

# Advocacy: Poverty is sexist

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*Each year the Advocacy team selects an area of focus from among the four members' deepest cares and concerns. This year, the Advocacy team is focusing on ending extreme poverty worldwide.*

**By Kim Jenkins, Executive Director, Open Door Community House**

Women and children disproportionately make up the largest population of persons living in poverty around the world and here at home. Many programs around the globe seek to alleviate the problem by offering, for example, training for women to sell items to earn money for their families, or a gift of animals to raise for milk or meat.

Statistics show and history has proven that poverty is sexist. A family, even entire communities, can be transformed when women are empowered in the home, the marketplace, and in business ownership.

In Georgia, statistics tell the story that poverty is sexist here, too, with nearly 17 percent of women living in poverty compared to 12 percent of men – and we know that the percentage is much higher in many communities in our state. Nearly 40 percent of Georgia families that *are working* are still living under 200 percent of the poverty line, not enough to provide essentials of daily living without outside financial assistance.

In the United States in 2018, full-time working women earn only about 82 percent of what men in the workforce earn, according to the Institute for Women's Policy Research. Federal poverty guidelines indicate that a family of four must earn at least \$50,200 to live at 200 percent of poverty.

Open Door Community House, located in Columbus, Ga., is empowering women to create financial security through employment, training, and the building of social capital or networks of people who can connect to resources including job opportunities that pay a livable wage.

As a National Mission Institution of United Methodist Women, Open Door is committed to long-term solutions to poverty for women, children, and youth. Our mission is to “empower impoverished people in our community to realize their full potential as children of God.”

About 10 years ago, a board member made a profound statement that begged us to examine *how* we provided services and it changed the course of our ministries. She said, “I was here as a college student serving as a lifeguard when Open Door had a pool. We are now serving fourth generations of those same families.” Instantly, we had the same sinking realization that even though our ministries had changed through the years to accommodate the needs of the community, we were still serving in ways that were not helping people move *out* of poverty. We were addressing symptoms (food insecurity, unstable housing situations, dependency on government and agency assistance to survive) instead of addressing the root causes of poverty in our area (such as the lack of employment opportunities that paid a livable wage, lack of a high school education or greater). It also was during this time that nearly all of our staff members were saying, “We are seeing the same people for the same things day after day. What can we do differently?”

We believed that for families to change, for our community truly to be able to move beyond poverty, we had to find new ways to empower women and families to become financially secure, find sustainable and supportive community, and be able to hope and dream again.

The board and staff of Open Door spent a great deal of time in Scripture study and prayer. We held visioning sessions around creating shalom in our community. We felt energized and compelled by God to create opportunities for real and lasting change.

The reading of Robert Lupton's book, “Toxic Charity,” provided us with the language, tools, and structure

for long-term transformation. As John Wesley had stated centuries before, Lupton's most valuable guiding statement is, "Above all, do no harm." He put into words what so many of us were feeling: the more we do for people, the more dependent on us they become, which in turn often fosters a sense of entitlement. We damage others unintentionally by doing *for* them what they often have the capacity to do for themselves.

This newfound sense of purpose, identity, and ministry direction led us to become the lead organization in Columbus for Circles in Columbus, part of a national movement to inspire and equip families and communities to thrive and resolve poverty. Circles asserts that responsibility for both poverty and prosperity rests not only in the hands of individuals, but also with societies, institutions, and communities.

We also decided to cease providing a clothing ministry and renovate that physical space into an educational program called The Open Door Institute, providing training in culinary arts, customer service, work readiness, life skills, computer classes, and GED preparation and testing.

Over the years, we at Open Door have continued to adjust our ministries to focus on long-term solutions for women and children to move beyond poverty.

Serving since 1935, Open Door currently provides eight ministries through which women and families find encouragement and restored hope. These include but are not limited to:

- **The Mathews Promise Academy:** an afterschool and summer program for children who live in homes of low-wealth. Focusing on reading development and academic success, the ministry also provides the *Youth in Unison* music education program, daily devotionals, Bible study, age-appropriate life skills, recreation, sports, arts/crafts, and educational field trips. Nearly all youth who graduate from our program attend college or enter military service.
- **The Open Door Institute:** a ministry of education and training to help participants obtain living wage employment. Graduates from the culinary arts program now serve in restaurants, catering businesses or even open their own business. Most all graduates are ServSafe certified which earns them a higher salary. Many serve as assistant managers or sous chefs.
- **Circles in Columbus:** a program ministry connecting persons living in poverty (the Circle Leader) with volunteers from the community (Allies) who work together to implement the Circle Leader's plan to move out of poverty. There are currently two Circles sites and three training sites for Circle Leaders. The Circles community also works on a "Big View" issue (a systemic issue in the community that keeps people stuck in poverty). One result of "Big View" at our Open Door location was the implementation of FANN, Friends and Neighbors Network, a food co-op that provides one half to one third of a family's monthly food needs. This has now expanded into other FANN sites across Columbus through community partners.
- **The Virginia D. Jackson Home for Women:** the oldest transitional housing program for women in Columbus, the home provides a structured environment for women experiencing homelessness to live for up to one year. During that time, women gain employment, attend school, pay off debt, and work toward their own goal of obtaining and maintaining permanent housing.
- **Welcome Home:** a rapid rehousing program for women and children experiencing homelessness. Following a "housing first" model, the program works with each woman to reduce or remove existing barriers to housing and long-term financial sustainability.
- **Showering Program for the Homeless:** this ministry offers daily devotions, Bible study, and basic needs assistance to women and men experiencing homelessness and who are unsheltered, meaning they reside in places like tents or abandoned buildings. The program offers breakfast, a hot shower, hygiene items, barber services, and access to representatives from the Department of Labor, New Horizons, and Veterans Affairs.

We are blessed by partnerships with United Methodist churches and United Methodist Women across South Georgia.

Poverty is sexist. Serving together, we will continue to empower women to hope, dream, feel secure, and move beyond poverty.

*Kim Jenkins serves as executive director of Open Door Community House in Columbus. Contact her at 706-323-5518 or [kim@odch.org](mailto:kim@odch.org). Each year the Advocacy team selects an area of focus from among the four members' deepest cares and concerns. This year, the Advocacy team is focusing on ending extreme poverty worldwide. Learn more about the Advocacy team and its efforts at [www.sgaumc.org/advocacy](http://www.sgaumc.org/advocacy).*