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| **From Poverty to Prosperity:** **Making the Case for a Public Response** |

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| ***Public Works: The Dēmos Center for the Public Sector****September 13, 2010*Greetings colleagues –We know that many of you will be drawing attention to the new poverty numbers set to be released this month.  In addition to highlighting what the numbers will tell us about the increases in poverty related to the effects of the recession and persistent unemployment, we here at Public Works think that this is also an opportunity to specifically articulate that government has a critical role to play in addressing poverty.  We know that many of you already make this point, but we thought that some of the findings from our research and field work might be helpful as you prepare your public communications efforts this week. In our field work, when we are working with anti-poverty advocates, we urge them to think about the big-picture story they are trying to tell, the one that can engage the public and help them see why addressing poverty is a shared responsibility and that we are all affected when families in our communities struggle economically.  There are three elements to this big story:           **Interdependence** - economically, we are all interconnected and interdependent;          **Intentionality** - we can shape an economy that works for all of us; and          **Government has a Role** – our public structures and systems are the foundation of our economy and they are our tools for achieving the common good.  We hope that the resources that follow help you think about weaving these themes into your public communications efforts so that we can create a new narrative in our country about the causes of poverty and the ways we can help build prosperity in our communities.  In this email missive, we include:           [*Making the Case for Public Response to Poverty*](#making)         [*Understanding the Intersection of Public Perceptions about Government, the Economy and Poverty*](#understanding)         [*Traps to Avoid*](#traps)         [*Resources on Poverty and Prosperity*](#resources)*.*          [*Quoteworthy*](#quote)***All of these materials can be found at*** [***From Poverty to Prosperity***](http://sites.google.com/site/demospublicworks/from-poverty-to-prosperity) ***on*** [***www.publicworkspartners.net***](http://www.publicworkspartners.net/)***.***  |
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| **Making the Case for a Public Response to Poverty** iStock_000006968889Medium[1]We need a more productive narrative about the causes of and solutions to poverty.    We need a narrative that helps our audiences to see poverty as a systemic problem and to see how government can effectively help to create prosperity in families and in our communities.   Our research shows that communications including three important elements can do just that:    1.       **Interdependence and community.**   Not only are all Americans connected economically, our economic fortunes are dependent upon each other.  We all benefit when our communities thrive, when we build resiliency across generations, and when our economy is strengthened.   2.       **Intentional economy.**   We can shape the economy to meet our common goals through the policies we promote and the structures we create.  History tells us this is so.  The American middle class didn’t arise by accident.  We built it through policies--such as home mortgage deductions, the GI Bill, and tax and investment policies that allow people to build savings.  We can continue to build and strengthen the middle class—the engine driving our economy—with intentional and proactive choices that help people move from poverty into economic stability. 3.       **Government as a tool for our common good.**  The core mission and purpose of our government is to protect and promote the common good.  It is exactly at times like these that we must act to protect the well-being of our communities and our states.  Our public structures and systems are our mechanisms for doing that.  These public structures are foundational to prosperity and economic stability.  They are the strength of the middle class.  They are essential to our quality of life.  **Understanding the Intersection of Public Perceptions** |
| 3.1220591779@web55107.mail.re4.yahooThose advocating for policy changes that promote prosperity are operating at a challenging intersection of public perceptions and attitudes about the economy, the role of government, and poverty and individual responsibility.  Each of these comes with powerful and dominant cultural narratives:         **The Economy** is a difficult topic for Americans—one they prefer to leave to experts. When they do think about it, they think of it as a force of nature – beyond anyone’s control.  Or, they perceive the economy as having been shaped by the hard work and moral decisions of individuals—not by public sector action.  From these perspectives, it appears that the free market naturally, and properly, leads to different outcomes for different individuals.           **Government** is equated with bickering politicians or seen as an incompetent and wasteful bureaucracy. In both these views, the day-to-day work of government is obscured.  Americans see their own roles as consumers of government --  rather than as citizens/managers with a stake in the competence of the public sector.          **Government’s role in shaping economic outcomes** is seen as reactive—rescuing the deserving as a last resort and policing bad actors. When it performs these limited roles, it’s seen as creating dependency and smothering business.  Proactive roles for government -- such as helping to direct economic policies to benefit us all –are largely unseen.         **Poverty and individual responsibility** are connected in the public mind.  Many  believe that individuals are responsible for their Text Box:  own economic conditions and that hard work brings success while laziness brings failure. Anyone can achieve the “American Dream” through equal opportunity, but equal outcome is not guaranteed.These public beliefs leave three big holes for us to fill in our communications:          Systemic causes of poverty – that poverty is not only determined by individual effort, but also by broader economic conditions and by policy choices.           The idea that the economy can be shaped to benefit us all—that inequality doesn’t just “happen.”         The idea that government policies can and should help to address poverty. **Expanding the Economic Opportunity “Story”**As we advocate for particular policies, we need to tell a narrative that moves our audiences beyond their current default understanding of poverty to a more productive understanding.

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| **From:** | **To:** |
|          Independence |          Interdependence |
|          Financial independence |          Financial stability |
|          Individual and family benefit and success |          Community/generational benefit and resilience |
|          Policy by policy |          Intentional systems |
|          Out of “poverty” |          Shared prosperity |
|          An educated consumer |          Empowered citizens |
|          Crisis and problems |          Solutions |

**Traps We Want to Avoid**These common beliefs about the economy, individual responsibility and government together shape average Americans’ thinking about poverty.  As communicators, we want to pay attention to the ways that our own narratives tap into these beliefs and ultimately misdirect and “trap” audiences into unproductive thinking.  Some “traps” to avoid:           Triggering “Nanny” Government.  While it’s important to articulate the role that government has in addressing poverty, try to make it a systems and community well-being story -- one about creating economic conditions and opportunity -- not just a story about how government should “take care of those vulnerable people.”            Otherizing the programs that serve low-income families.  Even when programs directly serve only a portion of our population – low-income children, people with disabilities or families in need -- we need to help our audiences see how our entire communities and states benefit from them.  We need to illuminate how all of us – and our whole economy -- benefits when prosperity is widely shared.           Inequality Happens.  It is deeply ingrained in the American mind that economic success is the result of individual effort.  As a result people tend to see inequality as the unfortunate, but natural, result of the fact that some people work hard and make good choices (and sometimes get lucky) and others are lazy and make bad choices (and are sometimes unlucky).  We want to be careful to not cue up this powerful morality tale. We can avoid it by focusing on how important it is for our overall success to create opportunity for all, to use our public systems to build up pathways for a robust and prosperous middle class.           Telling a Portrait Story. Often, reporters want to “put a face on poverty” and ask us for individuals to interview to include in their stories. However, research conducted by Shanto Iyengar, Stanford Professor of Political Science, demonstrates that narratives focusing on individuals as opposed to those that draw attention to systemic causes often backfire.  You can turn a “portrait story” into a “landscape story” by directing a reporter away from individual program recipients and instead encouraging them to interview a food pantry director who can tell the broader story of middle class families requesting assistance, a day care provider who can discuss the changing demographics among the families seeking subsidies, or a temporary employment agency director who could speak to the proliferation of low-wage jobs.    “Analysis of news reports suggest that when poverty is framed as a societal problem, society is deemed responsible. Alternatively, when news presentations illustrate poverty with a specific example of a poor person, responsibility is assigned to the individual.”  (Iyengar, 1990)      Self-sufficiency.  Often, when talking about anti-poverty programs, we speak about the goal of helping families achieve "self-sufficiency.”  However, when we do, we cue up another powerful mythology – that each of us can make it entirely on our own if we only work hard enough, get a good education and take advantage of opportunities – and we suppress a much needed recognition of economic interdependence.  We need to raise awareness about the need to work together to address the root causes of community problems, not just address individual circumstances. **Resources on Prosperity and Poverty**Here are some resources on the issues of poverty and prosperity that we’ve been reading:  [How to (not) talk about Poverty.](http://www.google.com/url?sa=t&source=web&cd=1&ved=0CBIQFjAA&url=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.inclusionist.org%2Ffiles%2FCMC%2Fpovertyframingchicago.pdf&ei=IgeMTJ3yOoa8lQeImIVh&usg=AFQjCNEgx5V79MmB1SjBkt20xMLbqoyJuw&sig2=_eHtyINHRuSs2Fcwp7ezVg)Margy Waller.  Mobility Agenda [Economy that Works for All](http://www.economythatworks.com/)[The Opportunity Agenda](http://opportunityagenda.org/)[You can there from here…](http://www.pdx.edu/sites/www.pdx.edu.cupa/files/media_assets/seofinequity.pdf) *an occasional paper series from the Social Equity and Opportunity Forum of the College of Urban and Public Affairs.  Apr. 2008.*This series includes“*Provoking Thought, Changing Talk: Discussing Inequality*” by Joe Grady and Axel Aubrun that explains how difficult it is for people to understand the issue of inequality, and “*Provoking Thought, Changing Talk: Putting it into Practice*” by Larry Wallack and Lori Dorfman that explore the implications of Grady and Aubrun’s piece. [Record number in government anti-poverty programs.](http://www.usatoday.com/news/washington/2010-08-30-1Asafetynet30_ST_N.htm?loc=interstitialskip) *USA Today. August 30, 2010.*  This article includes current data on the growth in government anti-poverty programs during the Great Recession.   [17 Percent of America in Anti-Poverty Programs](http://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2010/08/17-percent-of-america-in-anti-poverty-programs/62263/).  *The Atlantic. August 30, 2010.* provides brief commentary on these new statistics. |

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