

**JOHN FRANKLIN** GUEST COLUMNIST

## To address poverty, first change our definition of poverty

**A** democracy is at its best when its citizens and elected officials come together to listen and share some good ideas, to engage in a dialogue about making the world a better place for all residents.

That's what we saw happen in Trenton on Jan. 26, when the New Jersey Assembly held public hearings to discuss how to combat poverty and rebuild the middle-class in the state.

This is the first step in bringing about lasting change — believing in one central idea.

At United Way of Northern New Jersey, we believe that lasting change begins with ALICE. We believe that ALICE can be the platform for achieving common ground.

ALICE stands for people who are Asset Limited, Income Constrained, Employed. These folks are the backbone of our economy. People who are working every day, sometimes at more than one job, but still not making ends meet for basic necessities.

It's our kid coming out of college, our parent living on social security, the person taking care of our parents in nursing homes, the one taking care of our toddlers.

There are 890,000 ALICE households in New Jersey. Let that number sink in.

Then, add in those who meet the archaic definition of poverty: That's another 336,000 households. Combined, there are 1.2 million New Jersey households falling behind. That's 40 percent of our neighbors.

This touches all of us.

I believe ALICE is the most important issue in New Jersey and America today. ALICE represents the erosion of the American Dream.

Think about Nora, a support counselor at a northern New Jersey group home for adults with special needs and disabilities. Despite working full time, Nora struggles to

make ends meet. She takes on extra work at another group home, working nights, overtime, and weekends — sometimes working 14 consecutive days before getting a day off.

She is ALICE and we need her. And, we need her to be healthy, independent and able to support herself and her family because if she can't, we will have to.

The next steps are clear:

- Recognize the current definition and perceptions of poverty are woefully outdated.

- Help cut through red-tape and predatory practices denying ALICE access to existing supports like the Earned Income Tax Credit, the most effective pro-work, anti-poverty program.

- Expand access to quality child care. ALICE needs this in order to work. Plus, it reduces employer turnover costs and has a proven return on investment for our future workforce.

Without bold moves today, the dream is lost for ALICE. And how long before it is lost for all of us?

I'm not a Pollyanna, but seeing our democracy at work at the Assembly hearing, I am optimistic. I believe that we can do as Mother's Against Drunk Driving did, or as the people who dreamed up public education.

I believe we can change the dialogue in this state and the country.

I am not alone in this belief.

At United Way, we have Fortune 500 companies, committed volunteers and dedicated staff supporting our efforts. We have politicians like former Gov. Thomas H. Kean and U.S. Sen. Cory Booker who just two months ago sat together on stage and agreed that common ground can be forged for ALICE.

A movement cannot be the work of one person. I'm proud that this idea was born at United Way and is now being cultivated across the country through some 250 United

Ways in 10 states, with more preparing to sign on.

We need even more people innovative enough and courageous enough to step out of the crowd and provide the leadership necessary to make the idea a reality.

New Jersey has proven itself capable of that challenge in the past. New Jersey can be a model once again.

Let's lead again, to make change and unite for ALICE.

*John Franklin is CEO of United Way of Northern New Jersey.*

