge a new discourse to be more effective today.**

**What, then, is the best way to position ourselves and our constituents politically in the contemporary context? First, I believe it is important to re-learn certain critical historical lessons to recapture our own memory and sense of agency, and apply these lessons to today's environment. To paraphrase the U.S. political scientist, G. William Domhoff, this reinvention requires three essential components: analysis, alternatives, and action.**

**In our analysis, we are reaping to some extent the consequences of a problem whose seeds we initially sowed. Many of our long-standing criticisms of the welfare system have been appropriated and distorted by those who do not share our values or goals in order to justify program cuts and the privatization of services. Our failure to suggest viable alternatives to policies we long criticized ultimately put us in the awkward position of defending policies and programs we had fiercely attacked for decades. This contributed substantially to the triumph of welfare reform and the animosity towards low-income persons that surrounds us today.**

**Our greatest successes as advocates, however, were not the modest increases in welfare benefits or less restrictive eligibility standards or fairer treatment of public assistance recipients we helped achieve. They occurred when we reframed the issues, posed new questions, defined old concepts in new ways, and suggested new solutions to seemingly intractable problems. In the past, advocates helped formulate a broad definition of health and used research to illuminate the condition of neglected and marginalized populations. Although many of our efforts did not achieve immediate, concrete, policy results, they cast people’s economic plight in a new light and, ultimately, laid the foundation for progress in the policy arena. Today, the promotion of an expanded conception of health and the use of social media to disseminate the “facts on the ground” in our communities are just two ways we could shake up the stagnant political debate.**

**It is insufficient, however, to criticize prevailing conditions without offering fresh new ideas and the means to implement them. We need to propose new ways to address peoples’ need that recognize the connection between economic assistance and the non-economic supports they also require. This vision requires us to frame policy issues not merely in terms of the fiscal costs to the state, but by clarifying the actual and potential social costs of action or inaction.**

**This leads me to the third element of Domhoff’s alliterative trilogy – action. Advocacy for social change is a form of collective action; it potentially has many characteristics of an emancipatory social movement. All such movements inevitably produce conflict. We must acknowledge and embrace the recognition that conflict is an inevitable part of our advocacy, that politics and practice are inseparable, and that our practice, wherever we work, is going to be an arena for ongoing struggle.**

**This last point underscores the importance of developing autonomous sources of political and financial support, and establishing broad-based coalitions with new, sometimes unusual allies that cross traditional boundaries of class, race, ethnicity, religion, and even political party. To do this effectively, however, we have to promote meaningful, not nominal participation by all stakeholders. We must also learn to make our arguments more appealing in the broader political arena. For example, we need to refocus the debate away from a discussion of the amount of state expenditures on the needy or the efficiency of current services toward an examination of the normative goals and distributive effects of present and future outlays, how they will be funded, and what effects they have on individuals, communities, and society as a whole. This requires us to reassert our belief in collective responsibility for human welfare and to challenge prevailing arguments which**

**prioritize individual “freedom” and a “you’re on your own” mindset in a competitive market economy over social well-being. If we do not gain support for a rebirth of the notion of collective responsibility, the neo-liberal regime is likely to increase the marginalization and exclusion of our constituents in the economy, society, and political arena.**

**Taking on this challenge requires us to enhance our existing skills and acquire new ones. We need to gather, analyze and, above all, disseminate the facts we see around us, using all available sources of information and technological tools at our disposal. How we frame and disseminate this information is particularly critical. I suggest we try the following approaches:**

**First, appeal to people through the use of “social math.” It is hard for most individuals to grasp the significance of aggregate statistics unless they are expressed in everyday terms. Similarly, we need to put a face on every issue, but connect the issue to a specific policy solution, not merely to a solution of a particular individual’s problem.**

**Second, manipulate the language and symbols employed by dominant policy actors. This requires us to understand the values and goals of our adversaries, as well as those of our allies. How open are they to change? How have they responded to past advocacy efforts? What are their current objections to our agenda? What are their political objectives now?**

**Remember, we have to target the audience we need to persuade, or at least neutralize, not the audience that already supports us. We advocates spend far too much time preaching to the choir. Flipping the script requires us to expand the cast of characters by broadening our base of support.**

**Third, develop a clear message for every issue, test it out, and reframe it if necessary by using unlikely allies. Don't hesitate to use diverse presentation styles or formats while stating a consistent theme. This requires us to be flexible and adaptive to the advocacy environment and to overcompensate by appealing to whatever is our strongest suit in each specific context.**

**Fourth, given the pervasive concern about fiscal cost, try to locate new or scarcely tapped revenue sources and funding streams to fund our proposals. Devise a specific programmatic and fiscal remedy for each problem and a specific strategy for each policy goal. If you cannot reduce a proposal's cost, demonstrate its economic benefits or its impact on long-term expenditures.**

**This leads to my fifth suggestion: We have to look at the big picture and take the long view of change. My research has demonstrated that consistency and constancy in advocacy efforts leads to greater effectiveness over time. Remember that our script is intended both to change current policies and to change the atmosphere in which future policy debates will occur.**

**To do this, we have to deepen the commitment of our allies, identify and craft responses to points of resistance, disagreement, and qualified support, cultivate accurate media coverage, educate policymakers, expand the public's understanding of our issues, develop bargaining points for the future, and strengthen the reputation, credibility and effectiveness of our organizations by presenting viable policy alternatives.**

**What I have attempted to summarize today presents us with a series of daunting challenges. To be honest, there are neither clear nor perfect solutions to these dilemmas. Yet, it has become increasingly clear to me that the expansion of social provision *by itself* cannot create a more just society. The structure of government institutions and the relationships between the state and the market, and the state and the nonprofit sector must be reconstituted in order to resolve the difficult problems that lie ahead. In addition, community problems like homelessness and inequalities in education, employment, environmental quality, health care, and housing cannot be solved by one city, county, or even one state at a time.**

**As authors of a new script, a counter-narrative so to speak, advocates can play a crucial role in this struggle. This revised script can serve as a form of resistance to the dominant culture and help validate an alternative reality. It can pose fundamental questions, such as who benefits from the status quo**

**and in what ways? It can help disrupt accepted “stories” and reshape the political and policymaking landscape.**

**A key challenge for us today, therefore, is not merely to create a new narrative but to forge a new social discourse – a new context – within which our stories make sense. To do this requires more than replacing one form of rhetoric with another. Applying a critical perspective to the issues we confront could reorient our goals from mere survival to the creation of a more egalitarian society. By challenging prevailing assumptions about poverty, the inevitability of a market economy, and the nature of the evidence used to rationalize prevailing justifications for their existence, we would be more open to the development of alternative frameworks and policies. By being open to new practice roles for ourselves, we could help forge new alliances in the pursuit of social justice.**

**Advocates have long believed that people, individually and collectively, possess the agency and ability to make their own history. If there is one overarching lesson from the past 35 years which can be applied to the decades ahead it is that nothing is pre-determined or eternal. We have the power and the responsibility to help shape that future. Thank you for your attention.**