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Opinion:

Mississippi bills could let state escape decades of nation's worst poverty and show whole country way out, say Weiner & Filtz

On Oct. 14, the Nobel Prize in Economics was awarded to three accomplished researchers who suggested a new approach to studying and solving poverty. Researchers Abhijit Banerjee, Esther Duflo and Michael Kremer placed a strong focus on three items of economic distress. They studied access to credit, preventive health care and new technologies. They found that life data significantly predicts poverty.

Mississippi has suffered distress on many data points paralleling its traditional unfortunate prominence as the poorest state -- a fifth of the citizens live in poverty compared to 12% nationally. But there are rays of sunshine that could show the state, and the whole country, the way out. State legislators' bills could slow and even end the high poverty numbers. The closeness of the just-concluded gubernatorial race, a five-point difference, could and should motivate the governor and legislature to move bills to help the nearly 600,000 below the Census Bureau-defined poverty level. "Poverty" is \$12,140 for a one-adult household and \$25,100 for a family of four. There are at least 35 bills introduced in the legislature that would help the poor in Mississippi escape poverty. Nine in particular stand out. Each of these bills was killed within their respective committees. They range from creating a Department of Labor, to formulating a child care program, to raising the minimum wage.

The Mississippi state legislature website lists each bill's author and its fate. The majority Republican members, who currently control the legislature and all committees, could be heroes for bipartisan support.

Some of the most poignant bills that would positively affect the impoverished but were killed in their respective committees are:

- House Bill 257, by Bryant Clark, D-Pickens, would have expanded Medicaid under the Affordable Care Act, but the legislature blocked it. As of 2019, 33 states and Washington, D.C. have expanded and implemented Medicaid, and 3 states have voted to do so but have not yet taken effect. The latest data from a detailed report by Kaiser Family Foundation, a health care policy think tank, found that in 2017, when 32 states plus D.C. had expanded and implemented the Medicaid expansion, 12.7 million newly eligible people signed up for Medicaid nationally. In fact, many key bills are led by Rep. Clark.
- House Bill 952, by Kabir Karriem, D-Columbus, would have raised Mississippi's minimum wage from \$7.25 an hour to \$10.10. Many cities and states are moving towards a \$15 wage. Even H.B. 277, which would raise Mississippi's minimum wage from \$7.25 to \$8.25 an hour and set requirements for exemptions and overtime, authored by Bryant Clark, D-Pickens, did not progress.

- House Bill 124 would create the Mississippi Affordable Housing Opportunity Fund and establish the Mississippi Home Corporation to carry it out. By: John Hines, D-Greenville.
- House Bill 216 would use existing and uncommitted money -- quite a rational approach -- to create a state-funded child care system. These funds would be remaining from the previous fiscal year, up to \$40 million, and would be available for use as vouchers. By: Orlando Paden, D-Clarksdale.
- House Bill 79 would foster a Mississippi Department of Labor. The state currently has an “employment services” department, but it does not function like other states’ legitimate labor departments do. By: Tom Miles, D-Forest.
- House Bill 162 would create a Skills Standards Advisory Board, to encourage and help workers obtain more skills. By: Bryant Clark, D-Pickens House Bill 207 would generate the Housing Loan Assistance Pilot Program; and authorize bonds to provide for it. By: Bryant Clark, D-Pickens.
- Finally, House Bill 426 would provide funds for the purpose of renovating a portion of the Metrocenter Mall in Jackson to house the Hinds Community College Workforce Development Training Center. By: Credell Calhoun, D-Jackson.

For context, the median household income in Mississippi is just \$43,529. In comparison, the U.S. median household income is \$60,336.

Twelve percent of MS residents are not enrolled in health insurance, some 3% less than the 8.7% of the national population not enrolled. That means Mississippi has 27.5% more non-enrollees than the national average.

Mississippi exhibits a 52.2% employment rate, while the U.S. has a 59.5% employment rate, likely showing workers who are discouraged in their attempts at finding a job.

Mississippi could be a model of the best kind instead of being routinely cited for income failure. Instead of the chronic listing of Old Miss as the nation’s poorest state, it could be showing the nation the way up.

Robert Weiner was a Clinton and Bush White House spokesman, Chief of Staff of the House Aging Committee and Health Subcommittee, spokesman for the House Government Operations Committee, and senior staff for Congressmen John Conyers, Charles Rangel, Claude Pepper, Ed Koch, Sen. Edward Kennedy, and 4-Star Gen. Barry McCaffrey.

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