

## Editorial: Plight of the working poor

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We can see the homeless, though some of us may look away.

We can usually identify the sick, which transforms some into caregivers as others keep a distance.

We can recognize the grieving, which can create unease for some while others are conditioned to offer comfort.

But there is no social reflex for responding to the masses of neighbors who struggle to survive financially every day. A fallout of our long economic crisis is that it now eludes focus.

The **United Way** has spent the last few years trying to put a face on people who live in households above the Federal Poverty Level but below the basic cost-of-living threshold. United Way dubbed them ALICE, a more memorable handle than "Asset-Limited, Income-Constricted Employed."

The concept gained some traction when United Way released the first Connecticut Report in 2014. We learned that if we aren't ALICE ourselves, we all know people who live paycheck to paycheck. They clean and protect our workplace. They prepare our food. We buy goods from them. We entrust our children to them.

This critical study is a window that provides a jarring view into households around a state with perhaps the widest wealth gap in the nation.

Identifying the problem has not budged the needle on solving it. The new report, released today, shows an increase from 25 percent to 27 percent of Connecticut households in the ALICE category.

None of our communities are exempt. In Bridgeport, the state's largest city, 63 percent of households fall into the ALICE and poverty categories. Data in Danbury (42 percent), Norwalk (36 percent) and Stamford (35 percent) is almost as dramatic. Even in

Greenwich, one of the wealthiest communities in the state, one in five households isn't getting by.

The bottom line is that things are getting worse for many people. Almost half of the jobs in the state paid less than \$20 an hour in 2014, and two-thirds of those jobs paid between \$10- and \$15-an-hour. ALICE is unable to balance the financial demands of housing, child care, food, health care and transportation.

The report identifies that something is broken, that healing is needed, but it is not diagnostic. United Way only recognizes the urgency to "increase ALICE's income and reduce household expenses."

It may be easier to address the second problem than the first. United Way's challenge is to lure more minds to brainstorm for solutions.

We direct the challenge to employers. People in the ALICE category are not going to food pantries, but some companies are finding ways to bring nourishment to employees in need. A rising challenge is the pressure for workers to have smartphones, which are not in their budgets. Companies could introduce programs in which used devices trickle down from higher-paid workers.

Chambers of Commerce and similar business groups should consider the ALICE findings and contribute to creating and sharing creative solutions beyond anything government can provide. The good of the employee is to the benefit of the employer. Nonprofits are already embracing the need to become more creative instead of simply mourning the loss of traditional resources.

United Way is helping us to recognize invisible neighbors in need. It's up to the rest of us to do more than simply pay witness to this economic crisis. We must not look away.

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