



THE BUFFALO NEWS

Politics, poverty and priorities

By Dan Herbeck NEWS STAFF REPORTER

Updated: 10/29/07 7:57 AM

Eight years ago, George W. Bush was a Republican presidential candidate stumping for votes in Buffalo's black community. At Mount Olive Baptist Church, he told the congregation of his plans to help poor people.

He spoke with enthusiasm of his plan to use billions of government dollars to help community groups and churches like Mount Olive to "rally the armies of compassion."

"I want the American dream to touch every willing heart," said Bush in his Oct. 4, 1999, speech at the church. "As we head into the 21st century, we don't want anybody to be left out."

Nearing the end of his second term, has the president made good on his Buffalo pledge to help the poor?

Leaders of many of the organizations that work with the city's poor say Bush's efforts haven't come close. The U.S. Census Bureau now

calls Buffalo the second-poorest big city in the nation, with more than 42 percent of the city's children living in poverty.

Since the president's speech at the East Delavan Avenue church, leaders at the church said, federal funding cutbacks forced them to shut down two after-school programs that provided tutoring, meals and sports activities to poor youngsters. Pastor William Gillison says his church currently has no partnerships with the federal government to run programs for the poor.

Many other not-for-profit organizations that help needy children and families in Buffalo say their funding has been steadily cut or static since Bush took office in 2000. They cite examples of how inadequate federal funding has hurt programs that help poor kids:

- On Moselle Street, the CRUCIAL Human Services Center has cut services because it has fallen behind



on many of its bills, including a \$28,000 bill for electricity. The center currently gets its power from a generator, and the director says federal budget cuts are a major cause of the problems.

- Erie County's federally funded Head Start program – a day care program for preschoolers from poor families – turns away more than half of the families that ask for help because of a lack of financing.
- In 2001, the Lt. Col. Matt Urban Human Services Center on Broadway received \$220,000 in federal funding to assist poor families. "This year, we're getting \$160,000 to provide more services to more people," said Marlies Wesolowski, executive director of the center.
- Last year, the Gloria J. Parks Community Center in Buffalo's University District had to eliminate a day care program that helped the poor, largely because of cutbacks in financial help from the federal government.

Some people, including Gillison, say it would be unfair to put all the blame on Bush – or any particular government leader – for the steady rise of poverty in Buffalo. They say fiscal mismanagement by the state, city and county governments has also hurt.

Gillison said government money alone cannot eliminate the cycle of poverty.

"The government should and could be doing more," Gillison said. "But to blame all this on the president wouldn't be fair. For things to be this messed up, he needed some help."

But many also feel that Bush has misplaced his priorities.

"We have to turn at least one kid away for every one we accept into our program. We constantly have to turn away families that are in need," said L. Nathan Hare, executive director of the Erie County Community Action Organization, which runs the county's Head Start program.

"This president doesn't put a priority on helping poor children. He has given priority to other things – like his war and giving tax breaks to certain humungously wealthy people."

Similar criticisms came from Alyce Cuddy, executive director of the Parks Center, and Staci Turner, director of the struggling CRUCIAL Center.

President defends efforts

Supporters of the president say the government is doing plenty – from a financial standpoint, at least – to help the poor.

"We can argue that we're not making as much progress [on poverty] as we should, but we can't argue that the government isn't spending enough money," said Nicholas Eberstadt, a Harvard University economist associated with the American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research.

The federal government spends more than half a trillion dollars annually for anti-poverty programs that include welfare, food stamps, health care and help with home energy bills, Eberstadt said.

Meanwhile, the president has said repeatedly that his tax cuts are designed to help all Americans, including those in poverty.

“When we keep taxes low, spending in check and our economy open – conditions that empower businesses to create new jobs – all Americans benefit,” Bush said after release of the August Census report that listed Buffalo as the nation’s second-poorest city.

That brings little solace to people like Wesolowski and Alyce Cuddy, executive director of the Parks Center, who work in the trenches in the fight to help Buffalo’s poorest families.

Wesolowski said the not-for-profit Matt Urban Center has to “scratch and scrape” for funding to provide counseling, tutoring, mentoring and after-school programs to 486 children in one of the city’s poorest and most crime-infested communities.

“Our philosophy is, rather than giving a poor family a fish for dinner, we teach them how to catch their own fish,” Wesolowski said. “That includes literacy programs, housing programs, teaching young people to be more responsible parents and after-school programs where kids can do something constructive rather than hanging with street gangs.”

‘We’re safe here’

David Jones and Lyndon Clark, both 14, and Akram “AJ” Abdallah, 11, are three of the young people who spend their time at the Urban Center’s after-school program in Polonia Hall on Paderewski Drive. With other boys their age, they get help on homework, work on computer skills, play basketball and get a hot meal.

When the boys spoke with a reporter recently, all three agreed that their neighborhood – not far from the old Central Terminal – is a “pretty safe” area in which to live.

But within minutes, all three boys also said that they have either witnessed shootings in their neighborhood or known someone who was shot within the past two years.

“I know a guy who got shot and killed because he stepped on another guy’s sneaker,” said the youngest of the three, AJ.

Last month, 15-year-old Devonte Murray, a student at one of the center’s after-school programs, was one of two boys killed by gangsters at the corner of East Delavan and Courtland avenues. Police said about 90 shots were fired; Devonte and his friend were innocent bystanders.

Violence and the fear of violence are “an everyday thing” for boys at the center, said Mike Hall, a program aide who also lives in the neighborhood.

“If we ever lost this center here, these kids would have nowhere else to go but into trouble,” Hall said. “We’re safe here,” David said.

Wesolowski said the Urban Center would like to greatly extend the hours of its after-school programs, opening the centers seven days a week, but that is impossible because funding is tight.

A shortage of such programs is seen as a major problem in the city by Henry Louis Taylor Jr. of the University at Buffalo’s urban and regional planning department.

“The problem isn’t poverty; it’s policy. We don’t have policies that focus on neighborhoods in the inner city,” Taylor said. “Don’t just blame Bush. Congress shows very little interest in urban issues, either.”

A head start

They were two high school kids without the slightest idea how to run a household or raise a baby. Brenda Biggs was 17 and her boyfriend, Jamire Barber, was 16 when their daughter, Shatara, was born.

That was 22 months ago. Today, Biggs and Barber are making a life for their young family with help from the Erie County Community Action Organization Early Head Start program.

The free day care and other services they receive from Head Start enable the young couple to find and hold decent jobs. Biggs works at group homes run by People Inc. Barber works at Literacy Volunteers of Buffalo. They're engaged to marry, and both plan to go to college next year.

Between them, they make more than \$30,000 a year, enough to afford a used car and a small East Side apartment.

It's not easy, but the two teens are proud that they finished high school, stayed off welfare, got jobs and are raising their daughter.

"I was scared when I got pregnant," Biggs said. "We wanted to keep our baby. I didn't want to drop out of school like so many other girls I knew. Somebody at Children's Hospital told me about Head Start."

Federally funded, the CAO's Early Head Start program has room for only 117 local families a year. Because of limited funding, CAO has had to put tight restrictions on the program. Only teenaged parents from Buffalo, with children under 3 years of age, can apply.

"We have to exclude anyone from the suburbs and any young person who is their early 20s," said Jacqueline Jones, director of the program. "There are many young people who are excluded because of the federal budget."

CAO also rejects many people from its bigger Head Start program for children who are 3 and 4 years old, Hare said. According to the government, CAO has a \$64.7 million federal grant, which Hare said covers three years of running Head Start here.

In Erie County, Hare said, Head Start assists 2,100 children and their families, providing day care, parental training, comprehensive health services and meals.

"We've got 600 Head Start employees, and about 80 percent of them make under \$30,000 a year," Hare said.

The president's latest budget proposal offers \$6.8 billion to the Head Start programs nationwide for the coming year – a cut of \$100 million that, according to Congress, would eliminate 13,500 children from the program.

Federal grants defended

Mark A. Smith, managed care director for the New Directions Youth & Family Services agency, believes that the president has tried to make good on his promise of compassion.

"I think the president is sincere about it," Smith said. "He is a compassionate man, but he also wants to wean people off federal money and help them to become more independent."

Exactly how much money does the federal government contribute to organizations that help Buffalo's poor?

In response to inquiries to the White House by The Buffalo News, the U.S. Department of Health & Human Services sent a list of more than 400 human services organizations in New York State that have received grants from the Bush administration.

According to the list, grants have been given to 12 Buffalo agencies, in addition to the CAO and its \$64.7 million. The 12 agencies received a total of \$3.9 million, with more than half the money going to abstinence education programs.

Nationwide, the Bush administration said it awarded more than \$4.1 billion to faith-based and community organizations in 2004 and 2005. No local breakdown was available.

"I think the president looks at faithbased initiatives as one of his legacies," Smith said. "I think you'll see a lot more money going to worthy organizations before his presidency is over."

dherbeck@buffnews.com

Find this article at:

<http://www.buffalonews.com/341/story/194662.html>

Check the box to include the list of links referenced in the article.

© 2007 The Buffalo News.