Background:
Nearly 50 million Americans now live below the federal poverty line. Recent societal, economic and political events (economic meltdown, mortgage foreclosure epidemic, Trayvon Martin, Hurricane Katrina, Ferguson, Missouri, Michelle Alexander’s “The New Jim Crow,” 9/11, the “school to prison pipeline,” unaccompanied minors coming across the border, etc.) have given rise to unprecedented public awareness of income inequality in America, the number of children living in poverty and the disparate treatment and impacts of the law and justice systems on communities of color and populations that face other barriers and obstacles to justice, such as disability, limited English proficiency, immigrant status and other factors.

Initiative Goal:
Identify, promote and implement best practices for eliminating legal and justice system-related policies, practices and procedures, including those tainted by structural racialization and other forms of bias, that perpetuate or worsen the harmful effects of poverty and discrimination on individuals, families and households, including barriers to individual and community well-being, personal and physical safety, food security, health care, education, employment at a living wage, safe, stable and affordable housing, meaningful political participation and access to justice.

Working Definition of Poverty:
Poverty is a state or lived experience caused and perpetuated by various, often compounded, factors such as:
• Inadequate economic resources and opportunity to build assets, including employment, adequate income and assets to meet basic human needs such as food, housing, clothing, etc.;
• Insufficient access to social resources such as healthcare, justice and education;
• Weak political standing and limited opportunity for meaningful association and engagement;
• Isolation and lack of cultural identity support;
• Inability to hold institutions and individuals accountable for fair and equitable behavior;
• Disparate treatment based on poverty compounded by other forms of structural unfairness and disparity based on race, ethnicity, gender identity, disability, age, religion, sexual orientation, indigenous identity, national origin, etc.
Manifestations of Poverty:
1. Substandard and unaffordable housing and homelessness;
2. Disproportionate involvement in criminal and civil justice systems;
3. Food inadequacy;
4. Inadequate healthcare and poor health outcomes;
5. Inadequate education outcomes;
6. Lack of opportunity for full employment at a living wage;
7. Living through an unending and continuous cycle of crises;
8. Lack of personal and physical safety;
9. Stigma and lack of personal dignity; and
10. Isolation from community and political infrastructure.

Implementation: Anti-Poverty Roundtables, Toolkit for Communities Seeking to Develop and Operationalize Local Anti-Poverty Agendas, and the ABA Online Quilt of Community Anti-Poverty Discussions

The goal of each roundtable is to bring together 10-15 community stakeholders who are interested in identifying, promoting and implementing best practices for eliminating policies, practices and procedures that unfairly perpetuate or worsen the harmful effects of poverty on low-income people in that particular local community. To connect other communities with the national anti-poverty discussion, the Commission will encourage the designation of at least one panelist in each community who is willing to develop an edited summary of the ideas exchanged and proposed new programming for posting to a Commission-moderated online blog entitled, “Operationalizing A New Anti-Poverty Agenda: An Online Quilt of Community Discussions.” This online blog would allow each roundtable to share its diverse perspective on the most pressing manifestations of poverty within their community as well as its proposed solutions. With the addition of notes from each roundtable, the Commission would add a patch to the national Online Quilt in order to bring together diverse patterns of anti-poverty ideas. These shared ideas could be implemented by other communities who in turn share their own strategies for combatting poverty, creating a resource for all communities to use in removing the practices, policies and procedures that worsen or perpetuate poverty. Additionally, in furtherance of its goal of educating the bar and the general public about homelessness and poverty and the ways the legal community can collaborate with other stakeholders to assist those in need, the Commission is developing a resource entitled: Toolkit for Communities Seeking to Develop and Operationalize Local Anti-Poverty Agendas, in which the Commission will compile a wealth of ABA policy and programming knowledge into a series of “blueprints for action” that are cross-disciplinary and specifically address each of the identified Manifestation of Poverty areas.

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