



Candidates talk about the poor

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PROVIDENCE — Acknowledging the economy is clearly linked with poverty levels, Rhode Island's six gubernatorial candidates Tuesday agreed the state's floundering economy must turn around so poor and middle-income families can continue to get the help they need.

The candidates were invited by the Rhode Island Interfaith Coalition to take part in a panel discussion held at the mid-point of the coalition's 2nd Annual Rhode Island Interfaith Coalition One Voice to Reduce Poverty Conference at Roger Williams State Park Casino. Keynote speaker was Commissioner of Education Deborah Gist, who spoke about the importance of a quality education for children to escape poverty.

More than 200 faith leaders from across the state convened for the day-long conference, which included an hour-long forum in which the Gubernatorial candidates addressed questions regarding their proposed strategies to help children living in poverty.

The Rhode Island Interfaith Coalition is calling on elected officials in Rhode Island to make a commitment to cut poverty in Rhode Island by 50 percent in the next eight years.

All six of the candidates said they will push to support and invest in Rlte Care, Rhode Island's Medicaid managed care program that provides families and eligible uninsured pregnant women, parents, and children up to age 19 with comprehensive health insurance coverage.

Last month, hundreds of Care New England employees and supporters converged at the State House to oppose Governor Carcieri's proposal to reduce what hospitals are paid by Rlte Care.

The governor's budget for the fiscal year that begins July 1 would not affect who is eligible for Rlte Care or what care they receive, but would cap what hospitals are paid by insurers for the services they provide. The state's three Rlte Care providers are Blue Cross & Blue Shield of Rhode Island, UnitedHealthCare and Neighborhood Health Plan.

"I absolutely support Rlte Care," said former state representative and Republican Victor G. Moffitt. "The Rlte Care program needs to be increased and improved and my plan is to straighten out the (state) budget so that there is more money there for Rlte Care and other programs like it. Until we straighten out the budget and fix the pension plan problem, programs like Rlte Care will continue to be cut."

"I remember the day Rlte Care was born," said General Treasurer Frank T. Caprio, a Democrat. "Here we

are two decades later and what we've seen is a critical program that has helped 100,000 Rhode Islanders. The people I've talked to say RItE Care works and needs to be preserved and as Governor I will do that."

Former independent candidate Lincoln Chafee, a one-time mayor of Warwick, explained that poverty is a lagging economic indicator and that until the state resolves its financial woes and strengthens its economy, programs like RItE Care will continue to be threatened.

"In the last few years we've seen a slippage in RItE Care and other key child care programs and it's all a result of the economy," Chafee said. "We have to get the economy going."

"I believe that a child requires three things - an engaging and loving family; access to quality health care; and a quality education," said Moderate Party candidate Ken Block. "Unfortunately, for far too many children in Rhode Island that doesn't happen. It scares me that the state's problems are making this happen. The state needs to step up and come up with a comprehensive economic plan so that care can be provided to help these people."

Attorney General Patrick C. Lynch, a Democrat, said he will continue to fight to maintain state programs that help poor and middle-income families, and noted his record of supporting the Health Care Conversion Act and his work to pursue a lawsuit against lead paint manufacturers.

"This is all about having a backbone and making the right decisions," he said.

Republican John Robitaille said the problem isn't just money and economics.

"We need to do it better. We need to do things more efficiently so more money can be deployed into RItE Care and other programs," he said.

The candidates offered their views on several other issues, including the state's unemployment rate, child poverty, closing the achievement gap between low- and high-income students, and ensuring every child in the state has access to quality education.

"We need new leadership and to bring people together," Chafee noted. "The (state) budget is the most important public document and the priorities in my budget will be child assistance and bringing back tax credits to distressed communities."

"The biggest problem today is the high unemployment," added Moffitt. "We need to create new ways to bring jobs to the state. We need to reduce the sales tax and, being the Ocean State, I'd like to build a world-class aquarium with hotels that would bring in tourism and jobs."

Robitaille brought up the issue of father absence as another major cause of child poverty, saying nearly two-thirds of poor children reside in single-parent homes.

"The increasing number of fatherless families is a major reason for child poverty and we need to reverse this trend. No wonder our kids don't have a chance," he said.

"As for education, that needs to start at home," said Caprio. "Families must make that a priority. We need parents to be more involved in their schools and we need more collaboration between school districts." Said Lynch: "We need to provide more support for organizations like Kids Count and Year Up and start providing Head-Start in kindergarten through high school. We also need to achieve a new (school) funding formula."

"Money needs to go where it's supposed to go," said Block. "We need to make sure dollars are spent properly and not wasted or stolen. Taking control of our finances is how we can help children."

The coalition's conference Tuesday also included a "State of the State" as related to poverty issues from Linda Katz of the Poverty Institute, and Elizabeth Burke Bryant from Kids Count.

According to Bryant, in 2008, over 118,000 Rhode Islanders (12 percent of the population) lived below the federal poverty level. In 2008, almost 35,000 children lived below the federal poverty level.

The Rhode Island Interfaith Coalition was formed in 2008 as part of a national movement to fight poverty with faith.

"The coalition believes people of faith have a moral obligation to address issues of justice and compassion," said coalition member Marty Cooper, director of community relations for the Jewish Federation of Rhode Island. "This includes speaking out in response to the economic realities facing Rhode Islanders, such as high unemployment, affordable healthcare, rising utility rates, unaffordable housing exacerbated by the foreclosure crisis and cuts in programs that effect our most needy." Last year, the Coalition's efforts helped preserve cash assistance for low-income Rhode Island families and funding for the Neighborhood Opportunities Program.