INTRODUCTION

On April 7th, the ABA Commission on Homelessness & Poverty held an invitation-only convening to foster strategic, interdisciplinary collaboration among national, state and local organizations to amplify collective efforts to end poverty. As we are well aware, individuals and families living in poverty face significant challenges to secure benefits, education, employment, food, housing, health care, mental health care, treatment and services and to avoid criminalization of their life sustaining activities. We came together to discuss the myriad of ongoing strategies and advocacy efforts to determine how new collaborations could improve outcomes of our various anti-poverty initiatives—and we succeeded at making new connections as well as identifying recurrent themes and common interests.

BACKGROUND

This convening is part of a multi-year initiative – Collaborate to Advocate: Lawyers and Communities Working Together to End Poverty. In partnership with stakeholders from the service provider, religious, academic, education, health/mental health, political and legal communities, the Commission has hosted anti-poverty roundtables in a diverse set of communities—ranging from urban areas in large cities, smaller cities, suburban communities and counties, and rural areas to reflect the broad range of geographies where poverty exists. Roundtables held in the following cities have connected diverse individuals and organizations, resulting in new interdisciplinary collaborations and initiatives:

- Birmingham, Montgomery and Selma, AL
- Charleston, SC
- Chicago, IL
- Deland, FL
- Houston, TX
- Oklahoma City and Sulphur, OK
- San Diego and San Francisco, CA

Building on the foundation of the local community roundtable approach, we broadened the conversation on April 7th to include national stakeholders—professional organizations and advocacy organizations—to determine how we might collaborate to amplify all of our efforts.
SUMMARY OF THE DISCUSSION AND KEY THEMES

Commission Chair Ted Small began the meeting by providing background on the initiative and emphasized that the goal of the convening is not to solve poverty in a day, but rather to learn from one another and discuss the potential for collaborative, interdisciplinary efforts.

Overview: Poverty in America

Rebecca Vallas, the Managing Director of the Poverty to Prosperity Program at the Center for American Progress, provided an overview of poverty in America. Vallas began her remarks by focusing on the current presidential administration and the potential threats to funding for anti-poverty programs. She mentioned major structural changes, such as block grants and potential proof of employment requirements. She also discussed the likelihood of merging many different programs into one and eliminating offices altogether, like the Department of Justice’s Office on Civil Rights. President Trump’s proposed “Skinny Budget” cuts funding for the school lunch program, job training, AmeriCorps, and other critical services like the Legal Service Corporation, adult protective services and disabilities services.

So, where do we go from here? As anti-poverty advocates, Vallas said we need to repurpose our message – we need to stop talking about poverty in terms of “charity,” but rather in terms of “basic living standards.” Poverty and hardship is not an “us” and “them” issue, but something any of us could experience. People do not identify with programs (i.e. Social Security, Medicare, SNAP), but do identify with the needs these programs serve. For example, we must advocate for putting food on the table, rather than SNAP or school lunch programs. In today’s political climate, battles will be fought and won locally through storytelling (i.e. the Legal Services Corporation campaign), new partnerships, unity, and litigation.

Advocacy, Campaigns and Strategies from National Partners

Participants agreed that no single solution to ending poverty exists and acknowledged the effectiveness of multidisciplinary, collaborative approaches. Participants discussed the importance of sharing data, stories and best practices as well as promoting each other’s work. Participants also emphasized the importance of not only including the voice of clients and those with lived-experience, but also the power of strategically and respectfully using client stories in advocacy efforts to demonstrate the need, convey the impact, and debunk harmful myths and stereotypes.

Strategies that arose during this discussion include:

- More coordination between stakeholders in the telling of stories of those experiencing poverty from the ground up (through social media, sharing stories with Congressional representatives, corporate America, community advocates, etc.)
  - In Selma, AL, advocates used a photo of a woman living in a hole to personalize the need for the city to support the establishment of a homeless shelter.
▪ Write Op-eds in state and local papers, as opposed to only writing for national media.
▪ Use consistent messaging - emphasizing that anti-poverty efforts are not “charity”
▪ Advocate for homeless and at-risk youth, elders/grandparents and families experiencing poverty - i.e. flexible funding, access to programs, employment and education etc.
▪ Develop stories that cut across traditional silos – i.e. build the bridge between the disabilities and elder community and all communities for a more holistic continuum of services
▪ Create “report cards” for members of Congress – i.e. ratings could be based on fulfilled promises, interactions with constituents, etc.
▪ Invest in data collection with collaborations for strategic use as a part of overall messaging
  ▪ For example the National Law Center on Homelessness & Poverty creates fact sheets on issues, like this one on “Homelessness in America: Overview of Data and Causes” to engage in educational advocacy
▪ Collaboratively promote increased participation by those experiencing poverty in the upcoming 2020 Census

How can interdisciplinary national, state and local organizations collaborate in new ways to address poverty?

Strategies that arose during this discussion include:

▪ **Education**
  o Collaborate to educate teachers, counselors, and education advocates on the importance of addressing education advocacy through an anti-poverty lens, especially early childhood education
  o Change the narrative and engage a cross section of economic development groups - there is no greater investment in our economy and work force than closing the achievement gap
  o Support the establishment of private/public partnerships within multiple sectors to shift the narrative
  o Engage teachers, principals and school counselors in the conversation (i.e. identifying “invisible” homelessness among students)
  o Empower teachers and parents to become advocates
  o Encourage lawyers to provide services to youth, acting as confidential harbors (up-streaming services and resources before youth and families reach their tipping point)
  o Educate youth and families on protections provided in the McKinney-Vento Act
  o Present personal testimonies of how school lunch and other meal programs are an essential lifeline, how school-hopping in multiple districts disrupts the learning process, and how IDs are necessary to apply for benefits

▪ **Employment**
- Encourage those experiencing poverty to write directly to their representatives, referencing specific policy.
- Insist that policymakers routinely consider cost-benefit analysis of policy proposals to avoid big spending with little results.
- Advocate through story-telling in state and local newspapers (Congressional representatives pay attention to news from their constituent states/counties).
- Prompt employers and business owners to advocate for the well-being of their employees (recognizing the importance of stability, steady income, etc.).
- Support the living wage and housing status as a protected status.
- Promote the implementation of ban the box legislation on the state-level.
- Advocate for those experiencing sexual orientation discrimination, using the Seventh Circuit case that ruled sexual orientation is protected by Title VII.

### Housing
- Increase collaboration between housing programs, job training and workforce development programs.
- Subdivide older housing stock to create more affordable housing and assist the elderly in being able to afford to age in place.
- Consider housing in the context of services, educating providers on other services and integrating housing into overall anti-poverty strategies.
- Advocate against dismantling HUD’s “fair housing rule.”
- Raise awareness that those experiencing homelessness are disproportionately black and are profiled.
- Support advocacy through personal stories/voices – information must flow from communities up to the national level and those experiencing homelessness must be seen as individuals, not numbers.

### Health (mental and physical)
- Encourage membership organizations (like the American Psychological Association) to break through silos and collaborate with different fields to collectively use training and skills to benefit the community (i.e. medical/legal collaboration) – i.e. consider implementing an inverse program where doctors go to legal clinics as well as traditional partnerships.
- Educate leaders and representatives on how food and housing security directly affects mental and physical health.
- Create a healthcare council and/or “index of wellbeing” – measuring disparity among neighborhoods (based on available services, preventative care, average income, etc.).
- Collect data – data is an important resource and effectuates change – must encourage all (though campaigns, emphasizing confidentiality) to participate in upcoming census – i.e. Health Care Data Profiling in Sonoma County, CA; Health Impact Assessment of Counties.
- Support the use of coordinated entry and hospital/continuums of care partnerships (when people are housed, they don’t cycle in and out of the emergency room)

- **Disproportionate involvement in criminal and civil justice system, and lack of personal and physical safety**
  - Change hearts and minds proactively - we can’t legislate our way out of the school to prison pipeline (must use restorative justice, rather than suspensions and zero tolerance policies)
    - See the [National Law Center on Homelessness & Poverty’s Housing Not Handcuffs Campaign](https://www.nlchp.org/our-work/housing-not-handcuffs)
  - Empower parents and local advocates with awareness of DOJ requirements that school systems report incidents of school discipline
  - Question whether School Resource Officers are really acceptable – i.e. Sonoma County, CA’s Restorative Justice Framework
  - Support states laws sealing juvenile records
    - See the Coalition for Juvenile Justice’s project – [Collaborating for Change: Addressing Youth Homelessness and Juvenile Justice](https://www.cjj.org/collaborating-for-change)
      - with two main goals (1) to decrease the likelihood that homeless youth become involved with the juvenile justice system, and (2) to prevent youth homelessness among justice-involved youth
  - Encourage collaboration between service providers, police agencies, and the justice system
  - Advocate for civil representation for all
    - See the DC Bar Foundation’s [Voices for Civil Justice](https://www.dcbaf.org/civil-justice), a clearing house of civil legal aid providers, related organizations and resources
  - Support the creation of systems for lawyers to easily seal and expunge records for adults
  - Reduce court fines and fees for families and juveniles

**Next Steps**

Given the passion and commitment of the participants and their respective organizations, there is a clear, common interest in collaborating further to address and overcome 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. At the conclusion of the convening, participants were asked to forward their policy priorities and thoughts on potential future collaboration to the ABA Commission on Homelessness & Poverty. A follow up convening will be held in Summer 2017.