



# Nashville's Poverty Reduction Initiative

“There are those among us who are frightened that they may become homeless, are worried about their family going hungry, and uncertain about their future. Imagine thinking about your future and all you can see is fear. With statistics showing that 26 percent of Nashville children under 18 and 11 percent of adults 65 and older live in households with incomes below the poverty line, fear is a daily reality for too many. This flies in the face of working toward the common good, toward social justice and human dignity. Here in Nashville, we understand that it is our responsibility to decrease poverty's causes and lessen its effects. We understand that it is our duty to start throwing out lifelines and begin to reel our neighbors back in. As a Catholic, as a mayor, and as a human being, I know that we cannot allow this poverty divide to continue to widen. We cannot allow people to remain trapped. We cannot allow capable citizens to see their lives as hopeless and filled with despair. We cannot afford to lose future generations into the abyss of poverty.”

**Nashville Mayor Karl Dean**

Excerpt from speech at the Nashville Catholic Charities Poverty Conference, March 25, 2010

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## Introduction

It is no surprise that Nashville, a city that consistently ranks in the top five of “America’s Friendliest Cities,” would have the heart and conscience to address the needs of people living in poverty.

A coalition of government, nonprofit, and business agencies, as well as faith-based groups and concerned individuals representing all segments of our community have linked together to develop and implement an action plan designed to significantly reduce poverty in the city. We recognized that there were already many successful poverty reduction initiatives in place in our community, but our collective

work was limited by a lack of singular vision and unified commitment. There was insufficient collaboration and coordination between agencies, and the programs needed an infusion of funding.

Our community came together to address this reality with a shared commitment to develop and implement a community-wide poverty reduction plan. Hundreds of individuals and countless numbers of organizations worked diligently over the course of a year to research the conditions of poverty in our community and the work in place to combat it, as well as develop specific, measurable strategic-action steps and goals that would glean more substantial and dramatic results.

Our goal was clear: to develop a comprehensive blueprint and action plan aimed at cutting poverty in half during the next decade and increasing the quality of life for those struggling with day-to-day existence. The result was a detailed report and action plan presented to and adopted by Mayor Karl Dean that consisted of 30 major recommendations divided into several critical areas and assigned to standing implementation committees.

It all began in the fall of 2007 when the Nashville Jewish Federation's Community Relations Committee organized the Nashville Food Stamp Challenge as part of a national effort spearheaded by its parent organization, the Jewish Council for Public Affairs. More than 50 Nashvillians participated, living on the equivalent of food stamps for a week to simulate just how difficult it is to feed oneself on such a minimal subsistence. During the emotional debriefing session that followed, challenge participant Congressman Jim Cooper encouraged our group to use what we learned from our shared experience to renew our commitment to those who experience poverty daily. This challenge put into motion a process that we hoped would serve as a mechanism to successfully reduce poverty in our community.

Howard Gentry, past vice mayor and the CEO of the Nashville Chamber of Commerce Public Benefit Foundation, subsequently led several Food Stamp Challenge participants in developing a mission and target goals that would ultimately be brought to a larger steering committee for its consideration and development. This group founded the Nashville Poverty Reduction Initiative with the mission to: leverage the passions, resources, and strengths of existing public, private, and faith-based partnerships to facilitate an open, inclusive, and communitywide dialogue that would lead to the creation and implementation of a comprehensive plan designed to substantially reduce poverty in Nashville.

The Nashville Poverty Reduction Initiative's initial goals were to:

- Educate our broader populace about the economic and social/moral issues related to poverty
- Adopt Half in Ten's benchmark vision for reducing poverty
- Evaluate existing services, identify additional services needed, and narrow the gaps between
- Examine how improved collaboration and revenue sharing could increase outcomes
- Engage interested participants in developing a communitywide comprehensive action plan for reducing poverty
- Coordinate, monitor, and support the implementation of the newly created action plan
- Develop strategies for acquiring needed financial resources through the creation of a government-public-private consortium

The mission and goals set into motion a series of action steps that began with forming a steering committee, included presenting the proposal to the mayor, and continues in the work we are actively doing today.

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### Forming a steering committee

We expanded the founding group of visionaries into an official steering committee that included city and federal government officials, leaders of social service agencies, people of influence from the nonprofit and business sectors, and known experts in poverty. We also formed a leadership partnership between the Chamber of Commerce Public Benefit Foundation and the Metro Action Commission, the local city agency responsible for federally supported poverty programs. This unique collaboration linked the business and public sectors of our community.

The newly formed steering committee met monthly to further define our journey, refine and adopt our mission and goals, and develop a plan to bring our community together in support of them. Our first major action was to organize a poverty symposium designed to educate the broader community about issues related to poverty and coalesce community members and agencies around reducing it.

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## Holding a community poverty reduction symposium

The steering committee immediately recognized that a major community forum was needed in order to get community buy-in and recruit others to help in formulating and committing to a communitywide plan for reducing poverty. We therefore unveiled our proposed coordinated commitment to reducing poverty in our community at a community poverty symposium in September 2008 at our downtown convention center.

The symposium included a half day of educational presentations followed by a dramatic call to action that challenged the nearly 500 concerned Nashvillians to engage in one of seven action committees. Other highlighted segments included:

- A kickoff from Mayor Karl Dean where he challenged the audience to bring him a well-developed, practical, and doable plan to reduce poverty, pledging in return the city's cooperation and support in implementing it
- A clear description of the face of poverty in the United States and in Nashville in particular
- An examination of the critical economic, moral, and religious reasons why our community must address and reduce poverty
- A review of the current status of major poverty-related issues facing Nashville such as health care, workforce development, and housing
- Presentation of a rationale and process for developing and implementing a comprehensive poverty reduction action plan

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## Forming action committees

The closing call to action at our poverty symposium proved very successful. Nearly 300 attendees and others not in attendance agreed to serve on one of our seven action committees:

1. Housing
2. Health care
3. Food
4. Childcare
5. Economic opportunity
6. Neighborhood development
7. Workforce development

Each committee was given six months and charged with gathering data and information on their area and identifying doable, “reasonably” affordable recommendations for action that would significantly reduce poverty in our community. Each committee was asked to examine what was being done already, what gaps existed, what needed to be done, and how we could go about making change happen. They would submit their findings to the steering committee at the end of the six months.

We carefully selected leaders and co-leaders for each committee and recruited experts to bolster and support each committee to help ensure success. We also offered a full day of training to both leaders and committee members—contracted through the National League of Cities. Approximately 200 participated in this training, to our delight. And the Metro Action Commission provided committees with a variety of support services, including consultation and coaching for committee leaders, meeting record keeping, assistance with data collection and analysis, and materials to guide their study and formulation of recommendations.

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### Reviewing committee findings, rationale, and recommendations

Once all of the action committees completed their research and submitted their recommendations, the steering committee—up until now, busy with overseeing and participating in the action committees—regrouped to examine and synthesize the results.

The steering committee met with action committee chairs and members in the weeks that followed in order to better understand, clarify, and compile all of the recommendations received. They carefully sorted through the reports for overlap, affordability, feasibility, and projected assignment for implementation.

Once the steering committee was comfortable with the review, it developed a draft of a final poverty reduction plan, which was honed and affirmed for quality over several months before ultimately presenting it to the mayor.

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### Presenting a poverty reduction action plan to the mayor for Implementation

Mayor Dean conducted his own careful review upon receiving our plan and provided us with suggestions for improving and implementing it, ultimately signing off on our final revisions. He personally introduced the plan to the community

at a press conference in the fall of 2009 and hailed it as an outstanding example of public-private collaboration, and pledged his office's support.

The mayor assigned Metro Social Services—the city agency responsible for implementing local initiatives related to poverty and homelessness—with responsibility for overseeing and coordination. He also asked MSS to oversee the process and assure implementation and asked them to provide him with quarterly updates and an annual progress report. MSS research analysts annually conduct a detailed “Community Needs Evaluation” of the status and conditions of poverty in Nashville. This study has been recognized for its excellence, and over time it will align to correspond specifically with our seven implementation committees to make it easier to measure and track progress.

The mayor also committed his office to helping secure resources needed for implementation. And he assigned members of his government to serve on each of the seven active implementation teams.

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### Forming a poverty council

We replaced the existing steering committee with a newly appointed Nashville Poverty Council to guide progress. We asked Howard Gentry to chair the council, whose members included the initiative's founders along with action team co-chairs, representatives from the mayor's office, and newly appointed community members.

The poverty council is expected to meet at least quarterly to monitor, coordinate, support, and help implement the recommendations of the seven implementation teams. They also address more global issues such as periodic reports to the mayor and the public, community education and public relations, and acquiring needed funding.

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### Beginning oversight and coordination, and forming and strengthening implementation teams

Metro Social Services took leadership of the program after it was assigned responsibility for oversight and coordination. MSS also reconvened the seven initial action committees as implementation teams with strengthened leadership and membership, to begin putting our poverty reduction plan into action.

Implementation teams were charged with evaluating the status of the existing recommendations and making modifications as necessary. They were also asked to gather baseline data in their assigned arena to afford us a clear picture of progress made in the years ahead. The breath of community participation on each of our committees is substantial. The textbox below provides a partial list of local organizations that have agreed to provide leadership and support our committees, as well as commit to the implementation of the 30 recommendations identified in our poverty reduction action plan.

## Partial list of local partner organizations

### **Child Care Action Committee**

Metropolitan Action Commission  
McNeilly Center for Children  
Catholic Charities of Tennessee  
United Way of Metropolitan Nashville

### **Economic Opportunity Action Committee**

Metropolitan Social Services  
Metro Agriculture Extension Service  
Nashville Alliance for Financial Independence  
Jewish Federation of Nashville and Middle Tennessee  
Belmont University  
Students in Free Enterprise  
Federal Reserve Bank  
Fifth Third Bank

### **Food Action Committee**

Metropolitan Nashville Department of Public Health  
Metropolitan Social Services  
Second Harvest Food Bank of Nashville and Middle Tennessee  
MANNA  
Food Security Partners  
United Way of Metropolitan Nashville

### **Health Action Committee**

Metro Public Health Department  
Nashville General Hospital  
United Neighborhood Health Services  
Health Assist Tennessee

Vanderbilt Center for Health Services  
Dispensary of Hope  
United Way of Metropolitan Nashville

### **Housing Action Committee**

Metropolitan Development and Housing Agency  
Metropolitan Homelessness Commission  
Metropolitan Social Services  
Affordable Housing Resources  
Habitat for Humanity  
The Housing Fun  
New Level Community Development Corporation

### **Neighborhood Development Action Committee**

Metropolitan Planning Commission  
Metropolitan Department of Codes and Building Safety  
Mayor's Office of Neighborhoods  
Neighborhoods Resource Center  
Civic Design Center  
Congressman Jim Cooper's Office  
Belmont University-Center for Social Entrepreneurship and Service Learning  
United Way of Metropolitan Nashville

### **Workforce Development Action Committee**

Nashville Career Advancement Center  
Metropolitan Social Services  
Goodwill Industries of Middle Tennessee  
Urban League of Middle Tennessee

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## Commencing work

Mayor Dean's blessing of Nashville's Poverty Reduction Initiative was critical to its ability to move forward. And his support in assigning oversight and progress reporting to Metro Social Services has allowed the program to move forward. There is much work left to do, but we have so far accomplished the following implementation steps:

- The mayor assigned members of Metropolitan Social Services and representatives from his office to participate on and assist each of the seven action teams. We filled openings and strengthened membership on the committees, and in some cases identified new leadership.
- We began the process for funding implementation through a public-private partnership. This is a unique and vitally important feature of our work since it is clear, especially in today's climate, that neither the public nor the private sector alone can afford to cover the costs of the work that needs to be done.
- Committees developed an implementation timetable and aggressive meeting calendar.
- We scheduled quarterly action team leadership meetings as well as poverty council meetings.
- Committees affirmed their goals and commitments and completed a baseline report to be used as a means for measuring progress and poverty reduction.
- The poverty council developed an initial report for the mayor that will be followed by semi-annual updates and a summative year-end progress report to the mayor and community.

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## Closing commentary

Fighting poverty is indeed very challenging and time consuming. Yet we have no choice but to devote ourselves to reducing it for moral and social, as well as economic reasons. Not only is living in poverty degrading and self-perpetuating, but it saps the strength out of a community's health, stability, and economy while presenting both children and adults with seemingly impossible obstacles to overcome and deplorable conditions in which to live.

Nashville can be proud of the poverty reduction plan it developed and the process it created for implementing it. But the true measure of our success will be the positive results of our work. Much has been done that merits applause, but far more remains to be done. One thing remains constant—our resolve. We will not quit trying to do what we know must be done. Ours is a doable action plan that is within our capacity to successfully implement over time. In fact, we have already witnessed a positive change in attitudes and commitment to poverty reduction, and new and more efficient efforts taking place. We are certain that we will make a difference in the lives of those living in poverty in our community.

Partnerships and collaboration with others around the country will definitely enhance our journey ahead. We invite you to join us in our journey, knowing that we can learn from each other's work. We are not experts in addressing poverty issues, but we hope our work can serve as a catalyst for other communities interested in doing the same.

We welcome all inquiries and are most willing to offer our assistance and materials to any community interested in traveling a journey similar to ours, especially those willing to share lessons learned from their experiences in turn.

Avi Poster

Founding Member of the Nashville Poverty Reduction Steering Committee

Current Member of the Nashville Poverty Council

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## Resources and sample documents

### Sample documents

“Nashville’s Poverty Symposium: A Call to Action to Reduce Poverty in Our Community,” September 22, 2008, available at: <http://www.nashville.gov/mac/poverty.asp>. See modifications at <http://www.nashville.gov/sservices/docs/poverty/RecommendedActions-Modified072610.pdf>

“Nashville’s Poverty Reduction Initiative Plan,” February 22, 2010, available at: [www.nashville.gov/mayor/docs/news/NashvillesPovertyReductionPlan.pdf](http://www.nashville.gov/mayor/docs/news/NashvillesPovertyReductionPlan.pdf)

“Nashville’s Poverty Initiative Calls for Community-Wide Collaboration to Help Poor: Mayor Dean Names Metro Social Services as Coordinating Agency for Plan’s Implementation,” February 22, 2010, available at: <http://www.nashville.gov/mayor/news/2010/pr/0222.asp>

“Roles and Responsibilities of Lead Organizations For Implementation Teams,” May 2010, available at: <http://www.nashville.gov/sservices/docs/poverty/LeadRolesResponsibilities.pdf>.

“2009 Nashville Community Needs Evaluation Report,” October 6, 2009, available at: <http://www.nashville.gov/sservices/commmunityneeds.asp>.

“Poverty Initiative Implementation Update: June 2010,” June 8, 2010, available at: [www.nashville.gov/sservices/docs/PIIupdateJune10.pdf](http://www.nashville.gov/sservices/docs/PIIupdateJune10.pdf).

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### Expert resources to contact for additional information

Honorable Howard Gentry, CEO, Chamber of Commerce Public Benefit Foundation and Chair, Metro Social Services Board of Commissioners  
Founding Chair of the Poverty Reduction Initiative Steering Committee  
[hgentry@nashvillechamber.com](mailto:hgentry@nashvillechamber.com)

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