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Point of View

We simply won't look at poverty

By Gene Nichol

June 3, 2012

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I've spent a good deal of time on Jones Street in Raleigh of late. The legislature's in gear. Folks on a mission. The state House offered a budget, as is now its tradition, leaving brutal holes in Medicaid, pre-K and K-12, need-based financial aid, mental health care and public transit – though it is poised to grant new corporate tax breaks that are impressively avant-garde. The leaders know what they want to hear and whom they want to please. The train is moving.

But having also spent much time, in recent weeks, in the field with the NAACP, I'm struck by those who won't make it to the statehouse agenda.

There is the young, optimistic yet tearful woman from Henderson County stricken with diabetes. She wants to marry the good man she loves, who'll help raise her daughter. But she can't. She would lose her Medicaid. And then, she worries, she might lose her life.

There are the hundreds of clients of the Beloved Community Center in Greensboro. Folks who are homeless, living in extreme poverty. Many line up at 3 in the morning to get a shower when the doors eventually open at 6:30. Four recently died on the streets in a single week.

Just down the road at Greensboro Urban Ministries, 500 meals are served, three times a day, seven days a week, to the hungry and destitute. Still, they can't meet the demand – in a city where poverty's reportedly not a worrisome problem.

And there's the 57-year-old man in Reidsville, living in a storm drain. It's nasty, he admits, but necessary to combat the elements. He was laid off after a plant closure, having worked 38 years. In 36 months of homelessness, he's "been hungry every single day." The "trickle down," he reported, "never seems to trickle on us."

In Hickory, if you walk a few hundred yards into the woods, you find families – many veterans, many working, many with kids, over 120 by last count – living in dilapidated tents and cardboard shanties. That is, until they get chased away by police, who threaten them with arrest and destroy their tents as deterrent.

All down the road from great and sprawling mansions; in a tale Dickens wouldn't have the imagination, or the gall, to invent.

Nor will our legislators hear from East Spencer, a small, ancient, predominantly black North Carolina town where 40 percent of citizens live in poverty. No library, no school, no grocery store in a "food desert." This, even though the national headquarters of Food Lion is just over the bridge in Salisbury and a massive food distribution center is smack in the middle of East Spencer.

Nor, I'm guessing, will our leaders turn their attention to Hendersonville, where a few weeks ago, as police chased an unarmed black man alleged to have stolen a computer game, over 50 bullets were fired into a half-dozen houses.

A barrage even rocked the local church. Where if a grandmother and a 4-year-old child hadn't hit the floor quickly enough, shots coming through the window would have killed them. A transaction, we can rest assured, that would never have occurred in a prosperous white neighborhood. So that a mother would cry, "When they shot into all those houses, they wounded the whole community, because they said our lives didn't matter." And how else could it be understood?

And in Charlotte, in the shadows of great banking towers – the bailed-out banking towers – you can find the second-highest increase in family homelessness in America. Where hundreds come on buses and in the cars in which they've slept to line up at Crisis Ministries every morning for food and services; living in invisible desperation in North Carolina's richest city. No doubt anxiously anticipating the upcoming Democratic convention.

And, for me, in what could be perfect allegory if only it weren't true, there is the disabled, impoverished, homeless man from central North Carolina who wanted silently to protest on the corner he claims as his own when President Barack Obama came to town. But the Secret Service moved him blocks away, editing him out of the chief executive's picture. Deleting him from the presidential field of vision. Not to be counted, obviously. Not to be aided. Not to be given a meaningful chance. But, more importantly, not to be seen at all.

In Raleigh, in Washington – not to be seen at all.

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

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