

How to wage a smart war on poverty

Q&A: Senator Cory Booker and Senator Tim Scott

By David Jeffrey, Commissioner –

For the past 51 years and counting, the United States has been fighting what President Lyndon B. Johnson called the “War on Poverty.” Despite all our efforts, more than 43 million Americans live in

poverty, according to the most recent report from the U.S. Census Bureau in September. Government programs like the earned-income tax credit and SNAP help millions living dangerously close to the poverty line, and The Salvation Army’s [Human Needs Index](#) serves as a powerful tool to track basic human need at the national and state levels to help social service providers be more responsive to those unable to make ends meet. But more has to be done.

Recently, Senator Cory Booker and Senator Tim Scott unveiled a bipartisan plan to wage a smart war on poverty in distressed communities around the nation: the Investing in Opportunity Act. With The Salvation Army’s work to help those in need in every ZIP code in the country, I asked Senator Booker and Senator Scott about how we can come together and wage a smart war on poverty.

What should every American know about the current state of poverty in our country?

Scott: The first thing every American should understand about the current state of poverty is that poor people—I’ve been one myself—have a strong desire to succeed. That the fire that burns in the heart from those of us who have been or who are mired in poverty is the same passion that beats in every other American’s heart. At times, we see that the poor are relegated to a lesser category of effort and desire, but that theory is just false. We all share a common drive to want to work hard with the hopes of providing a better tomorrow for generations to come.

Booker: One in five Millennials lives in poverty. The United States has the second-highest relative child poverty rate in the developed world. What that means in terms of failures of national moral obligations should go without saying, but it also has significant implications for the future of our entire country’s economic health. We cannot hope to achieve progress while leaving behind nearly one-fifth of the next generation.

What is your biggest takeaway from the recent U.S. Census Bureau Report?



Scott: While there are slight improvements in the newest figures released in the U.S. Census Bureau Report, the numbers are still staggering. We still have about 43 million people in America who continue to live in poverty. If we look at statistics for the past 30 years, there is no significant change; the poverty rates have hovered between 11 percent and 15 percent. We should all be asking ourselves, How can we do better? As lawmakers, we need to engage our communities, listen to their concerns, and find ways to bring long-lasting change to our communities that need it the most.

What can we do to help the 43.1 million Americans still living in poverty?

Booker: Perhaps one of the biggest things we can do to help the 43.1 million Americans still living in poverty, including roughly 15 million children, is raise the minimum wage. So many children in poverty have parents who work, but their low wages mean long hours and a constant struggle to make ends meet. We also need to continue to fight efforts to cut SNAP benefits, preserve and improve housing programs, and work to make quality healthcare coverage more affordable. Next, we need to help those in poverty lift themselves up by improving access to quality schools and education, starting with universal access to high-quality preschool. We must ensure that every child has the opportunity to attend a world-class public school, and if they want to go to college, the cost of tuition should never be a barrier.

Why is it important to support the Investing in Opportunity Act to boost investment in economically distressed areas?

Scott: Government-regulated programs have fallen short. Poverty rates remain virtually unchanged. We must look for innovative solutions to helping millions of Americans living in poverty and in distressed communities around the nation.

Booker: The Investing in Opportunity Act encourages investment in distressed communities that lack the resources needed to jump-start economic growth. It would remove barriers to putting money into local communities and create “opportunity zones” for investors to fund and support entrepreneurs and small businesses. By investing in local infrastructure and developing blighted properties—all at little to no cost to the taxpayer—we can create new opportunities and bring much-needed capital back to areas where citizens are struggling to get by. The private sector has a critical role to play in reinvigorating distressed communities. By channeling the trillions of dollars in capital sitting on the sidelines toward these communities, we can make a world of difference.

Why is poverty alleviation important to you?

Scott: What makes the issue of poverty important to me is that I’ve lived it. I was a kid who grew up in a single-parent household, mired in poverty, disillusioned at times, and nearly flunked out of high school. I was fortunate to have influential role models in my life who showed me there was a much different world out there for me. I want to use the lessons I have learned in my personal life to help people from inner cities to our rural communities who may feel as though they have been left behind.

Booker: We can’t expect to succeed and compete in a global economy if we’re leaving so many Americans on the sidelines. Poverty lies at the root of the fundamental debates and issues of our

time: criminal justice reform, education, fair and affordable housing, economic growth, and racial and social justice. Alleviating poverty is a moral imperative and important to our collective future. It is an issue that requires an all-hands-on-deck approach rooted in collaboration, smart policy, and compassion. Organizations like The Salvation Army have an important role to play in building consensus, raising awareness, and providing meaningful support for those living with the daily reality of poverty.