

Setting Priorities and Fighting Poverty in Wisconsin

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Executive Summary

For more than 100 years, the Wisconsin Idea—the belief that the boundaries of the University of Wisconsin should extend to the boundaries of the state and beyond and that university research should be used to improve all aspects of human life—has influenced the university’s work, including that of the Institute for Research on Poverty (IRP).

This paper summarizes three aspects of the Wisconsin Idea in action as it relates to poverty in Wisconsin: (1) the planning and initial implementation of a statewide effort sponsored by the governor and facilitated by the Department of Children and Families to identify long-term strategies for increasing economic security; (2) the identification and provision of key information needed to implement these strategies; and (3) the compilation and analysis of information about poverty trends in Wisconsin. The paper’s authors, who have each participated in these three activities, conclude the paper with the identification of ongoing challenges and opportunities with respect to Wisconsin’s strategic antipoverty agenda.

The first element of the Wisconsin Idea in relation to addressing poverty in Wisconsin was IRP’s participation in the development of Wisconsin’s strategic antipoverty agenda, which was managed by what is known as the Core Team. Wisconsin chose to have a Core Team, rather than the Department of Children and Families or the Governor’s Office, manage the planning process in order to ensure the development of a shared agenda for which many different stakeholders throughout Wisconsin could assume responsibility and ownership. A wide net was cast that included not only traditional stakeholders such as nonprofits and advocacy groups, but also other state agencies, foundations, Native American tribes, law enforcement agencies, business leaders, political leaders, and individual consumers who have utilized Wisconsin’s human service systems. IRP was represented on the Core Team as well as the Planning Work Group that supported its efforts.

The Core Team spent a significant amount of time debating whether or not Wisconsin’s overall planning effort would be best guided by the establishment of a statewide poverty reduction goal. Ultimately, no specific poverty reduction goal was set. Instead, the Core Team chose to focus on assessing the current status of family social and economic well-being; identifying specific actions that could be taken to improve family economic security and prioritizing these strategies; and assigning clear roles in accomplishing these strategies.

The vehicle for launching the strategic planning process was the governor’s summit on “Building Bridges to Family Economic Success” held May 2009. Through an interactive process, more than 300 individuals contributed to the identification of shared outcomes, priority strategies, and critical partners that needed to be engaged to move Wisconsin toward its goals in six key areas: adult education/preparation for employment; birth to grade 12 education; creating work opportunities; family supports; housing; and income, assets, and supports. The Core Team issued its final report in December 2009¹; ownership of the implementation process has been

¹ <http://www.wiscap.org/pdfs/DCF%20Building%20Bridges%20FINAL.pdf>

transferred to the Division of Family and Economic Security within the Department of Children and Families.

The second element of the Wisconsin Idea in relation to addressing poverty in Wisconsin was the provision of relevant information. Throughout the strategic planning process, IRP played a critical role in providing information about the extent to which strategies identified by the work groups were supported by evidence or had been implemented in other jurisdictions. This information was provided through participation in the Core Team, Planning Work Group, and specific topical work groups, or through direct consultation with Department of Children and Families staff. In addition, information related to specific recommendations of the Family Support Work Group was provided to key staff and other partners through an IRP working conference focused on improving the well-being of families, especially vulnerable families. The working conference—“State Innovations in Policies Supporting Healthy Families”—was held in June 2009. It brought together scholars with an interest in the areas of home visiting programs, alternative response programs, and integrated planning for children and family service delivery together with practitioners and policymakers involved in planning and implementing related interventions.

The third element of the Wisconsin Idea in relation to addressing poverty in Wisconsin was IRP’s compilation and analysis of information regarding poverty trends within the state. As noted, although the Core Team did specifically discuss the possibility of setting a concrete poverty reduction target, it was decided that looking at measurable improvements in family’s social and economic well-being would instead be the goal of the strategic planning effort. Therefore, in lieu of a specific poverty reduction target, IRP—as a key participant in the Core Team—proposed and undertook development of the *Wisconsin Poverty Report*.² It also began the process of developing a new and more flexible measure of poverty specific to Wisconsin.

All three of these activities—developing long-term strategies for increasing economic security, identifying and providing key information needed to implement these strategies, and compiling and analyzing information about poverty trends—represent significant progress toward setting priorities and fighting poverty in Wisconsin. However, whether or not these activities ultimately result in a reduction in poverty or an increase in economic security in Wisconsin remains to be seen. On the one hand, there remain significant challenges to moving the agenda forward, including whether momentum can be sustained. Of particular concern are whether identified strategies are disseminated and implemented, progress is tracked over time, and adjustments are made as necessary, based on this progress information. On the other hand, there are several opportunities on which Wisconsin can capitalize as it moves forward, including empathy, availability of federal funds, and other complementary initiatives. Finally, and perhaps uniquely, Wisconsin has an advantage in terms of moving its agenda forward thanks to the Wisconsin Idea and the continuing relationship between the University of Wisconsin and the State.

² Smeeding, Timothy M., and Julia A. Isaacs, 2009, *Wisconsin Poverty Report*. Institute for Research on Poverty: University of Wisconsin–Madison. Available at <http://www.irp.wisc.edu/research/wipoverty.htm#wipovreport>