BANNED FOR LIFE
Two Parents Led a Fight to Fix a Broken System

Welcome to San Jose: Google Campus Could Spark New Ideas on Gentrification

Marguerite Casey Foundation: Listening and Learning From Grantee Organizations
When Marguerite Casey Foundation launched, we asked questions and listened. After much reflection, we put families at the center of our philanthropic endeavor.

We were ready to act in the name of a national, family-led effort of movement building to support equity and dignity for all. I remember hearing a question at an early meeting: Why should families – and not a specific issue – be at the heart of this endeavor?

Today, the answer remains clear. As Foundation grantees can attest and I’ve witnessed over the years, the grassroots power of families – their leadership, expertise, voice, drive and ability to work across boundaries – can take communities from poverty to agency to unity.

In this edition of Equal Voice Magazine, you will read about how families are driving changes in rural and urban communities across the country, developing solutions to a wide range of challenges from gentrification to access to food stamps. In these pages, you will also see a snapshot of our philanthropic work: our commitment to youth social justice leaders; a National Family Platform developed by families; and inspiration from our recent National Convening.

These are stories of how low-income families are the experts about their lives. They know the steps and policies to make their communities better. We can listen to and trust them – and unrestricted grants to family-led community organizations remain a crucial part of this work. This is the way forward to advance dignity and equity for all families.

The Spanish poet Antonio Machado once wrote: “Traveler, there is no road. Traveler, you make the road by walking.” I often reflect on this wisdom.

At times, progress can be difficult to measure. But when it is before you – in people’s stories, eyes, voices and smiles – you know it. When I see it, my heart fills with happiness, and no one asks: Why do you want to focus on families?

We and the families and organizations with whom we work have accomplished much. But we all have more walking to do. Let’s take these steps together.

I wish you and your family a wonderful holiday season.

Luz Vega-Marquis
@LuzVegaMarquis
President and CEO
Marguerite Casey Foundation
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Google Campus Could Spark New Ideas on Gentrification – Google and San Jose are exploring a new campus in this city. It could intensify gentrification and spark an approach to balancing family needs and corporations.

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Focus on Philanthropy

National Family Platform – We Ask. We Listen. We Act.
At Marguerite Casey Foundation’s National Convening in May, we surveyed grantees and leaders about the National Family Platform. Learn about their feedback on issue areas affecting poverty.

Our president and CEO, Luz Vega-Marquis, authored an essay about power for our National Convening. The Stanford Social Innovation Review published a version of it.
Each year, Marguerite Casey Foundation honors “America’s Next Leaders,” who are the recipients of the Sargent Shriver Youth Warriors Against Poverty Leadership Award. The Marguerite Casey Foundation award honors young people who, in the spirit of Sargent Shriver, have demonstrated a deep commitment to social justice and have transformed that commitment into effective action across an array of issues.

Marguerite Casey Foundation supports and promotes “America’s Next Leaders” in order to recognize their resolve and courage and to help them build a network that will foster their individual and collective work moving forward.

Each year, Marguerite Casey Foundation board members meet with the youth to talk about their social justice work, lives, communities and plans for the future.

Read more about these incredible young people and their accomplishments at caseygrants.org.
Cheyenne Little Eagle Phoenix
Long Beach, California

Freedom Fox Richardson
Baltimore, Maryland

Alejandra Salinas
Apopka, Florida

Deveraux Smith
Baltimore, Maryland

Shane Wilcher
Berea, Kentucky

Erica Davis
Knoxville, TN

Leroy Gatlin
Oakland, California

A youth from San Diego, CA,
San Diego, California

Freedom Fox Richardson
Baltimore, Maryland

Alejandra Salinas
Apopka, Florida

Deveraux Smith
Baltimore, Maryland

Shane Wilcher
Berea, Kentucky

Erica Davis
Knoxville, TN

Leroy Gatlin
Oakland, California

A youth from San Diego, CA,
San Diego, California
President Donald Trump and his budget advisers, in the minds of many people, really don’t like the Legal Services Corp. (LSC).

In 2017, they sent a budget to Congress that would have entirely eliminated the program, which, although stretched thin, currently delivers hundreds of millions of dollars a year in legal services to poor people navigating civil cases. Congress rejected the proposal. In 2018, they again proposed eliminating the program – which provides lawyers to poor clients in civil cases, an area of the legal system in which the U.S. Constitution doesn’t guarantee the right to an attorney – and again Congress said no, slightly increasing the LSC allocation instead, from $385 million up to $410 million – still far shy of the $527.8 million the agency had requested.

“I am confident that Congress will not eliminate our funding,” says LSC President James Sandman of the budget wrangling unfolding in 2018. Yet, he acknowledges, the budget that Congress has approved to date for his organization is still woefully inadequate: “In courthouses around the country, vast numbers of people don’t have a lawyer – in housing court, family court and so on. It’s a crisis. Current funding is not nearly adequate.”

In Hawaii, LSC data show an astonishing 96 percent of rental housing disputes feature a legally unrepresented tenant. In Philadelphia, 98 percent of foreclosure cases involve homeowners with no legal representation.
After a contractor took advantage of Mary, a senior with limited English skills in Bergen County, New Jersey, for repairs on her home damaged by Hurricane Sandy, she turned to Northeast New Jersey Legal Services. A pro bono attorney worked with her to help win $289,000 from the contractor under the Consumer Fraud Act, according to Legal Services Corp. Mary later found a different contractor to repair her home. Photo courtesy of Legal Services Corp.
Indications, so far, are that, for 2019, the Trump administration, far from plugging the funding gaps and expanding access to legal services so that all who qualify financially for such assistance get it, will instead go for a third-time-lucky try to nix this nearly half-century-old program.

“The results [of defunding LSC] would be devastating,” Sandman explains. “LSC-funded programs are two-thirds of the legal aid program in the United States.”

And, since the courts have held that there is no constitutional right to an attorney in civil cases, were LSC to evaporate, an awful lot of Americans, people like Legal Services of Greater Miami, Inc. client Steve Friedman, would be left to fend for themselves as they try to navigate the byzantine court system.

Lawyers working for legal services helped the 62-year-old retired veteran Friedman – who lives in a small house in Homestead, a suburb south of Miami, with his wife, their teenage son and his wife’s aged mother – keep his home when he fell behind on tax filings to the IRS and faced a mountain of interest payments and penalties that he couldn’t possibly pay.

Friedman, who suffers from a raft of medical conditions, had worked for 28 years in the U.S. Air Force and several more in government service in Washington, D.C. afterwards. With his wife staying home to look after her ailing mother, his small government pension was the grand total of the family’s income. It was, if they budgeted precisely, just enough for the family to squeak by.

Their careful financial balancing act was, however, upended by his failure to file tax returns promptly in the years immediately before he retired – a failure that, he acknowledges, was no one’s fault but his, and one which left him no off-ramp. He couldn’t afford to pay the bills. Yet, the longer he didn’t pay the more the penalties racked up, and the more likely it became that he would lose his home and other possessions as the government tried to recoup the money he owed.

“I can’t afford a lawyer,” he recalls of that grim period in his life. “Everybody wanted from $2,000 to $10,000. I don’t have those kinds of means.” Finally, a veterans’ group that he had approached for help put him in touch with a legal services office, which doesn’t charge clients for the attorneys’ work. Over the following months, his lawyer, who specialized in tax issues, negotiated a settlement with the IRS that allowed the U.S. agency to recoup a portion of the money owed, over a number of years, but that protected Friedman’s assets from seizure.

“If it wasn’t for legal services, I would have had no place to go to, nobody to take my side,” Friedman says simply. “They make the difference in little people’s lives, when it seems the whole world’s against them.”

Take away LSC dollars and such help would likely have been unavailable.

Friedman was lucky that he secured legal assistance. The Florida Bar Foundation, which funds providers of legal services in that state, had, a few years earlier, experienced a sneak preview of what happens when there is a sharp downturn in the money flowing in. It wasn’t pretty.

Like many states, Florida collects a proportion of the interest that accumulates in attorneys’ trust accounts and distributes it to legal services. During boom times, the interest on trust accounts do remarkably well. In the early years of this century, it was doing well enough, in fact, to build up a rainy-day reserve of tens of millions of dollars. Then, in 2007-08, the state’s real estate market cratered. In quick succession, interest rates plummeted as the Federal Reserve tried to limit the Great Recession damage by lowering benchmark rates so as to discourage the hoarding of funds and to keep money circulating. The combination decimated the trust accounts program.

For a few years, by drawing down the rainy-day reserve, legal services managed to continue largely as it had before. Then, when the reserves ran out, the cuts kicked in. Suddenly, in lieu of $12 million per year from this fund, legal services had to make do with $5 million. The impact of the 58 percent cut was brutal.

“At this point we don’t provide any general support at all, it’s all grant-based,” says Catherine York, grants program officer for The Florida Bar Foundation.

If there’s grant money to support, say, lawyers working with domestic violence survivors, those individuals will be represented; but for someone like Friedman, whose case didn’t fall under a broad umbrella heading for a grant, representation has become
increasingly dicey.

In many counties in Florida, as the dollars dried up, legal services attorneys had to stop taking all cases involving clients trying to access public benefits for the basics needed to survive. Were federal LSC dollars to disappear on top of this, The Florida Bar Foundation has calculated they would have to drop 48 percent of the roughly 80,000 legal services cases per year in the state.

Legal services offices also receive dollars from an array of grants that philanthropic organizations give for work in specific legal areas or geographic regions, as well as from revenues allocated by cities and states.

Yet the amounts, and the purposes of the funding, vary greatly region to region, and also, as Florida’s experience with its trust fund shows, from year to year. New York City, for example, helps fund legal services specifically for eviction cases; and New York State recently announced a $100 million per year across-the-board contribution to legal services.

But in poorer, more rural states, including Mississippi, Louisiana, Alabama, North Carolina, South Carolina, Arizona, Indiana, Idaho, Kansas and Utah, a paucity of state funding and private grants for legal

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We have a legal system created by lawyers for lawyers, constructed on the premise litigants had lawyer. If you’re not trained in the law and you try to navigate the system, good luck to you.”

James Sandman
LSC PRESIDENT
The Legal Services Corp. is open to the 57 million Americans whose family income is at or below 125 percent of the federal poverty line.

For 2018, 125 percent of the annual federal poverty line is $15,175 for a household of one person, $20,575 for a household of two people, $25,975 for a household of three people and $31,375 for a household of four people, according to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

The 57 million Americans living at or below 125 percent of the federal poverty line is lower than the 60 million Americans who qualified in 2016, but still 13 percent higher than it was before the Great Recession.

In more than a dozen states, including Florida and Texas, more than 20 percent of the population qualifies for free legal assistance, according to U.S. Census Bureau data.

Nearly 3 out 4 legal services clients are women, according to the LSC.

services means that the system, made up of hundreds of legal aid organizations and offices around the country, overwhelmingly relies on the flow of federal dollars.

“We have a legal system created by lawyers for lawyers, constructed on the premise litigants had lawyers,” Sandman says. “If you’re not trained in the law and you try to navigate the system, good luck to you.”

Take the disabled Kansas City resident, for example, who, absent a good attorney, would likely have ended up homeless after his landlord gave him a three-day notice to vacate his home. Instead, the attorney convinced a judge to extend the eviction date out 30 days, giving him time to find a new place to live.

There’s also a 39-year-old mother of three (who asked that her name not be used) in the small town of Pittsburg, Kansas. She fled her abusive husband after he repeatedly physically attacked and mentally abused her and finally threatened to shoot her if she tried to divorce him.

For her, the results could have been even more...
Mario, a U.S. Navy veteran who served as a medic during the Gulf War, worked with the Veterans Advocacy Project with Community Legal Services of Mid-Florida to secure service-related disability payments from the federal government. Legal Services Corp. reports he and his family also now live in stable housing. Photo courtesy of Legal Services Corp.

It’s tempting to dismiss the Trump team’s position to cut the LSC budget as posturing, as symbolic red meat thrown to their base – supporters who, as many observers say, instinctively dislike federal spending on the poor, in particular when those dollars are perceived to disproportionately benefit non-White residents in big cities (nearly 28 percent of LSC clients in 2016 were, according to the organization’s “Legal Services Corporation by the Numbers” publication, African-American, and another 17.6 percent were Hispanic); and impoverished women (nearly 3 out of 4 legal services clients are women).

That’s the same game Republicans played during Ronald Reagan’s presidency, when they cast LSC as being the wellspring for “radical” legal strategies initiated by those intent on undermining landlords, attacking corporations for their polluting tendencies, pushing feminist and race-politics agendas and so on. And it’s the same game that critics of the LSC, including think tanks such as the Heritage Foundation, played a decade later, when they pushed Congress to pass bills, which were then signed into law by President Bill Clinton, severely restricting LSC funds from going to class-action cases or lobbying efforts for large-scale policy reforms.

LSC survived the 1980s attacks, and, in modified form, those that followed in the 1990s. But symbol-politics are, nevertheless, important: Demonize a
program long enough, and you eventually corrode its support. The Trump administration may never get to a point where they can successfully defund LSC in its entirety. But over the years, by repeatedly questioning its legitimacy, it may succeed in significantly slicing and dicing its budget, eventually killing much of it off by a thousand cuts.

Cut LSC, and Colorado Legal Services would, says Jonathan Asher, its executive director, overnight lose $4.7 million of its $11 million, resulting in huge reductions in services, particularly in rural areas with citizens who voted for Trump, migrant worker legal issues and tribal communities.

In Kansas, where, hobbled by a rigid anti-tax agenda supported by many legislators, the court system is already desperately underfunded – judges in the state are paid less than in any other state in the country – legal services would have to fall back on the forlorn hope of increased dollars coming from a tiny stream of funding from that already stressed court budget.

Marilyn Harp, executive director of Kansas Legal Services is pessimistic about the implication. “We would certainly become half the size,” she believes. “And more importantly be no longer able to look at a broad array of cases that meet the needs of our clients.”

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What would this mean for the justice system, and for those men, women and children who currently rely on free legal representation from legal services lawyers in a range of civil cases?

In all likelihood it would mean worse outcomes: more evictions, more parents losing custody of their children for no good reason, more people unable to access public benefits that they ought to qualify for, more people failing to secure restraining orders against potentially violent spouses, more people facing liens on their homes and incomes as a result of unsolved tax problems that a trained lawyer could have found middle ground on.

“I’d probably have been up the creek without a paddle. I probably wouldn’t have had no help,” says Sheila Murphy, a 54-year-old resident of Lake City, in central Florida, regarding what would have happened to her absent the presence of a legal services office in her town. Attorneys helped Murphy when the state wanted to take away her guardianship of her severely autistic, nonverbal son once he turned 18. She received help again when the government erroneously tried to stop her son’s disability payments.

The Lake City resident, who left school after 10th grade, and who, since her son needs around-the-clock care, can’t work a job outside the home, doesn’t understand all the legal paperwork. She can’t imagine trying to navigate a complicated court case on her own. “I believe I would have lost custody of my son because of all the red tape. They’ve got red tape in between everything. Why you don’t qualify for this, why you can’t do that.”

As Trump continues to push for defunding the Legal Services Corp., Murphy’s experience is a cautionary tale of what sorts of travesties could result. “A nation where people can’t access legal assistance

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**Ms. S., on the left, a resident of Baton Rouge, Louisiana, worked with attorney Margherita McWilliams of Southeast Louisiana Legal Services to clear up an insurance payment issue so she could rebuild her house after floods struck the area in August 2016. Ms. S. and her children have lived in the house for decades. Photo courtesy of Legal Services Corp.**

**Ronnie Pitcock, a U.S. military veteran, received attorney support from Legal Aid of Western Missouri after he was discharged from surgery and found that his former wife had left him. Legal Services Corp. says his former wife took his savings, which left him homeless. He is now in stable housing. Photo courtesy of Legal Services Corp.**
Ava spent time in a hospital burn unit after an abusive argument with her then husband. She worked with Indiana Legal Services to file for a divorce and secure access to her bank account. Legal Services Corp. says she is looking forward to moving into an apartment and seeing her children, again, after an extended period of rehabilitation. Photo courtesy of Legal Services Corp.


“If President Trump succeeded in his efforts to eliminate LSC,” the Congressman continues, “millions of low-income Americans would be forced to stand alone in our courtrooms defending their homes, health care and the security of their families.”


More on Legal Services Corp. and How to Find Assistance

When the U.S. Congress founded the Legal Services Corp. in 1974, it declared:

“There is a need to provide equal access to the system of justice in our Nation for individuals who seek redress of grievances.”

“There is a need to provide high quality legal assistance to those who would be otherwise unable to afford adequate legal counsel.”

That “providing legal assistance to those who face an economic barrier to adequate legal counsel will serve best the ends of justice and assist in improving opportunities for low-income persons.”

People can find more information about legal services at www.lsc.gov and www.lawhelp.org.
ACTIVISTS STAND UP FOR AFFORDABLE HOUSING IN NEW YORK

By David Cruz
Special to Equal Voice News
Published: March 12, 2018
Whether in grueling heat-filled days or frigid temperatures, a cadre of activists has been fighting for the soul of their Bronx community.

Their communities lie in the heart of Jerome Avenue between 184th and 167th streets. It’s there where the city looks to rezone 92 blocks, the largest rezoning for the Bronx in years. For the last three years, the valley-like neighborhoods, from Mt. Hope to the Grand Concourse, have been studied by the city. They’re home to a largely low-income Hispanic bloc and a concentration of auto mechanics that do business below the rumbling 4 subway line. Hispanics from all backgrounds make up more than 60 percent of the population.

Graffiti-strewn with ripped up business awnings and cracked streets, quality of life along the two-mile stretch remains relatively low, given the high crime rate, poor health outcomes and expensive apartments relative to residents’ take-home pay. Two-thirds of residents set aside more than 30 percent of their take-home salary on rent, making them rent-burdened.

For New York City, the answer to a crunched housing market is making affordable housing more available through rezoning. The Jerome Avenue proposal is pushing for some buildings to go as high as 19 stories. In exchange, the city is committed to building 4,000 affordable housing units and preserving 1,500 other units as a way to resist market pressure to increase the rents. It needs approval by the New York City Council, which is set to vote on the proposal in the coming weeks following a lengthy public review process.

The New York City Department of City Planning (DCP) is overseeing the rezoning with help from multiple city agencies, including the Parks Department, Transportation Department and most notably Housing Preservation and Development (HPD).

For Carmen Vega-Rivera, an activist with Bronx Coalition for a Community Vision (BxCCV) and a Bronx resident on the Grand Concourse for 37 years, the rezoning proposal has swallowed up her life. Getting around with a walker, Vega-Rivera, along with a sentry of community activists, has spent three years convincing the city to rethink its zoning policy. If New York City history has taught her anything, historically minority neighborhoods primed for rezoning will see many move out given housing policies that ultimately allow market forces to reign.

“I’m so angry I’m thinking what about my daughter and my grandkids. Where they gonna live? My son, who is with me, where’s he going to live?” said Vega-Rivera, speaking to the Norwood News at Court Diner on East 161st Street and Walton Avenue, a block and a half east of Jerome Avenue.

Community Action for Safe Apartments (CASA), a grassroots tenant-organizing group, has helped spread word of rezoning to its membership of 5,000 strong as part of BxCCV.

The Jerome Avenue housing proposal was introduced by Mayor Bill de Blasio in February 2015, one of the first proposals born out of his Housing New York plan, which seeks to build or preserve 200,000 units of affordable housing through its Mandatory Inclusionary Housing program (the figure has now been pushed to 300,000). It’s one of 11 rezonings currently carried out by DCP. The neighborhoods mostly comprise Black and Hispanic residents.

And it’s promising affordability in an area that’s vastly dependent on it.
REAL AFFORDABILITY

But the affordability question and its consequences have been stuck in the mind of Vega-Rivera along with many activists. Affordability, after all, is a relative term. For Vega-Rivera, rents can determine whether one can live in a neighborhood.

She points to the city’s housing policy that proposes some rents on new affordable housing units to be at 60 percent Area Median Income (AMI), or $51,540 for a family of three. HPD enforces those guidelines. Building affordable housing is largely dependent on whether developers will build them in exchange for tax subsidies.

The policy presents problems for a third of the residents characterized as living in poverty, making less than $20,780 for a family of three. That makes them ineligible to even apply for affordable housing through HPD’s Housing Connect lottery. Even apartments the city has committed to build, set aside for extremely low-income earners, won’t make them eligible, as requirements stand at 30 percent AMI, or $25,770 for a family of three. This has led Vega-Rivera to conclude that new housing is not intended for the existing community, including the rent-burdened.

Worse, new housing at the rates proposed by HPD can lead to a speculative jump in rents around the area prime for rezoning.

“If you’re making $20,000, even $40,000, where you going to move? Can you pay the $2,800? Can you pay the $3,200?” asked Vega-Rivera, referring to the types of rents she’s been inquiring about in her area in the last few months.

New York City’s AMI formula is lumped with incomes in neighboring Westchester and Rockland counties, where incomes are much higher. This skews the policy unfavorably toward the very low-income earners.

In DCP-led community visioning sessions, representatives told a number of CASA members that affordable housing will indeed come to the satisfaction of Jerome Avenue residents. The members just weren’t aware it wouldn’t be for them, recalled Sheila Garcia, executive director of CASA.

“My members were like, ‘Oh, the city is going to mandate housing and it’s going to be affordable.’ And I said, ‘How much money do you make in a year?’” asked Garcia. The member said $20,000.

“The units will not be for you because you don’t actually make the amount of money in your household in order to qualify for the housing,” Garcia remembered responding.

At a hearing on the rezoning held by City Planning Commission, Madeline Mendez, a disabled Hispanic woman living on Social Security, took her frustrations out on the board that ultimately approved the rezoning as part of the public review process.

“[Supplemental Security Income] is $19,000 a year. Do you think I could afford those affordable housings that you’re making for the middle class and the upper class? Do you think my community that makes $25,000 in under a year could afford those affordable housings that you’re planning to make? Do you think that them developers are considering us?” said Mendez. “We’re being discriminated and you all know that.”

Affordability, it seems, is in the eye of the beholder.

Takeaways

As part of its commitment to supporting low-income families advocating for a just and equitable society, Marguerite Casey Foundation issues Journalism Fellowships and Scholarships each year so the public and policymakers can have a deeper understanding about movement building and the need for solutions.

In late 2017, David Cruz of Bronx-based Norwood News received a Journalism Fellowship. He used the Fellowship to support an in-depth look at affordable housing efforts in the Bronx and how unintended consequences can surface in the process. —

Cruz writes clearly about housing policy, which can be dense, and how activists in the Bronx are working to support their neighbors.
“The people who qualify for ‘affordable’ housing are people who make more than a lot of people who actually need it,” said Gregory Jost, adjunct professor of sociology at Fordham University. “The formulas are kind of set up to benefit certain people and not others. And then what happens is that those who don’t benefit, which are a lot of people in the neighborhoods where there’s a lot of targeting for, like, rezoning, feel completely shut out, because the rezonings trigger a whole wave of speculative investment, which then triggers displacement.”

Jost is part of “Undesign the Redline,” an exhibit chronicling the health effects of neighborhoods that were redlined, a federal policy where so-called “hazardous populations” comprising mostly minority neighborhoods were deliberately deprived of investment. The area of Jerome Avenue that’s the present focus of rezoning was deemed “Definitely Declining.”

A review of the original maps outlining redlined neighborhoods show nine of the 11 current rezonings fell in areas redlined by the federal government in the 1930s.

HPD has attempted to assuage the rent-burdened by increasing the number of mandatory affordable housing units.

**Exchange Policy**

Deeper affordability is the main component to CASA’s quest for the impoverished. Change in the face of affordability is second.

Rezonings are usually followed by positive change. For Jerome Avenue, that includes upgraded sidewalks, street trees, benches, lighting and major multimillion-dollar renovations to parks, including Aqueduct Park, Mt. Hope Garden and Grand Avenue Playground.

Vega-Rivera looks upon these changes with satisfaction and resentment. On one hand she’s content with the city taking a closer look at what’s needed, which include more open public spaces and a plan to fix the infrastructure. But on the other hand, these changes come with strings attached.

For Vega-Rivera, the city appears to engage in an unspoken exchange policy where new amenities come in exchange for affordable housing that’s not quite affordable to the current masses. Rezoning usually spurs development, but at the expense of dangling positive amenities she believes won’t be enjoyed by the existing population. Change is good, but only on the community’s terms, according to her. “It shouldn’t be a tradeoff...and say that the developers can’t build real affordable housing for those that need it. That’s no tradeoff for me. That’s what pisses me off,” she said.

Garcia agrees. It’s one reason that drove Community Boards 4 and 5 to give conditional approval to the proposal (Community Board 7 is also included in its rezoning, with just a sliver of the rezoning proposal edging into the neighborhood, compelling the board to defer to boards 4 and 5), realizing the city’s investment to Jerome Avenue was rare.

“The city is saying to people of color, poor people of color, ‘The only way we’re going to invest in your community is if you let us rezone and make your home more unaffordable for you and maybe potentially displace you in order to provide good schools,’” said Garcia. “It’s actually really hurtful, and it says something how we value poor people of color throughout the city.”

The mayor’s office did not return an email seeking comment.

Regardless, Councilwoman Vanessa Gibson, whose 16th Council District represents a large swath of the proposed rezoning, is seizing on the moment. Throughout the public review process, Gibson has noted the city has made little investment on Jerome Avenue until now.

“Despite the real fear and the anxiety that many families and residents feel, and I hear it almost every day, I realize the risk that we are taking, but I also realize how much is at stake,” said Gibson in testimony she gave at the Nov. 29, 2017 City Planning Commission hearing. “Many of our seniors and families have lived in the Bronx for a really long time, and they deserve to stay there. They lived in an era of the dark days in the Bronx. And now that we have brighter days ahead they certainly deserve to remain. I will not allow this community to be shortchanged.”

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If you’re making $20,000, even $40,000, where you going to move? Can you pay the $2,800? Can you pay the $3,200.”

Carmen Vega-Rivera
ACTIVIST WITH BRONX COALITION FOR A COMMUNITY VISION (BxCCV)
Councilman Fernando Cabrera, whose 14th Council District covers a portion of the rezoning proposal, said the “proposed rezoning comes at an important time when my district and the entire district have a critical need for affordable housing. But this is only part of the story. In truth, District 14 is an extreme one of the basic amenities that are crucial to community survival.”

Cabrera’s and Gibson’s votes arguably count, as most members typically vote in line with the Council member whose project overlaps with their district. Gibson arguably has the most power. She could effectively advance or kill the rezoning on several conditions, namely that the city consider creating more seats to ease the already overcrowded schools in the areas. It’s the promise of schools that convinced Community Board 4 Chair Kathleen Saunders to back the proposal.

The additional casualties of the rezoning are the existing auto businesses that line Jerome Avenue. Born out of a policy to put affordable housing above everything else, the city’s proposal will change zoning distinctions where automotive shops do business, revising the distinction from commercial to residential, effectively putting them in the line of fire for displacement. An August 2017 report by BxCCV notes that the “introduction of housing will displace auto businesses in these areas, as property owners can receive a significantly greater return on their investment for residential uses.”

Yes, the affordable housing stock will increase along Jerome Avenue with the intent of keeping the housing market affordable. But Tom Angotti, an urban planner, retired professor of urban planning at Hunter College, and author of “Zoned Out,” a book on rezonings, notes that’s not always true. Market forces will dictate and cause a speculative jump in land values and rents along Jerome Avenue, where two-thirds of the units are rent-stabilized and vacancy rates are lower than New York City’s average.

Those units appear to be under constant threat. Over the last 10 years, 172,000 of the nearly 1 million rent-stabilized units in New York City were deregulated, pushing those rents beyond the $2,500 to $2,700 threshold needed to keep them regulated.

This paradox happened in Greenpoint-Williamsburg following the 2005 rezoning. There, thousands of Hispanic families fled while White families began to settle. This came even as nearly 10,000 housing units were built, which included affordable housing. Median incomes rose from $46,255 to $71,325, a 65 percent jump, from 2002 to 2013.

“[T]he increase in development potential led landlords to buy out or evict tenants, while homeowners in affordable
The city is saying to people of color, poor people of color, 'The only way we're going to invest in your community is if you let us rezone and make your home more unaffordable for you ...'

Shiela Garcia
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR WITH COMMUNITY ACTION FOR SAFE APARTMENTS (CASA)

units were enticed to leave. And then the affordable units that were built weren't truly affordable to most local residents. And many of the promised affordable units were not even built," said Angotti in an email.

Back on Jerome Avenue, the city admits that their rezoning proposal "could" result in 4,000 affordable units. In its Draft Neighborhood Plan updated in October 2017, the city also admitted that only 1,000 of the 4,000 affordable units earmarked for construction will ultimately remain affordable, opening the door for increases.

Creating those units depends on the real estate industry where private developers may not be sold on the subsidies offered by the city. "The city is saying, and they said this in the past, 'Of course we're going to build all this housing, but we're going to prioritize developers that use the least amount of subsidies.' We know that right now that would be catastrophic for anyone who lives on Jerome," said Garcia.

Even Right to Counsel, enacted by the city to offer attorneys to tenants in Housing Court against their landlord, won't help, said Garcia. "Right to Counsel is irrelevant to Jerome if people can't actually afford the rent," said Garcia. "No attorney will be able to keep you in your house if you can't pay the rent."

Gentrification is certainly on the mind of Vega-Rivera. She's beginning to see rents creep along the Grand Concourse, running parallel to Jerome Avenue. "Where's the affordability in this neighborhood?" she asked.

In her apartment building just outside the proposed rezoning area, at least 37 housing units in her building remain vacant.

THINKING INCLUSIVELY

For the last three years, the city has hosted a total of 41 types of public meetings and get-togethers related to the Jerome Avenue rezoning.

Vega-Rivera has long believed that the city is not listening to its residents, especially when it comes to its affordability terms. In the early stages of the rezoning effort, she was struck that meetings had taken place well after the city announced its intent to rezone the neighborhoods. "I know firsthand because I learned about meetings that were already happening when the announcement was made in 2014, and I learned about meetings that took place that fall in 2014 that did not involve me," said Vega-Rivera. "I was shut out. Is it because I'm an agitator? Is it because I speak up? Is it because I know about my community? I know what the needs are."

Garcia of CASA remembers a summer festival on the Grand Concourse where several streets were shut down. DCP had set up a table outlining the Jerome Avenue rezoning while downplaying plenty of the technical terms. "They just had a table and told people, like, 'Look we're going to make the community beautiful, we're going to bring all these things in,'" Garcia recalled. "I think that's problematic because it's not giving people the context and engaging in a conversation that's real."

The city swears it pays attention to the needs. By City Charter mandate, rezoning proposals go through a public review process involving community boards.

While Vega-Rivera calls it 'lip service,' Angotti says their version of planning falls flat.

"New York City does not do planning. It really has not done it in any open democratic systematic way. What they call planning is nothing more than holding some meetings at which residents, local business owners, are simply observers who get the chance to speak from time to time but have really no fundamental control over the decisions that are gonna be made," Angotti argues.

FIGHTING BACK

Regardless of socioeconomic background, Angotti said the best thing anyone facing a rezoning is getting organized.

"There're really three rules: Organize, organize, organize. Privileged communities, White communities. That's how they get what they want. That's the only way that people are going to get anything," said Angotti. "If you're going to sit and wait, you're never going to get anywhere. If you're going to believe they're mainly to support your interests, then you're not going to get anywhere."

BxCCV has taken on that strategy. For its part, they've convinced the city to agree to some safeguards that include a revised term sheet, tougher tenant protections, legal representation for qualifying tenants at housing court and a Certificate of No Harassment program that verifies that landlords seeking building permits have not harassed tenants.

Those would not have come without intervention.

"We don't want to make the same mistake twice," said Garcia.

David Cruz, a recipient of a 2017 Journalism Fellowship from Marguerite Casey Foundation, is editor in chief of Norwood News, a publication based in the Bronx area of New York City. This story first appeared in the Norwood News. It is reprinted with permission.
People and Purpose in San Diego County

By Elizabeth Posey
Program Officer, West

Co-author by:
Brad Wong - Content Editor, Equal Voice

Photos by Mike Kane
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Environmental Health Coalition has up-to-date information, as well as a video, about the proximity of industrial businesses and heavy machinery to families in Barrio Logan, a predominantly Latino neighborhood of about 5,000 people in San Diego. There are concerns about higher-than-normal asthma rates in Barrio Logan children, as compared to other area youth: environmenthealth.org

On a March evening at a community center in San Diego, Francisco "Panchito" Martinez stood at a public forum, a bedrock exercise of democracy, and before three District 8 City Council candidates.

With microphone in hand and more than 100 people in the audience, several of whom wore headphones to listen in Spanish, Somali and Vietnamese, the college student asked the candidates about cultivating and supporting youth leaders in the eighth most-populous U.S. city.

Martinez’s participation was a form of engagement in more ways than one. The youth questioned those seeking the privilege of representing people in government while also addressing the need for multigenerational civic involvement.
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Learn More About Pollution Concerns in Barrio Logan, U.S.A.
Environmental Health Coalition has up-to-date information, as well as a video, about the proximity of industrial businesses and heavy machinery to families in Barrio Logan, a predominantly Latino neighborhood of about 5,000 people in San Diego. There are concerns about higher-than-normal asthma rates in Barrio Logan children, as compared to other area youth: environmentalhealth.org
WHAT HAVE BARRIERS TO CIVIC PARTICIPATION CREATED?

Community leaders and families in San Diego County point to consequences when the voices and views of all residents are not reflected in policies. They include:

- Mothers and fathers walking six miles home from the nearest public transit stop, often after midnight because bus routes and operation hours do not meet the work shift needs of low-income neighborhoods.
- Some women who clean office buildings staying at their places of work until 5 or 6 a.m., even though they’ve completed their jobs for the day, because of bus routes and operation hours.
- There are safety concerns about walking home late at night or early in the morning, as well as less time with children and family members.
- Questionable zoning decisions in which housing, a school and industrial sites are located in the same area. Many residents and grassroots leaders call this “incompatible” land use.

For Martinez, who often goes by Panchito, and other residents who questioned the candidates in English and Spanish, the forum marked a continuum of a broader community-leadership initiative in San Diego County – one driven by residents and grassroots organizations seeking greater voice and more accurate representation in government and community affairs.

Like other parts of the U.S., San Diego County’s population has transformed dramatically over the last several decades. Today, people of color are the majority among the county’s 3.3 million residents. Together, Latinos and Asian Pacific Islanders make up 4 out of every 10 residents.

In Barrio Logan, the San Diego neighborhood that Panchito and about 5,000 other people call home, there are industrial businesses as well as residences.

In this primarily Latino neighborhood, which is southeast of the city’s popular Gaslamp Quarter and within view of the Port of San Diego and U.S. Navy facilities, concerns over health are one reason why residents say local government should mirror the makeup of this diverse region.
Positive Disruption: Pursuing Equity

Low-income families, people of color, members of the LGBT community and various supporters are banding together with a network of nonprofit organizations. They’re standing up in the fray to broaden the culture of leadership – as well as its definition – and boost civic engagement.

They’re changing a system they say has overlooked their voices in community and policy decisions. They’re saying political power, government representation and decisions about spending public dollars are a shared endeavor – that the promise of U.S. democracy includes everyone.

The goal is to make civic participation more accessible, and to recognize leadership across income, racial, ethnic, gender and sexual orientation lines. They’re doing that with support from Marguerite Casey Foundation and other philanthropic investments that started years ago.

Each community organization brings a considerable focus and presence of involved families to this enterprise in San Diego County, home to “America’s Finest City.”

There’s Environmental Health Coalition; The San Diego LGBT Community Center; American Friends Service Committee’s U.S.-Mexico border program operated out of its San Diego-area office; Engage San Diego, which works on nonpartisan voter engagement; and the Center on Policy Initiatives, a research and action institute that supports worker prosperity.

The Idea of a Network

Each organization is a grantee of Marguerite Casey Foundation, which is nurturing a national family-led movement for a just and equitable society through unrestricted grants and trust in families.

Under this framework of equity, movement building and engagement, these organizations and families are maximizing community leadership efforts through the San Diego Equal Voice Network, which formalized in 2016.

Marguerite Casey Foundation supports this network and about a dozen others nationwide.

Grantee members lead the networks, convene meetings, determine topics on which to focus and share information. There is greater amplification of people’s voices, concerns and solutions, participants say, through the collective.

In 2012, these organizations illuminated a startling fact: Of San Diego County’s then 3 million residents, people of color accounted for 52 percent of the population. But they made up only 23 percent of those serving in government.

Questions quickly surfaced: Is everyone’s voice being heard? Are families included in decision making? Who’s missing? Who needs to be included? How do we ensure that equity drives the solution?

In other words: What can we do together to create positive change that we can’t do separately?

They started working with other nonprofit organizations that are now members of the San Diego Equal Voice Network, as well as with grassroots allies.

They launched an effort to change a system that, as U.S. Census Bureau data showed, lacked equitable outcomes for residents of color. They widened their scope to include low-income families, members of the LGBT community and any interested resident or worker in the area.

Among their goals:
- Increase civic participation and nurture new community leaders, including young people.
- Share leadership development resources and best practices with anyone interested.
- Collectively track the participation of community members in various training leadership development programs.
- Highlight what works and inform families of leadership opportunities, no matter which organization sponsored it them.

Their intentionality and intersectionality dovetailed with what families were voicing, as well as with demographic shifts and investments from philanthropic organizations.

Alan Kaplan, the new director of Engage San Diego, described a goal that remains front and center for many families and the San Diego Equal Voice Network: “A San Diego where the electorate and leadership are reflective of people who live and work here.”

“We're creating opportunities and vehicles to bring voices in,” said Delores Jacobs, a longtime community leader who is stepping down as CEO of The San Diego LGBT Community Center.

Among those voices: Panchito and his mother, Maria. The family team, concerned about the quality of life in their neighborhood, has worked with Environmental Health Coalition for years.

Redefining Leadership and Participation

So how is this idea for change being implemented?

One of the first steps was acknowledging and legitimizing how families and individuals already were serving as community leaders. And that involved rethinking the traditional definition of leadership. That meant recognizing:
"We’re creating opportunities and vehicles to bring people in."

- A mother who joined the PTA at her child’s school to address educational inequities and advocate for students who are struggling.
- Bilingual youth who accompanied their parents to canvass neighborhoods, served as interpreters and discuss in Spanish or Vietnamese – voting, pollution and asthma rates, which is a major concern, especially in children in Barrio Logan.
- A parent who has two minimum-wage jobs but took time to volunteer at a nonpartisan phone bank to remind neighbors to vote.

They also acknowledged that “leader” might be shunned by immigrant residents whose government officials in their former countries are corrupt or violent.

The new definition of multilevel leadership went beyond the titles of board chair, president and chief executive officer to include parent, youth, auntie, cousin, sister and neighbor.

“People enter through different doors,” said Diane Takvorian, executive director and a founder of Environmental Health Coalition.

**Nurturing New Leaders and Regional Cooperation**

The organizations had existing leadership programs, but network members found that a collective focus and a willingness to discuss and resolve different ideas invigorated the endeavor.

The Center on Policy Initiatives was already operating three leadership programs: one for new and elected officials, another named the Boards and Commissions Leadership Institute and an initiative for college students. At the center of all three: social and economic equity, awareness, diversity and racial justice.

Center on Policy Initiatives staff also sought community leadership information from and exchanged insights with Urban Habitat, a nonprofit organization in Oakland and member of the Bay Area Equal Voice Coalition which includes groups in San Francisco and San Jose.

In 2009, Urban Habitat pioneered its own Boards and Commissions Leadership Institute, which is being replicated nationwide. Staff members from these two organizations – in different parts of California – held phone conversations and meetings to deepen working relationships and share information.

**Community Leaders in Elected Office**

While boosting cooperation and broadening the definition of leader were part of this endeavor, advocates and families always kept the formal power of elected and appointed office in mind.

Residents and nonprofit leaders point to the path of Georgette Gómez, a community advocate who did grassroots work with The San Diego LGBT Community Center and Environmental Health Coalition.

She ran for two elected offices and now serves as a councilmember on the San Diego City Council and as chair of the San Diego Metropolitan Transit System.

Grassroots leaders say she makes it a point to hire staff of color, who understand the need for equity.
in public policy. They add that as a woman of color, her election wins inspire many county residents, especially those who don’t see themselves represented in government or community affairs.

One policy innovation that Gómez supports, they say and her office confirms, and that has ties to her grassroots community work is a public benefits agreement, which is surfacing in other U.S. cities such as Los Angeles.

Based on an organized labor concept, it ensures qualified residents are hired for jobs, such as in construction, when public dollars or tax incentives are used for infrastructure projects.

That way, residents can have equitable access to taxpayer-supported jobs.

Network members also are looking to the future by examining the composition and accessibility of these government bodies:

- Escondido Union School District Board of Education
- San Diego County Board of Supervisors
- City of San Diego Planning Commission
- Metropolitan Transit System Board of Directors
- Port of San Diego Board of Port Commissioners

Community leaders say they’ll issue a report later in 2018, an update from their earlier survey.

**A Youth Steps Up**

For Panchito, who attends San Diego State University, participation and leadership run in the family.

Panchito’s mother, Maria, has served on the Environmental Health Coalition board of directors. The two still work closely with the group, which has an equity and justice focus. It also helped organize the District 8 City Council candidate forum to boost local democracy.

Panchito also works with the Barrio Logan College Institute, which says the average yearly household income for a family of four people in the neighborhood is $25,000.

In 2017, Panchito received a Sargent Shriver Youth Warriors Against Poverty Leadership Award from Marguerite Casey Foundation, which recognizes collaborative accomplishments by young people.

As part of the honor, Panchito traveled to Seattle to talk about grassroots-driven change in Barrio Logan with other “Shriver Warriors,” young leaders from throughout the country. They discussed injustice, advocacy and progress.

In March, after that San Diego City Council candidate forum, Panchito mentioned an immediate goal: Becoming a member of the Barrio Logan Planning Group to ensure that voices of families from the neighborhood are at the local decision-making table.

Smaller governing bodies, community leaders say, can go unnoticed, though their members make important policy decisions or recommendations that affect low-income families and people of color in neighborhoods.

On April 19, Environmental Health Coalition sent a tweet announcing the news: The 20-year-old will join the Planning Group – and one focus for the college student will be access to healthy foods.

As a member of the Planning Group, which includes representatives from the Port of San Diego and U.S. Navy, Panchito will study the issues.

The youth leader also will ask questions, listen carefully and, then, cast votes.

**SHARING KNOWLEDGE:
MORE ON COMMUNITY LEADERSHIP PROGRAMS**

Interested in starting a community leadership program in your city? Or want to learn more about efforts in San Diego County and Oakland, California?

- The San Diego Leadership Development Project, which includes Marguerite Casey Foundation grantee organizations, has resources and a list of multilevel offerings that they support: sandiegoleaders.org.
- Environmental Health Coalition has a leadership model and training program called SALTA: environmentalhealth.org/salta.
- The Center on Policy Initiatives offers three levels of community leadership programs. They are Leading a New Way for elected officials, the Boards and Commissions Leadership Institute for people on or interested in joining a board or commission and Students for Economic Justice for people in college: cpisandiego.org.
- In Oakland, California, Urban Habitat offers a Boards and Commission Leadership Institute, which includes information on strategic networking and an analysis on race and class urbanhabitat.org/leadership.
By Paul Nyhan
Equal Voice News

Photos by
Elizabeth Gonzalez
Published: August 8, 2018
Google Campus Could Spark New Ideas on Gentrification

Campus could bring jobs and displacement

Who could say no to 20,000 new jobs and a state-of-the-art Google campus for their city? San Jose is in the midst of answering that question – the latest frontier in an era of corporate homesteading in urban America – as Google eyes building a sprawling campus in the heart of its downtown in Silicon Valley.

But, the reality beyond that idea is far more complex. Tens of thousands of Googlers and acres of higher-end condominiums to house them would threaten to tear the fabric of one of the most diverse cities in America, where Asian American and Latino residents make up 34 and 33 percent of the population respectively. The campus could push more lower-income families even farther outside city limits, according to community leaders, families and activists.

At the same time, it would threaten to widen the economic divide between the city's wealthier residents and everyone else.

How? The proposed corporate campus could enflame San Jose's raging housing market, where families already struggled to find homes as median home values soared 24 percent during the last year and now stand over $1.1 million, Zillow reported. All of those jobs and the people that come with them also could erode the city's cultural identity and weaken public schools by reducing enrollment.

Yet, within this complex question lies an opportunity rarely found in gentrifying cities, a chance to create a new approach to corporate development. Perhaps it would not be a completely new model, but a first step toward one that better balances the needs of corporate America with those of working-class and poor families.

“Those are the biggest companies in the world, and I think they set precedent for when you are that big and you are valued at that much and you are making that much money, what is your responsibility not even to the world, what is your responsibility to the people down the street?” Andrew Bigelow, a 27-year-old musician, community organizer, and San Jose native, said.

To answer that question, San Jose's leaders must perform a delicate balancing act. The development promises needed jobs and revenue for this bedroom

Cities have the capability of providing something for everybody, only because, and only when, they are created by everybody.

– JANE JACOBS, “THE DEATH AND LIFE OF GREAT AMERICAN CITIES”
A construction site in downtown San Jose, and two other high-rise buildings under construction.
city—alone among the nation's 20 largest cities with more people at night than during the day, according to census data.

But, the city, which is already home to tech giant Adobe, needs to guard against the campus becoming a Trojan horse for lower-income families that hides higher rent and other forces that push them far from their communities. Community groups are pushing Google to hire San Jose residents first, though the types of jobs at the potential campus remain up in the air, while also creating well-paying jobs for contractors and construction workers.

“It’s an opportunity for a new model of a major tech company that wants to be part of a real city and a real place,” said Kim Walesh, deputy city manager and economic development director for San Jose. “We are in San Jose trying to collaborate, to co-create our future. People who care come to the table (not only with) issues, but to develop solutions...together that everyone can agree to.”

And this is not a problem unique to iconic Silicon Valley. Twitter’s expansion in San Francisco has pushed the region’s cost of living even higher and longtime families from the city. Drive 800 miles north, and you can see how Amazon’s growth is remaking Seattle’s skyline and neighborhoods, while the company’s self-generated race for a second headquarters raises questions about the true value of corporate homesteading around the country.

In San Jose, however, there is a chance to do things a little differently. It’s a city that tilts progressive on social issues, and bends conservative on some fiscal policies. It is also the third-largest city in a state that’s a national leader on social justice issues, including raising the minimum wage and immigration rights.

There are tentative but hopeful signs in the public engagement process, which began this spring. Google has signaled a willingness, though with few details, to look at the project’s impact on the city, as its leaders talk about a holistic approach focused on community, nature, innovation and economics.

“We are committed to make this a great thing, not just for Google, but for San Jose and all of its citizens,” the company’s general counsel Kent Walker said at the annual shareholders meeting in June. “We are also exploring possibilities of working on housing initiatives and other kinds of things that could address various impacts.”

Exploring possibilities is one thing. How or if those possibilities become realities remains the pressing question for many families.

“This (project) is not a small pebble in a pond. This is a huge rock,” Salvadore “Chava” Bustamante, executive director of Latinos United for New America in San Jose, said. “This project offers a lot of opportunities, but also a lot of challenges.”

For decades, corporate America has negotiated where to build its gleaming new headquarters with cities, unions and other power brokers. Today in San Jose, new brokers are emerging, led by the grassroots Silicon Valley Rising campaign, giving low-income families a stronger voice that perhaps this time will be loud enough to be heard.

The question is how will San Jose and Google listen to families? Will they hear their solutions at public meetings held by the project’s advisory group? Will families sit on policy-shaping organizations? Will their ideas be reflected in any final development plan?

Will they listen to Daniel Gonzalez?

We are in San Jose trying to collaborate, to co-create our future. People who care come to the table (not only with) issues, but to develop solutions...together that everyone can agree to.”

Kim Walesh
DEPUTY CITY MANAGER AND SAN JOSE ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT DIRECTOR

A mural of Cesar Chavez at an elementary school in East San Jose.
The Hidden Cost of Development

Daniel Gonzalez was born 33 years ago at the now-shuttered San Jose Medical Center in downtown. He went on to James Lick High School, where he met his future wife, spent a couple of years at San Jose State University, and now works in the public school system.

Over the years, the father of two watched his tight-knit family pull up stakes and leave San Jose. His parents, younger brother, aunts, uncles and cousins moved out into California’s Central Valley, as the cost of a home or rent on an apartment moved beyond their reach. Today, many of them now drive two to three hours, each way, to jobs in San Jose.

Asthey scattered, the bonds that sustain families weakened. When Daniel’s cousins ran into trouble – he saw two incarcerated and one deported – their family and support network was no longer down the block or the street. Instead, it was often hours away in the Central Valley.

“When things go sideways in the world you tend to feel alone and isolated. You don’t feel you have people you can lean on,” Gonzalez said. “Those are the hidden costs of this development” in San Jose.

Gonzalez sees a more visible cost in a vacant lot next to the city’s Eastridge mall.

The lot is being transformed into softball fields, Gonzalez says, even though families in nearby neighborhoods are far more likely to play soccer or basketball. It makes him wonder who those softball fields are for.

“This kind of sends a message things are being redeveloped, but for who?” Gonzalez said. “Development, that is not going to preserve any culture we have here.”

Gonzalez worries about who will preserve San Jose’s rich cultural history, including the campaigns for farmworker rights led by Cesar Chavez, who lived in San Jose, if longtime residents can no longer afford to live in the city.

“Chavez, a lot of his strikes and his marches were started in San Jose...Parents who worked with him” live here, Gonzalez said. “Who is going to tell that story? Who is going to carry on that history, that legacy?”

Andrew Bigelow is worried about telling his own story of San Jose, where he has lived his whole life, growing up on the East Side and playing football at West San Jose High School. Now he works as an organizer for Silicon Valley De-Bug, a community-focused organizing, advocacy and storytelling collective in San Jose.

After getting married last year, he realized they wouldn’t be buying a home in his hometown.

“We are never going to be able to own anything, unless we win the Lotto or my album goes platinum,” Bigelow, a past winner of the Sargent Shriver Youth Warriors Against Poverty Leadership Award, said. “Even if you make $100,000 a year, I don’t think you are ballin’ out here. I think you still have roommates.”

But, Bigelow isn’t dismissing the Google campus outright. He thinks some good could come from it, if nothing else the beginning of a new view of gentrification.

“It has to start sometime, so it should start now. It should have started yesterday. It should have started when I was a kid. They need to be accountable. They need to be in touch,” Bigelow said.

Andrew Bigelow’s nuanced view of a Google campus is a sign of the potential this project holds, one that is echoed guardedly by community organizations in the region.

“The people of San Jose have said over and over that Google is more than welcome in our city, but we need protection from big tech’s local legacy of evictions, homelessness and displacement,” Maria Noel Fernandez, director of the Silicon Valley Rising campaign and deputy director of Working Partnerships USA, said.

To secure those protections, Silicon Valley Rising is pushing for a community-benefits agreement, under which Google would commit to working on four core issues: fighting gentrification, displacement and homelessness; creating good-paying jobs and supporting local construction workers; committing to a new partnership with local education; helping to improve access to transit and mitigate the project’s impact on traffic; and agreeing to oversight and other mechanisms to enforce the agreement.

The coalition also wants Google to invest in affordable housing and quality job standards in local hiring.

“I don’t think Google’s responsibility is an open question honestly. Google is receiving a large (amount) of public good,” including potentially more than $10 billion of public investment in transit, valuable public land and zoning flexibility, Jeffrey Buchanan, director of policy at Working Partnerships USA, a member of Silicon Valley Rising, said.

A question-and-answer on the project provided by the city counters that the $10 billion estimate overstates investment needed to expand Diridon Station, which is expected to progress regardless of what happens with the Google campus, and that money will come from many sources.

Google stresses the city’s housing challenges and other issues highlighted by its proposed campus require work and collaboration among a range of partners, including the government, companies and other organizations.

“It is Google’s intention to have a very robust discussion, to make sure that everyone — nonprofits, residents, small business owners, educators — all have an opportunity to share their aspirations, their goals, their concerns through an open and transparent process,” Javier Gonzalez, the manager of government affairs and public policy, told The Mercury News, in April.
What’s Next?

For now, the project holds the promise of a new way. Whether that promise is realized will be clearer by the end of the year, when the City Council is expected to receive a memorandum of understanding, an initial statement of intent of sorts, between the city and Google.

In San Jose, some longtime residents see it as an empty promise.

“We don’t have any choice in this, and it’s been sold as an opportunity...for their community. But, what (it’s going) to really do is push out the folks in the community,” said Elizabeth Gonzalez, a leader of Serve the People San Jose, which is opposed to the campus. “There are so many families who are struggling here... who don’t see a future in San Jose.”

At Silicon Valley Rising, they are focused on getting their priorities and goals into that memorandum before it’s submitted to the City Council, work that is fueled by a movement of San Jose families.

Those priorities reflect realities of living in a gentrifying city in 2018: soaring rents; cultural dilution; and fraying of bonds among families who have called a city home for generations.

The campaign is “another reminder how people are really experts in their own lives...they are feeling the crisis every single day. They know it doesn’t have to be this way,” Silicon Valley Rising’s Fernandez said.

“We have an opportunity to choose a different way for our community.”

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PAUL NYHAN is the senior writer for Marguerite Casey Foundation’s Equal Voice News.
Helping the environment versus helping poor communities: For so long, it’s been viewed by many who are concerned about social change as picking one or the other. You can create jobs, but you can’t clean up polluting industries. You can encourage alternative energy, but that’s for communities of means, not for low-income neighborhoods.

But a grassroots coalition of community advocates and environmentalists in Illinois is working together to change that picture. They’ve forged an innovative partnership to bring clean energy, family-wage jobs and wealth building to some of the most disenfranchised communities in the Midwest. It’s called the Illinois Future Energy Jobs Act, and there are hopes it can serve as a model throughout the United States.

Some have called the Future Energy Jobs Act perhaps the most significant energy bill ever passed by the Illinois General Assembly. It took almost two years of near-constant meetings and negotiations involving consumer groups, faith communities, environmentalists, elected officials, grassroots organizations and power companies to get it crafted and passed into law in 2016. The law and dollars associated with it continue to be rolled out in 2018.

The Rev. Tony Pierce, board chair of Illinois People’s Action, talks about the importance of the state’s Future Energy Jobs Act and social justice. Photo source: Illinois People’s Action.
“It’s really exciting that we’re starting to see progress with this,” said Ben Ishibashi, a climate justice organizer with Illinois People’s Action, an interfaith community organization in downstate Illinois that advocates for social justice issues and is affiliated with People’s Action and People’s Action Institute. “We’re more than a year into it and we’re starting to see programs up and running. The very first jobs are now being created. I am so thrilled.”

Clean and Prosperous Communities

Dawn Dannenbring, an environmental organizer in Peoria with Illinois People’s Action, is part of the coalition that helped birth the Future Energy Jobs Act. The coalition includes Organizing Neighborhoods for Equality: Northside (ONE Northside) and The People’s Lobby (which is affiliated with The People’s Lobby Education Institute).

Dannenbring said it promises a more prosperous, healthier future on many levels for people in disenfranchised communities in Illinois. That includes low-wage earners, as well as people coming out of prison and substance-abuse treatment programs.

“(Before) people go through this program, many are lucky to be making $20,000 to $25,000 a year,” she said. “But these are $30,000 to $40,000 a year jobs. That’s entry into middle class.”

A Plus for Places and People

The progress is welcome because Peoria, by many indicators, can be a challenging place in the country to live if you’re Black. The poverty rate for Black residents

Future Energy Jobs Act Highlights

From the Citizens Utility Board of Illinois:

• A change in state renewable energy laws to spark billions of dollars in new investment to develop wind and solar power.
• Creation of a community solar program allowing entire neighborhoods to enjoy the benefits of solar energy, whether they can install solar panels on their rooftops or not. Community solar helps overcome barriers such as a lack of money upfront to purchase solar equipment or ownership of a single-family home to install it on. It allows households to enter into agreements to help fund solar energy installations in their neighborhood and then share in the proceeds generated by that installation.
• Funding in the amount of $750 million to provide training for green energy jobs and to help consumers cut utility bills. It’s expected to eventually spark tens of thousands of jobs connected to improvements in energy efficiency and renewable energy in Illinois – jobs like solar installers and efficiency auditors.

To learn more, visit the Illinois Clean Jobs Coalition: ilcleanjobs.org
in the city is 28.2 percent, versus 10.4 percent for the city’s White residents.

In addition, the average income for a Black household in the city is $28,777, while White households enjoy an average income that’s more than double that, at $58,563.

The city is home to about 113,000 residents, according to the U.S. Census Bureau.

Supporters, Dannenbring said, fought long and hard throughout the crafting of the act to include low-income communities in all aspects of it. Those communities are the ones “who feel climate change first and worst, because if they live in coastal cities, they live where it gets flooded. Other places, they live next to polluting factories and coal plants,” she said.

“If we’re having a clean energy revolution, they need to be a part of it. If there is going to be clean energy projects happening in our neighborhoods, we want people hired for that.”

They faced the fears of some in the environmental community on that point, she added. “It wasn’t that anyone was against it, but some groups were very honest and said they were worried first about carbon in the environment, then about jobs second,” Dannenbring said.

“We were pretty honest, too, and we told them, ‘That’s what is always said.’ We said, ‘No more getting in line. You want our support? You want us fighting for this? This is what we have to see to fight for it.’ ”

Jobs That Are Light Years Ahead

In May, clean energy training programs in downstate Illinois graduated their first classes. Some graduates almost immediately found jobs in the solar industry.

“Hearing that, people got teary eyes,” Dannenbring said. “Our folks are beating the odds and getting hired.”

About 25 percent of people who finished the class were Black, another 8 percent were Asian American and the remainder were White, she said. Overall, 40 members of the first class were women. “That made me so excited,” she said. “You have to be able to lift and carry 40- and 45-pound solar panels on roofs. These were jobs traditionally going to men.”

Environmental Justice for All Communities

The Rev. Tony Pierce, board chair of Illinois People’s Action and co-pastor of Heaven’s View Christian Fellowship in Peoria, said it boils down to the concept of environmental justice. The Future Energy Jobs Acts means lower power bills for people who need it, a chance for people frozen out of the job market to get decently paying clean energy jobs and an opportunity for whole communities previously disenfranchised to gain sovereignty over their energy needs.

It also means a cleaner, healthier environment for all, said Pierce, who also serves as CEO of Heaven’s View Community Development Corp. and Community Transformation Partnership Power.

More places in the United States need to move to a green economy, said George Goehl, executive director of People’s Action and People’s Action Institute. He hopes the transition pace to such an economy would be faster.

“Equally important is who benefits from that transition,” he said in a statement. “Rev. Pierce, Illinois People’s Action and other stakeholders are making sure poor and working class people are among the beneficiaries. The model they’ve created is without question one of the leading lights in ensuring a transition that is just and equitable.”

Pierce snorted at the notion that people of color don’t care about the environment. “Our mission…is to push lower class Whites, Browns and Blacks into the middle class,” said Pierce, a businessman before becoming a full-time minister. The act is “forecasted to create approximately 30,000 living- and prevailing-wage jobs between now and 2030. That’s a big vehicle to move people into the middle class,” he said.

“I think it’s analogous to when [technology] was a generation ago, when these guys named Gates and Jobs burst on the scene to transform America, with trillions of dollars in benefits to the country. That’s kind of a once-of-a-lifetime opportunity. Solar and green energy may be that opportunity for our generation.”

ELAINE PORTERFIELD is a Seattle-based writer, editor and communications professional. She has contributed to Seattle Magazine, Reuters, The New York Times and NBC.
Cesar Chavez Day is a time when communities nationwide honor the late civil rights and farmworker movement leader.
In 2018, families and grassroots leaders will come together to celebrate Cesar Chavez during the first weeks of April, to accommodate Easter and Holy Week. At rallies, speeches and parades they will reflect on the man’s accomplishments and the need for continued community progress. Cesar Chavez Day falls on March 31.

In South Texas, members of La Unión del Pueblo Entero (LUPE) – a community organization which Chavez and Dolores Huerta, a fellow farmworker and civil rights leader, founded – will hold its annual Chavez Day march and rally on April 7.

Hundreds of people are expected. In 2018, they will focus on recipients of the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program and SB 4, the Texas state law that immigrant families say will lead to deportations.

Marguerite Casey Foundation’s Equal Voice spoke with one youth leader from South Texas whose parents are among LUPE’s 8,000 members, about how Chavez and his calls for respect, dignity and equity continue to inspire people, especially in 2018.

Josué Aldape, 13
Mercedes, TX

Q: Could you tell me about yourself and your family?

We’ve been here, in the Rio Grande Valley, for 19 years. My parents came from Mexico because my oldest sister wanted to learn the English language and culture. I have five siblings.

We ended up liking it here. We know neighbors. Neighbors know us. We have family members here. We got connected here.

Q: When did you first learn about Cesar Chavez?

I think I was 4 or 5. LUPE has a meeting the first Friday of the month.

They would talk about things to make us strong. That’s where I learned about him.

They made us answer questions after reading an article about Cesar Chavez and his work to help farmworkers. They would ask: ‘What would you do if that happened to you?’

I would reply, ‘I would do exactly what he did.’ He helped people out.

He fought for farmworkers rights. He fought for portable restrooms for farmworkers. He started the United Farm Workers and LUPE.

Q: When did you realize the power of his ideas and work?

When I was in the third grade, I became involved in more LUPE meetings. I learned more about Cesar Chavez. I would speak with my parents about him.

They would say: ‘Were you at the meeting? What did you learn?’ They gave me a pop quiz. They were surprised that I was listening.

I like him because there are many temptations in South Texas. The way he lived, we live the same way. I like how he rose up.

I like to think of myself as a leader. I put myself in his shoes. I want to become like him. I want to stand up for people who need it the most.

Q: You’ve participated in LUPE meetings. How else have you participated in community events?

My mom would take us to rallies. Most of them were about low pay for farmworkers or people getting paid little, like at restaurants. We would protest and tell people to boycott because of the low pay.

Q: Why do you feel connected to people you might not know?

I felt their pain. I put myself in their shoes. Getting paid so little for all that hard work.

Q: You’ve had some special experiences at rallies and meetings. Could you talk about them?

In April 2016, I was interviewed by three television news stations and a newspaper. We were at an event for an immigration law. They asked how this issue would affect me and my family. I told them: ‘I am here today to fight for our rights and my family.’

Families need to stay together.

Q: You’ve also met U.S. House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi. What was that like?

It was in March 2017.

The stage fright was terrible. I had to tell them about my experience and how it would be better with immigration reform.

I was hoping I could make a change.

I kind of related to Cesar Chavez because I talked to people about immigration in the same way he talked with people about farmworkers.

We met at the main office of LUPE in San Juan.

Q: What did you say?

I told her reform would be better because parents can be united with their families when they have immigration documents. Parents have a chance to tell us about life. We love each other so much. We don’t want to get separated.

A child would have to work, pay the bills and assist a family.

Q: What did she say?

She said I was a brave soul. She thanked me for my thoughts. She even wrote us a letter from Washington, D.C.

It says: ‘The discussion was insightful, informative and enlightening. Your commitment to seek compassionate solutions is critical and greatly appreciated.’

Q: Cesar Chavez Day is on Saturday. What do you want people to know about him and dignity, especially in 2018?

I would like to tell them to put themselves in other people’s shoes. Not everybody knows how it feels. That’s why they don’t care.

Q: Why is caring important?

Without caring, there is nothing in life. If you don’t care about your children, who will feed them? If I don’t care about anybody, what am I doing in life?

Caring helps you be a better person.

Brad Wong, content editor for Equal Voice News, conducted this interview, which was edited for clarity.
Health Care in America: THE REAL
In 2017, Congress placed a target squarely on Medicaid’s back. Republican leaders pushed to cut hundreds of billions of dollars from the health care program, while Democrats, and some Republicans, defended it as critical to the nation’s most vulnerable families.

Medicaid’s fate remains up in the air, to be determined by looming budget battles, and perhaps even the 2018 midterm elections.

But what is Medicaid? More importantly, who relies on this sprawling $350-billion program that provides health insurance to approximately 74 million Americans?

Today, Medicaid ranks among the federal government’s largest commitments to the nation’s families, a complex and sometimes misunderstood joint venture between the federal and state governments on which 1 in 5 Americans relies for health care coverage, according to the Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation.

Medicaid was created 50 years ago with a smaller mission: to cover the nation’s neediest residents, largely those on public assistance. Over the years, it expanded to include people with disabilities and many pregnant women and children — it now covers nearly 40 percent of kids and 45 percent of births, according to Kaiser Health News. In 2010, the Affordable Care Act allowed states to increase eligibility to individuals who earn up to 138 percent of the federal poverty line.

Over the years, Medicaid became a net to catch those falling into widening gaps created by rising health care costs and falling rates of employer-provided coverage, according to Elise Gould, a senior economist at the Economic Policy Institute. By 2015, only 23 percent of those at the bottom of the pay scale had insurance through their employers.

Today, Medicaid covers a wide swath of Americans, ranging from low-wage workers to grandparents.

“Not only is it a health insurance program, it is our largest health insurance program,” said Eliot Fishman, senior director of health policy at Families USA, a Washington, D.C.-based health care advocacy group. “People from all different walks of life...depend on the Medicaid program.”

In what could be the greatest reduction in the social safety net in decades, Republicans now want to reshape Medicaid. In October, Congress passed a budget blueprint that proposes cutting Medicaid spending by roughly $1 trillion over 10 years, echoing the Trump
administration's budget, which would cut more than $800 billion in projected spending on the program over the same period.

With Medicaid on the chopping block, understanding who the modern program serves matters more than ever. To gain a clearer picture, Marguerite Casey Foundation's Equal Voice News traveled to Southern California to talk with people who use Medicaid – warehouse workers, millennials, an auto technician, and families who are White, Black, and Latino. We listened as they explained how a program born during the 1965 War on Poverty became an integral part of their lives.

On a sun-soaked deck overlooking Los Angeles, we met with millennial and former freelance writer Haley Potiker. Twenty-three miles away, we talked with Bruce Jefferson as he prepared to unload shipping crates at the Port of Los Angeles. A few hours down Interstate 5, we met the Donners in a middle-class beach community, grappling with fallout from a catastrophic medical crisis after decades in the workforce.

The bond that connects these families – separated by race, income and neighborhood – is their reliance on Medicaid at one point or another in their lives. These are the families with the greatest stake in the battle over how, or if, the health care program is resized and reshaped.

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NEW ECONOMY WORKERS FIND HEALTH CARE OUT OF REACH

LONG BEACH, Calif. – Every morning Bruce Jefferson arrives for work in the darkness of 4:45 a.m., joining hundreds of men walking down trails from the highway above, riding buses, or driving into the bowels of the Port of Los Angeles. They gather outside the gates of a single warehouse, where they will spend the day unloading shipping crates at one of the nation's busiest ports.

Jefferson and his coworkers represent another side of the new economy. While Haley Potiker is an example of millennial freelancers who feed the nation's media brands, Jefferson belongs to an army of lower-wage workers that keeps online shopping goods flowing – an army that often can't afford private health care coverage.

Despite their central role in the supply chain of today's retail industry – they move televisions, microwaves, tools, clothes, toys, even Christmas trees for online retailers and others – these workers typically earn minimum wage or a little more.

After two decades working in warehouses around Southern California, first as a lumper unloading shipping crates and now as a tire chocker securing the wheels of those crates, Jefferson, 57, earns just $12 an hour. He relies on Medicaid for his health care coverage.

There is “no way I am affording health care,” Jefferson said as he drank coffee from a portable mug and smoked a cigarette outside the warehouse on an unseasonably hot October day where temperatures would rise above 100 degrees. His current employer, a temporary staffing agency, offers a health care plan, but Jefferson says he can't pay the premiums on the $17,000 a year he takes home working full time on an unpredictable schedule.

The Venice Beach native has relied on California's Medicaid program, Medi-Cal, for the last eight years. He is far from alone. In 2014, 23 percent of low-income workers like Jefferson relied on Medicaid or other public health care coverage, according to the Kaiser...
Family Foundation.

“Those of us who are living paycheck to paycheck really need it,” Jefferson said as he waited to start work. “I believe they are trying to cut it to save money. Money shouldn’t be the issue. It should be about a person’s health.”

Today at the Port of Los Angeles, Jefferson is engaged in improving warehouse work that leaves many with few coverage options beyond Medicaid. He and other workers have joined forces with the Warehouse Worker Resource Center and the Teamsters Union to demand permanent jobs, safe conditions, and the right to organize under a union and a living wage, which could allow them to afford health care coverage.

Today, Jefferson doesn’t really have a choice. “It’s either [health care] or the rent,” he said.

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Covered by Medicaid:

- **45%** of all births
- **39%** of children
- **41%** of adults with HIV*
- **62%** of nursing home residents

*Ages 18-64  
Source: Kaiser Health News*
LOS ANGELES – Haley Potiker was a rising media star as recently as last year, writing for Vice News and Cosmopolitan, moonlighting as general manager of a hip-hop record label, and building a career in the nation’s entertainment capital, Los Angeles.

**Millennials Can’t Have It All, a Career Without Health Care**

As a member of the expanding on-demand workforce, Potiker wrote news stories and music profiles from her rooftop deck in LA’s hip Silver Lake neighborhood, with a view of downtown and the iconic Hollywood sign in the background.

But, there was another side to her burgeoning career in the new economy. As a freelance journalist, Potiker earned recognition, but not health insurance. Instead, she remained on her parents’ health care plan until she turned 26, when she was, by law, kicked off.

Even though Potiker worked two jobs – as a writer and label manager – and often logged 10 to 12 hours a day, she only earned about $25,000 a year heading into her late 20s in one of the nation’s most expensive cities. After she lost her parents’ coverage and began shopping for private health insurance she realized she couldn’t afford the $200 monthly premium.

Then one day a 3-inch-thick packet from a Los Angeles-based Medicaid program arrived at Potiker’s apartment, informing the more-than-fully-employed writer and manager she was eligible for the program.

“I put my health care on a credit card for four months until the Medi-Cal packet came along and saved me,” Potiker recalled. “I knew my pay was too unpredictable to put it on a debit card.”

Raised in the wealthy Orange County enclave of Villa Park and a graduate of Occidental College, Potiker never expected to need government help to cover her health care costs. But today, 41 percent of Medicaid enrollees have university degrees or some college experience, Kaiser Health News found.

Potiker was enrolled in Medicaid for two years, until she landed a job at the Los Angeles Alliance for a New Economy (LAANE) that provided a generous slate of benefits, including health care coverage.

Today, Medicaid covers streams of people, like Potiker, who are doing well professionally but still fall through gaps in the U.S. health care system. In the gig economy, even the most successful often lack access to employer-provided health coverage. Roughly 60 percent of working-age adults using Medicaid have jobs (not including those with a qualifying disability), according to an issue brief from the Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation. A little more than half of those working adults work full time, and 8 out of 10 are in a family where there is at least one worker, according to the foundation.

The number of uninsured workers could grow in coming years as the gig economy, which creates many flexible jobs that rarely come with the benefits of old-economy jobs, continues to expand, fueled partly by a freelancer-reliant online media. This growth, in turn, could expand the ranks of Medicaid.

“It’s unsustainable,” Potiker said. “It’s just really depressing.”

Potiker sees this unsustainable model all around LA, where she runs into yoga instructors, musicians, and fellow writers who, she’s certain, rely on Medicaid for their health care coverage.

Now Potiker is trying to change this model in her role as a communications specialist at LAANE, which works for better jobs and healthier communities. One of her projects is working on the Fair Workweek Los Angeles campaign, which encourages retailers to offer full-time jobs with stable schedules – and health care coverage.

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**Haley Potiker**
Age: 28
Work: Writer, communications specialist, record label manager
CHULA VISTA, Calif. – Philip Donner spent 37 years firmly in the nation’s workforce until one day he was pushed out, and onto Medicaid, by a series of medical catastrophes.

It all began one summer day three years ago, when the award-winning automotive technician thought he was coming down with a stomach flu. It turned out to be a combination of diverticulitis with perforations and an autoimmune disease. It nearly killed him.

Donner spent the next three months fighting for his life, enduring multiple operations and more than four weeks in a coma. He went into cardiac arrest five separate times.

Three months later, Donner says, his best friend from work visited him in the intensive care unit and told him his manager wanted to talk with him. He learned he would not only lose his job, but his health insurance would stop at the end of the month, even though his condition was only beginning to stabilize. His medical issues could last the rest of his life.

Over the next six months, Donner moved from the world of private health insurance into California’s Medicaid program, Medi-Cal. But, it wasn’t easy. First, no one told him his new health insurer dropped him five months after he left the hospital. He waited another two months to join Medi-Cal, and even then only succeeded after an advocate from San Diego’s Legal Aid Society intervened.

Finally, Medi-Cal began covering key medical expenses, even for the last two months Donner didn’t have coverage, including medications that cost thousands of dollars a month that Donner now had no way to pay. Since he needed help with many daily tasks, including getting dressed and showering, neither he nor his wife Lori could work, which meant they qualified for Medicaid.

Medicaid “was our lifeline. Because if we didn’t have that he couldn’t stay alive,” Lori Donner recalled. “If they cut all of [these] programs from Medicaid, what are we going to do? Are we going to all die? Because there is no other program that [is] going to pick it up.”

Today, Donner, now 63, relies on a patchwork of Medicaid and Medicare, the federal health care program for older Americans, for coverage. Each month, Medicaid alone covers Donner’s heart medicine for a condition diagnosed during his illness, deductibles for doctors’ visits, home care medical supplies and other costs.

“I am saying about $5,200 a month he would have to pay out of pocket if Medi-Cal, Medicaid, wasn’t there,” Lori Donner said. “That is what they would try to stick us with. He would be dead, because we wouldn’t have been able to afford that by then.”

Fifty years ago, Medicaid was created largely to cover welfare recipients. Today, it often acts like the nets slung below acrobats, catching families that fall. It catches workers like Philip Donner, who are blindsided by a medical catastrophe that robs them temporarily or permanently of the ability to work.

As Congress debates ways to reshape and cut future spending on health care coverage that is often a last resort for families, Philip Donner wonders why.

“It’s ridiculous to cut us first. They always go after the things that will make people cry. They screw the vets. They screw the people who need that help,” Donner said.

Donner understands Medicaid is far from perfect – he has seen its flaws, such as all of the red tape and lack of information, up close – and that it needs a lot of work.

But “it’s a good aid when you need it,” Donner added. “The government helps finance that little drop in the bucket that keeps a lot of people alive.”

PAUL NYHAN is the senior writer for Marguerite Casey Foundation’s Equal Voice News.
Two parents became leaders in the successful fight to remove Missouri’s ban on food stamps for those with felony drug convictions. They reflect a growing movement of families who, having known poverty intimately, are now working to remove barriers they face every day.
Johnny Waller was turned down for food stamps when he was essentially living at St. Jude Children’s Research Hospital in Memphis, Tennessee, as his two-year-old son Jordyn fought for his life against stage-four cancer in his stomach.

Given Jordyn’s fragile health, doctors told Johnny to prepare fresh food for him at the hospital. Money was tight since he had left his cleaning business back in Kansas City to care for his son. But that was temporary. Johnny just needed food stamps until he got back home and back to work.

Missouri state officials told Johnny not to bother even applying. He had a felony drug conviction, meaning he was banned for life from receiving food stamps, even though he was convicted at age 18. It didn’t matter that Johnny had done his time – two-and-a-half years in prison – and left his old gang life far behind. It didn’t matter that he now ran a cleaning business that was creating jobs in his community. What mattered was he was an ex-felon carrying a conviction for drug possession. That meant he and his son were ineligible for food stamps.

Johnny didn’t need food stamps a few years later when criminal justice organizer Lora McDonald called asking for help repealing the lifetime ban. He was back at work, his son having lost his battle with cancer five days before his fourth birthday. Johnny still carried Jordyn with him wherever he went, his face etched in blue tattoo ink down his right forearm.

The two were together at Rockhurst University in Kansas City, where Johnny earned a 4.0 GPA while working full time as vice president of a nonprofit that helped ex-offenders transition from prison.

It’s rare that people like Johnny – people who have actually lived in poverty – shape the policies that shape their lives. They are left outside the halls of power – legislatures, city councils, mayors’ offices, governors’ mansions and the White House – where policies are made. And others, including their own advocates, work for them instead of with them.

So when Lora gave Johnny the opportunity to enter those halls – in this case the Missouri Statehouse – he
It creates that space through training that helps people understand and identify what has oppressed them. Then they take calculated risks to confront symbols of that oppression – Johnny confronted the State Legislature – in structured ways. Gamaliel's work is based on families owning, not simply telling, their stories.

"When you own your story, you have the courage to create something," said Ana Garcia-Ashley, national executive director at Gamaliel, which has 44 affiliates in 16 states. "You are changing the hearts and minds by you having the courage to transform your own story."

Gamaliel also connected Johnny to a broader movement of families across the country that was driving solutions to problems they faced every day. A big part of Gamaliel’s work is challenging the myths and misperceptions – often called the dominant narrative – that surround poor people, people of color, immigrants and youth. When policymakers are confronted with the reality of poverty, it is much harder for them to create policies based on myths.

When Lora McDonald took over as executive director of Gamaliel’s Kansas City affiliate, More2, she began...

"Who knows it better than me? I’ve lived it."

Johnny Waller
gathering more stories like Johnny’s to challenge those myths. Together, families and Gamaliel’s leaders built a movement that fought to remove the food stamps ban as well as other barriers for low-income families, including lack of access to good jobs, reliable transportation, decent housing and healthy food.

Because it takes more than one story to dispel myths. It takes a movement.

“Who has the right to label me?”

It seemed like Christine McDonald had been written off much of her life. Then one day she sat in a Kansas City rehabilitation center and listened to a senior counselor pronounce her “unrehabilitatable.”

She had lost her eyesight in three days due to a rare disorder, after facing a terrible choice while pregnant. She could take medication for the disorder, but it posed a severe risk to her unborn child. She chose not to take the medication.

The center could place her in a sheltered workshop for people with disabilities, where she would earn $6 a day. And that was as good as it would get.

This was just the latest version of what she heard often during more than 20 years of living on the streets and in the public parks of Kansas City, Mo., where she struggled with addiction and was a victim of human trafficking. She was routinely pushed to the margins, told she didn’t matter.

But at the rehab center that day in 2006, she had been clean and out of jail for several years, learning how to be blind, and building a life for herself and her six-month-old son. She wanted to take the same steps as many other Americans: enroll in college; land a job that supports her family, and find a good place to live.

Christine needed food stamps to help feed her family temporarily, while she worked toward a degree and a new job. But like Johnny Waller, she was banned for life from the assistance because of felony drug convictions.

It seemed every time Christine tried to take a step forward toward her new life, she was written off: as an ex-felon, a recovering addict, disabled or “unrehabilitatable.” But really, she was poor and struggling in America, and that label more than any other made her invisible to people in power.

It turned out those labels were dead wrong. Within years of being told she was beyond rehabilitation, Christine earned a college degree, along with a high school diploma, was co-director of a nonprofit that fought human trafficking, and was raising her son as a single mother.

“Nobody has the right to sit on the other side, a person of authority, a person of power...to sit on the other side of the desk of somebody trying to get help and say they are not fixable,” said Christine. “Who has the right to label me?”

Over the next five years, Christine and Johnny together would begin changing the policies that had threatened to hold them back, including emerging as leaders in the successful fight to remove Missouri’s ban on food stamps for those with felony drug convictions.

It began one morning in 2008 when Christine sent a
Gamaliel, a faith-based community organizing network with 44 affiliates in 16 states, addresses the root causes of racial and economic inequity. It nurtures grassroots efforts by getting people civically involved, developing leaders and promoting collective advocacy.

Each of its affiliates is a coalition of faith and community groups working locally to address the systems that create racial inequity and poverty. The organization and its affiliates are currently working to reform criminal justice and immigration policies that destroy the fabric and livelihood of communities, and they are working to improve public schools and create access to good jobs through public transportation projects.

Since the organization was founded in 1986, families who are most affected by racial and economic inequity have led Gamaliel’s work. It is the first national faith-based organization mobilizing low-income families led by a woman of color, Ana Garcia-Ashley.

— By Janelle Choi, program officer at Marguerite Casey Foundation.

The Gamaliel Way

Gamaliel, a faith-based community organizing network with 44 affiliates in 16 states, addresses the root causes of racial and economic inequity. It nurtures grassroots efforts by getting people civically involved, developing leaders and promoting collective advocacy.

Six Long Years

Every year for the next six years, Christine, Johnny and Lora traveled 150 miles to Missouri’s state Capitol in Jefferson City, and explained to legislators the fundamental flaws of the ban – a vestige of the 1996 welfare reform act that many states had already jettisoned. Who understood those flaws better than them?

“If I would have been a murderer. If I had done a drive-by shooting or if I had robbed a bank I could have gotten food stamps, alright,” Christine said. “But, because I was an addict and dealt with the disease of addiction I was part of a lifetime ban, even though I had never had a violent arrest.”

Over and over again, Johnny and Christine explained how food stamps worked in the real world and why families need them.

Finally, at yet another hearing, they decided to share what they had accomplished in the six years the bill had been stalled in committee. Johnny first graduated from Johnson County Community College with honors, then graduated with honors from Rockhurst University after earning an academic scholarship. Christine was speaking around the country on human trafficking and had already published the first of her two books.

“And in six years you guys can’t manage to get this to the floor to a vote,” Lora told them. “It worked. I think that day was the day they voted it out of committee.”

There was another shift that day.

The “first time the bill made it out of committee to the House floor was when Johnny was treated like an expert,” Lora recalled. “They were the ones that flipped legislators to vote yes.”

In June, 2014, Missouri lifted its lifetime ban on residents with three or less felony drug convictions, though restrictions remained, according to The Kansas City Star.

Only the Beginning

Christine and Johnny belong to a growing movement of families who, having known poverty intimately, are now gaining access to the halls of the power. It’s the combination of their stories and expertise with Gamaliel’s model that is opening doors to those halls – and to change.

Today, Johnny is poised to graduate from business school with an MBA in December. Once again, he earned a 4.0 GPA. And he still works full time.
Since the food stamp ban was lifted, Johnny has worked on two successful campaigns to ban boxes on job applications that ask if an applicant has a felony conviction. He joined another that raised the age someone can be charged as an adult for many crimes to 18. Today, he is busier than ever.

"It’s led to actually me having the courage now to go out and (campaign) on other issues," Johnny said.

These days, you often find Johnny in a cigar lounge and shop in a Kansas City suburb, organizing for another campaign, working or studying for his MBA.

“I am going to tell my story,” Johnny said, as he sat amid leather chairs, a walk-in humidor and hanging flat-screen televisions, apparently the only Black person in the lounge. “However long it takes. We are in it for the long haul.”

Meanwhile, Christine has moved on to other pieces of legislation, and is active in many arenas. Today, for example, she sits on multiple state boards, including the Missouri Attorney General’s Human Trafficking Task Force, and a state advisory council on behavioral health and substance abuse disorders. She also is director of advocacy at Restoration House of Greater Kansas City, a long-term residential program for victims of trafficking, and a respected author and speaker on social justice issues.

When Christine first joined the debate over food stamps, “I didn't think people like me had that kind of power.” But, every time she testified before Missouri legislative committees she gained confidence.

Now, she hopes to run for political office in the future.

“We all have the ability to change the world, and us,” she said.

PAUL NYHAN is the senior writer for Marguerite Casey Foundation’s Equal Voice News.

“
I didn’t think people like me had that kind of power. We all have the ability to change the world, and us.”

Christine McDonald
National Family Platform –
We Ask. We Listen. We Act.

At our May 2018 National Convening, we surveyed over 400 grantees and community leaders about the National Family Platform. It consists of 15 issue areas affecting poverty, such as employment and education, and policy recommendations for progress for families. Tens of thousands of families created it after they participated in 65 town halls in 2007 and 2008. In 2008, 15,000 families approved it during a multi-city convention. The Platform serves as a tool to demonstrate that families don’t lead single-issue lives. It shows how the challenges families experience are cross-issue and cross-region – and how this work builds alliances, long term change, and connects families to a larger national movement.

Who responded?

68% Grantee staff
32% Community leaders

How familiar are respondents with the National Family Platform?

12% Not at all familiar
61% Moderately or extremely familiar
35% Slightly or somewhat familiar

How frequently do respondents use the National Family Platform?

13% Never
52% Frequently or often
35% Sometimes or rarely
Impact of Platform and Use

We asked attendees about the impact of the Platform and how they use it. These findings are presented below:

Guiding Light

The Platform provides grantee organizations with a framework to ensure family issues remain in the spotlight. As challenges can feel endless for families, it keeps communities focused on important issues and strategies to address these challenges.

Intersectionality of Issues

Many issues affect families on a given day. The Platform reflects this complexity. It shows how the challenges families experience are felt across the country and connects communities to a larger national movement for progress.

Connections Among Organizations

The Platform deepens relationships among organizations working toward shared goals. Within Equal Voice networks, composed of nonprofit organizations and families nationwide, it serves to create unity for communities, align priorities and build a vision for progress.

Commitment to Families and Organizing

The Platform inspires grantee organizations to work on issues that families identify as important to their well-being. It includes family voices to lift up the need for comprehensive policy reform for genuine social change.

Connections Among Organizations

The Platform deepens relationships among organizations working toward shared goals. Within Equal Voice networks, composed of nonprofit organizations and families nationwide, it serves to create unity for communities, align priorities and build a vision for progress.
Future Use of the Platform

We asked about future use of the Platform and how to increase awareness and use. These findings are presented below:

**Building Connections Among Organizations**
Grantees will continue to work with other organizations on shared issue areas in the Platform. Building relationships both within and across regions and states will strengthen coalitions and amplify the connections among organizations. Grantees suggest using the Platform to bring attention to shared issues across the U.S., connecting local efforts to national ones, strategies to address these challenges.

**Intersectionality of Issues**
Grantees plan to integrate the Platform into ongoing programming. That will include expanding focus areas to be more holistic, bringing awareness (based in research) to the issue areas on which they do not currently work and using it as the base to develop organizational platforms. Additionally, across all regions, respondents suggest using the Platform as a tool with candidates to evaluate their support of families.

**External Communications**
Some grantees want to use the Platform as a communications and recruitment tool in the future. Leveraging the issues that validate the work of organizations and connecting them to a national movement would demonstrate that there is widespread agreement on the urgency of the issues and potentially serve as a way to recruit allies. It may also serve as a basis for communications with community members and funders to help understand how these issues affect us all.

What’s Next?

In response to this feedback, Marguerite Casey Foundation will refresh the National Family Platform and make it available in several different formats (print and online, in Spanish as well as English) to continue to make this a useful resource for families and grantees.
National Convening Paper
"Our Power. Our Community. Our Change."

Visit caseygrants.org to access the full National Convening paper.
GRANTEES

"MCF is one of, if not the, most significant funders of community-organizing and movement building. Their emphasis on long-term, general operating [grants], and trusting the leaders of the organization they fund is unique in the field."

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D: Demos: A Network for Ideas & Action • Diné Citizens Against Ruining our Environment

E: East Bay Alliance for a Sustainable Economy • East Bay Community Foundation • Economic Policy Institute • Ella Baker Center for Human Rights • Enlace Chicago • Environmental Health Coalition • Equal Voice Action • Equal Voice Education Network

F: Families and Friends of Louisiana’s Incarcerated Children (FFLIC) • Family Action Network Movement • Farmworker Association of Florida: Farmworkers Self-Help • Farmworker Association of Florida • Florida Immigrant Coalition • Florida Institute for Reform & Empowerment dba Organize Florida Education Fund • Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt Institute: Rewriting the Rules: An Inclusive Economic Vision

G: Gamaliel Foundation •

Georgia Strategic Alliance for New Directions and Unified Policies (STAND-UP) • Grassroots Collaborative • Grassroots Global Justice • Grassroots Leadership • Greater Birmingham Ministries

H: Highlander Research and Education Center • Hispanic Interest Coalition of Alabama • Hispanics in Philanthropy • Hope CommUnity Center

I: Illinois Coalition for Immigrant and Refugee Rights • Inner-City Muslim Action Network • Inner-City Muslim Action Network: United Congress of Community and Religious Organizations • Institute for Policy Studies: Black Worker Initiative • Instituto de Educación Popular del Sur de California (IDEPSACA) • Interfaith Worker Justice • Jobs for the Future: Opportunity Works in New Orleans • Joint Center For Political And Economic Studies

K: Kentucky Coalition • Kenwood Baker Community Foundation • Khmer Girls in Action

L: La Unión del Pueblo Entero • Labor/Community Strategy Center • Latino Center for Prevention and Action in Health and Welfare dba Latino Health Access • Lawyers’ Committee for Civil Rights Under Law: Parental Readiness and Empowerment Program (“PREP”) • Logan Square Neighborhood Association • Los Angeles Alliance for a New Economy • Louisiana Center for Children’s Rights

M: McIntosh Sustainable Environment and Economic Development • Metropolitan Tenants Organization • Mi Familia Vota Education Fund • Mijente Support Committee • Mississippi Center for Justice • Mississippi Low-Income Child Care Initiative • Morehouse School of Medicine: Satcher Health Leadership Institute • Mountain Association for Community Economic Development (MACED)

N: National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) • National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy • National Domestic Workers Alliance • National Korean American Service & Education Consortium • Black Youth Project 100 • National LGBTQ Task Force • National Partnership for New Americans • National Urban Indian Family Coalition • Native American Youth and Family Center • National Urban Indian Family Coalition • Native Americans in Philanthropy • Native Movement dba Black Mesa Water Coalition • NAVA Education Project • Neighborhood Funders Group • NEO Philanthropy: National Guestworker Alliance • New Florida Majority Education Fund • New Florida Majority Education Fund: Florida Rights Restoration Coalition • New Mexico Acequia Association • New Venture Fund: National Collaborative for Health Equity • Nollie Jenkins Family Center • North Florida Educational Development Corporation

O: Oficina Legal del Pueblo Unidos dba Texas Civil Rights Project • OLE Education Fund • One America: English Innovations • Organizing Neighborhoods For Equality: Northside

P: Parent Institute for Quality
Education ◦ Parents for Public Schools ◦ Partnership for Community Action ◦ People’s Action Institute ◦ People’s Lobby Education Institute ◦ PICO National Network ◦ Primavera Foundation ◦ Progressive Technology Project ◦ Project South: Institute for the Elimination of Poverty & Genocide ◦ Promise Arizona ◦ Proyecto Azteca ◦ Proyecto Juan Diego ◦ Public Allies: Power Coalition ◦ Puente Human Rights Movement

R: Radio Bilingüe ◦ Restaurant Opportunities Centers United ◦ Right to the City Alliance

S: San Diego LGBT Community Center ◦ San Diego LGBT Community Center: Engage San Diego ◦ Santa Fe Indian School: Leadership Institute ◦ Silicon Valley De-Bug ◦ Solidago Foundation: The Workers Lab ◦ Somos Un Pueblo Unido Southern Echo ◦ Southerners on New Ground ◦ SouthWest Organizing Project ◦ State Voices ◦ Statewide Organizing for Community eMpowerment Resource Project ◦ Strategic Actions for a Just Economy (SAJE) ◦ Strategic Concepts in Organizing and Policy Education (SCOPE)

T: ◦ TARGET Area Development Corporation ◦ Tennessee Immigrant and Refugee Rights Coalition (TIRRC) ◦ Tewa Women United ◦ Texas Organizing Project Education Fund ◦ Texas RioGrande Legal Aid ◦ The Fresno Center ◦ Tides Center: Opportunity Agenda ◦ Tides Center: Dream Defenders ◦ Tunica Teens in Action

B: Broadway Corporation ◦ United We Dream Network ◦ University of Maryland Baltimore County Shriver Center, Choice Program ◦ University of Texas at El Paso: Center for Civic Engagement ◦ Urban Habitat

V: Voices for Alabama’s Children

W: W. Haywood Burns Institute ◦ Westside Health Authority ◦ William J. Brennan Jr. Center for Justice ◦ Workers Defense Project ◦ Working Partnerships USA

Y: YMCA of Greater Long Beach Community Development Branch ◦ YouthBuild USA: Opportunity Youth United

Equal Voice Networks: Alabama

U: UnidosUS ◦ United South

To learn more about the Marguerite Casey Foundation’s grantees, visit caseygrants.org