

# Poverty-reduction measures informed by research, affected communities

Census figures show that almost 16 percent of U.S. citizens and a similar percentage of Michigan residents have incomes below the federal poverty line.

Poor children alone are at risk for homelessness, hunger, subpar academic achievement, and even emotional and health problems.

Galvanized by the incidence of poverty and its effects, a team of WMU experts has aligned with a statewide anti-poverty initiative to offer the movement poverty-reduction strategies informed by research as well as by residents of low-income communities.

The Voices for Action Poverty Reduction Initiative has the goal of cutting Michigan's poverty rate in half by 2020.

As part of that effort, WMU social work, legal affairs, evaluation and public policy experts, along with their partner-consultants, The Bingman Group, are evaluating the effectiveness of programs with anti-poverty related missions.

Together they'll use their expertise to help these various organizations develop best-practice models and to assist them in making programmatic changes where necessary. The W.K. Kellogg Foundation has granted \$245,000 toward this work.

Led by Dr. Linwood Cousins, professor of social work, and Dr. Earlie Washington, dean of the College of Health and Human Services, the WMU research team has made connections with community organizations that serve the poor.

The focus of the Early Learning Neighborhood Collaborative, for instance, is on school readiness. The Grand Rapids nonprofit



Cousins and Washington

provides children in poor areas of the city with an early start to education.

A WMU evaluation team from the College of Health and Human Services and educational consultant, Dr. Lloyd Bingman, are working with the ELNC to assess its kindergarten-readiness efforts.

Specifically, the team is assessing how the ELNC helps parents and caregivers prepare children for kindergarten.

Their evaluation also is assessing the nonprofit organization's progress toward its goal of providing,

expanding and sustaining the capacity of high-quality early care and education programs in Grand Rapids neighborhoods deemed vulnerable.

Meanwhile, the team also is conducting an evaluation for another Grand Rapids nonprofit, the Hispanic Center of Western Michigan.



Lloyd Bingman



Teresa Bingman

The ongoing assessment for the Hispanic center involves evaluating the organization's goal to improve its operational capacity as an anchor agency, both locally and regionally, for improving immigrant-rights advocacy and racial equity for Latinos impacted by heightened anti-immigrant speech, legislation and law-enforcement action, according to Teresa Bingman, policy analyst and principal with The Bingman Group. This includes strengthening partnerships with the Mexican Consulate, she says.

Evaluators also are assessing the center's programs that strengthen parental involvement and civic educational issues.

These projects are supported with grants in the amount of \$125,000 and \$120,000, respectively, from the Kellogg Foundation.

## Research and community engagement

Central to community-based research, Cousins says, is striking a balance between the perspectives of experts who visit those communities and the perspectives of residents who live in them.

One of the key components of the Voices for Action project headed up by WMU researchers was a series of community engagement forums in Kalamazoo.

Through the forums, low-income communities shared their thoughts and needs with organizers. Three issues came to the fore: jobs, education and healthcare.

"When you listen to people in poverty, you give them their dignity and show respect," Cousins says. "Some of their stories involved structural inequalities and some involved unwise personal decisions.

In listening, we neither condone their decision-making nor justify the unjustness of the system. We try to listen and leave them with their dignity."

Bingman noted that "from these forums, trust was built and earned on both sides... This gave WMU credibility in the community. Collaboration is key."

One participant in a 2012 forum put it this way: "I am pleased to participate in the UC Collaborative because people listen to me and others to find out what we need to improve our lives. We have our own thoughts

as low-income people about how we can do better, but people don't listen to us and hear our needs."

Cousins' overall plan is to help establish the Univers Community Empowerment Center at WMU, housed at the College of Health and Human Services.

"The UCEC will become an innovative leader in focused research and asset development through community collaboration," Cousins says. "The center will provide leadership in training, consultation and technical assistance, as well as applied research, program development and evaluation."

Voices for Action is contributing \$340,000 to support the creation of a university-based "empowerment" center that would be a hub for research, technical assistance and training for programs.

Cousins says that his interest in poverty is rooted in a desire to understand all the issues related to being poor—political, economic equity and access as well as access to healthcare and employment.



Growing up in segregated neighborhoods, Cousins says, poverty and discrimination are associated with the most part, people of color within the workforce. As I got older, it affected other people. But what I saw in my community was interest and hope where I am to

"To help people help myself. We are interlocking and helping ourselves. In helping ourselves, we are helping our community."

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