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## Point of View

# Higher wages the key to escaping NC poverty

By Gene Nichol

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Evidence of North Carolina's singular, and singularly unacknowledged, poverty crisis cascades.

We've long known our increase in general poverty levels is one of the steepest in the nation. A decade ago, we ranked 26th among the states, a tad better than average. Now we're 11th, pushing past our competitors. A brutal 26 percent of our kids live in poverty, 41 percent of our children of color. The Department of Agriculture announced, last year, Greensboro is the second hungriest city in America. Asheville's ninth. Feeding America reported earlier we have the country's second highest hunger rate for kids under 5, trailing only Louisiana.

Then, a few weeks ago, the Census Bureau announced North Carolina has, in the last decade, experienced a greater rise in concentrated poverty (census tracts where 20 percent or more are poor) than any other state. Business Insider, last week, peeled back the data to reveal that four of the 10 American cities with the sharpest increases in concentrated poverty are ours. Winston-Salem was ninth,

Greensboro sixth, Charlotte fourth and Raleigh third. We're the Super Bowl champs of exploding concentrated poverty.

Harvard recently determined that, of the nation's 50 largest cities, Charlotte has the worst economic mobility. Dead last. If you're born poor in Charlotte, you're more apt to stay that way than anywhere in America. Harvard apparently thinks if you're born poor in Charlotte, you should move.

Standard & Poor's piled on last week, concluding that the gap between rich and poor in the U.S. has become so extreme it's damaging the entire economy. S&P declared such intense disparity markedly hampers economic growth and has slowed our anemic recovery. And that's Standard & Poor's, not The Nation magazine. North Carolina has among the worst economic inequality rates in the country. Over the last three decades, the top 1 percent of Tar Heels saw their incomes grow by 98.4 percent, while the bottom 99 percent inched up only 9 percent.

And what has been the response of our leaders to this unfolding parade of horrors? Nary a word, of course. Either they don't know we're sliding over the precipice or they don't consider it worthy of comment. One wonders if the governor has a fiddle.

On the policy front, we continue our path-breaking experiment to redistribute resources from the distressed to the well-heeled. It is hard to believe a government could respond to the landscape described above by denying Medicaid to hundreds of thousands, enacting the largest unemployment compensation cut in history and ending the earned income tax credit – to pay for bold tax cuts for those at the top. Either the bottom third doesn't count, or our legislators actually believe in an occult economic strategy that defies logic, data, history and common sense. I'm guessing it's the former.

I've been surprised, though, in recent conversations with folks across the state living in or near poverty, how consistent the perception of problem is. In Charlotte, Durham, Raleigh, Salisbury, Hickory, Rocky Mount, Lumberton, Winston-Salem and Goldsboro, residents have explained that assistance is important but what they really crave are jobs that pay wages they can live on. You can't do that at \$7.25 an hour. They want the chance to advance when they work hard. If they could make a decent, humane wage, they explain, they wouldn't have to worry about food stamps or rent subsidies or bus passes or being able to buy the basics for their kids. They'd "do it on their own."

As one of my heroes puts it: "I want to grow. I want to have a life like others have. I want a salary to make ends meet. Even if it's McDonald's, I'd like to be able to afford to go out and get some ice cream with my kids. I want to be able to put back into our neighborhood. None of us can do that." Like so many others, she asks: "why don't you care whether the people who work for you can have a life if they work hard and do right by you"?

An array of states, and a handful of American cities, have adopted minimum wage laws that exceed the \$7.25 federal standard. North Carolina should as well. We added 276,000 jobs between January 2010 and June 2014. But a demoralizing percentage were low-paying, service industry positions. Charlotte and Raleigh are strong enough to move forward on their own if (when) the legislature balks.

The politics are tough, I concede. But when you talk to Tar Heels living at the edge, the refrain recurs: "It's the wages, stupid."

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