

Profile: She Redefines Poverty to Include Working People Who Can't Get By

Colleen O'Dea | April 27, 2016

Stephanie Hoopes melds data, compassion, and a respect for human dignity in a new methodology that reveals the hidden face of poverty – beyond the official statistics



Stephanie Hoopes

Who: Stephanie Hoopes.

Age: 51.

Personal: Works in Morris Township, lived in Mountain Lakes, mother of two children.

• What she does:* Director of the *ALICE*[®] Project of the United Way of Northern New Jersey.

Who's ALICE? Hoopes first got the idea for **ALICE – Asset Limited, Income Constrained, Employed** – while serving on the board of the United Way of Morris County, which she joined in 2005.

She was among those evaluating applications for assistance from organizations working in one of the wealthiest counties in the nation, and had high hopes for eliminating poverty there – it was only 4 percent, after all. But then she looked deeper into the problem and saw that the ranks of the needy stretched far beyond those deemed officially "poor" by federal poverty measures.

Hoopes attributed part of her interest in the needy to her Quaker upbringing, which instilled in her the idea that "each person has a certain amount of dignity, and to respect that." Looking at the data and talking to real people, it became clear to her that many people had the wrong idea about the plight of the poor and those with lower incomes. "The way poverty was always talked about bothered me," Hoopes said. "So many people were playing by the rules, were working, were not lazy. They were not the stereotype."

ALICE grows up: The first ALICE report, for Morris County in 2007, was well-received. Hoopes attributed that at least in part to the "tough questions" asked by the team as they developed methods for counting those who, while not technically poor, do not earn enough to make an adequate living.

The Morris United Way evolved into the United Way of Northern New Jersey, which serves Morris, Sussex, Somerset, Warren and parts of suburban Essex counties. And in 2011 ALICE became a statewide project, giving people the ability to compare counties.

Hoopes worked as an assistant professor at Rutgers' School of Public Affairs and Administration and served as director of the New Jersey DataBank from 2011 to 2012. The data connection helped inform the *ALICE project*. She

spent months investigating the effects of the Great Recession and developed new metrics to realistically redefine financial hardship in New Jersey, one of the wealthiest states in the nation.

The most recent report concluded that two of every five households in New Jersey cannot afford life's basic needs: food, housing, transportation, healthcare, and childcare. About 310,000 households are living in poverty, but another 890,000 are ALICE households, with one or more members employed, but unable to make ends meet in this high-cost state. Hoopes testified earlier this year at an Assembly committee hearing on poverty and was one of 10 women recently honored on the floor of the Assembly for her work.

ALICE expands: Officials at other United Ways across the country saw what Hoopes had done in New Jersey and wanted to find out about their own ALICEs. The United Way of Northern New Jersey is doing similar reports in 12 states. "It resonates," Hoopes said. "Every time we add a state, we look at this problem a little differently." For instance, Louisiana's population is still feeling the effects of Hurricane Katrina, 11 years after the storm hit.

But wherever they looked, the headline remained the same. "We are all surprised that more than a third of households in every state we looked at live below this ALICE threshold." Hoopes said many Americans don't realize how widespread the difficulties are. And her experiences traveling -- in addition to England, she has spent time in France, Africa, and China -- have given her a greater perspective on life. "It helps you appreciate there are problems everywhere," she said. "There are different approaches. If you look at the United States, we do not necessarily have the moral high ground."

What's next for ALICE: Hoopes' goal is to have data on "survival" budgets and ALICE families for every county in the nation to broaden the dialogue from one focused on the narrow federal poverty measure. "The language is very important to being able to talk about the problem without the baggage of the poverty stereotype," she said. "I hope policymakers will consider the impact on ALICE every time they weigh public policy decisions."

ALICE, the backstory: Hoopes was born and raised in Delaware. She attended Wilmington Friends School, a Quaker school, and went on to earn a bachelor's degree in political science from Wellesley College. Hoopes got a master's in American politics and international relations from the University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill and then a doctorate in government and international relations from The London School of Economics and Political Science. She taught classes in British politics at two universities in England in the late 1990s. Back in the United States, Hoopes spent a year teaching international political economy classes at Columbia University in New York.

What you may not know about her: Hoopes was a field hockey player through college. That has now "morphed" into golf, she said.