

Poverty, right before our eyes

BY GENE NICHOL

PUBLISHED IN: OTHER VIEWS

CHAPEL HILL -- Along with about 60 colleagues, I recently toured Eastern North Carolina. We weren't loading up for the Outer Banks. Instead, we visited an array of the state's most economically distressed communities.

In partnership with the state NAACP, the Justice Center and others, we met with about 1,500 Tar Heels in Washington, Roper, Elizabeth City, Winton, Scotland Neck and Rocky Mount. The goal was to move past bloodless poverty statistics and dusty academic reports to, in the Rev. William Barber's words, "take the blinders off" and "put a face on poverty." The "face" we saw humiliates North Carolina.

We heard of exploding demand at the food bank in Ahoskie - rife with employed, embarrassed, first-time users. Parents so desperate to find food for their children they camped out by the dozens, all night long, midwinter, to secure scarce canned goods. We visited a homeless shelter in Elizabeth City - learning that, citywide, 26 shelter beds were available. Over 1,000 are homeless.

In Edgecombe County, ministers questioned our "official statistics," saying they polled their congregations and over 40 percent are unemployed. Families described living without toilets in Gates and Hertford counties. Health care providers reported bending the rules to place oxygen in patients' homes to make it tougher, under law, for utilities to shut off service to impoverished, incapacitated customers.

I'm a dad. For 25 years I've experienced the world most viscerally as a parent. It tore, then, to see a young mother weep, explaining that, since the restaurant where she worked had closed, she'd been unable to buy Christmas presents for her daughter. Or to hear a young, unemployed college graduate, who had lost her housing, say she also feared she was losing the battle to convince her son, against peer pressure, that education was worthwhile.

Fathers tried to hide the fact that they'd been laid off from their kids. One mother, employed in commerce her whole life, now went door to door in the neighborhood, asking to do cleaning or take in laundry. Her kids were mortified.

In Winton, we learned of a 70-year-old woman who drives a school bus each morning and afternoon to assure that she can care and secure medication for her stroke-disabled husband. A daughter fretted for her not-yet-65 father, burdened with heart failure, who was unable to see a doctor until he can come up with \$400. And, she knew, it could be worse. A young woman from Colerain lost her husband, her aunt, and her house in the April 16 tornadoes. Since she couldn't afford insurance, she now lives in financial as well as personal ruin.

Related Stories

Related Images

The deprivation cascading daily in many of our rural communities can remind one of the Third World. I thought of schoolkids in Roper, preparing for the future, like my own, but flatly unable to secure access to broadband. Even in tiny, ramshackle houses, electric bills were astonishing - far exceeding those of much larger abodes in the Triangle.

A returned veteran, living outside little Washington, described his exhausting, ultimately successful, 21-year fight to get sewer and clean water in his community. I sat with a representative of an international foundation as he testified. She said it wouldn't have taken that long in the Dominican Republic.

In Scotland Neck, the former mayor explained that 40 percent of the housing was substandard, out of code. But if they enforced the rules, homelessness would mushroom. Roads and social services in the black community mocked those in white neighborhoods across town. The civil rights movement seems to have bypassed Halifax County.

I could go on. And at every available opportunity, I, and others, will do exactly that.

But riding home, I remembered the speech Robert Kennedy delivered at the Cleveland City Club the day after Dr. King was murdered. Famously, Kennedy decried the "mindless menace of violence in America" which once again, "stains our land and every one of our lives." But Kennedy didn't stop with "shot or the bomb in the night."

For there is, he reminded, "another kind of violence, slower, but just as deadly destructive." This is "the violence of institutions, indifference, inaction and decay." The "violence that afflicts the poor, that poisons relations between men because their skin has different colors." This is "the slow destruction of a child by hunger [and] homes without heat in the winter." This is "the breaking of a man's spirit by denying him the chance to stand as a father and as a man among other men. And "this too afflicts us all."

Gene Nichol is the Boyd Tinsley distinguished professor at UNC's Law School and director of the UNC Center on Poverty, Work & Opportunity.