

**Presentation by Lynda Gavioli on Poverty to Senate Select Committee on  
Women and Children,  
Monday, November 14, 2011**

**Introduction**

Good Afternoon, I am Lynda Gavioli, Chair of the Governor's Children's Cabinet Advisory Board. However, today I am speaking to you from my position as Executive Director of the Children's Coalition for Northeast Louisiana.

- Where geographically located--Northeast Louisiana bordered by Arkansas and Mississippi
  - Large region in size--12 parishes
  - 2 hours to drive across
  - Largely rural with population center being Ouachita Parish
- I. This area has been called America's Third World Country, because many of the statistics that describe our area and our children, in particular, are the worst in the nation. Eight of the parishes in northeast Louisiana carry the official designation of Persistent Poverty parishes. The majority of our parishes have 20% or more of the population that fell below the poverty line in 1970, 1980, 1990, 2000 and 2010.
- II. Statistics:
- Louisiana's poverty rate is 19.2%
  - NELA rate is 27%
  - Children in poverty LA 27%
  - NELA rate is 37% with rates as low as 31% in Ouachita Parish to High of 57% in East Carroll Parish.

Several years ago, as part of a statewide effort to look at poverty issues, we convened a meeting in our area of 410 thoughtful leaders to talk about ways to address poverty.

There were four priorities identified that needed to be addressed which, I believe, are still relevant today:

- Enhancing education at all levels--was the top priority with special emphasis on early childhood and quality childcare.
- Economic development with family friendly jobs as defined by higher wages with benefits
- Support of families including access to health care, affordable housing, child care, financial planning and information about services available.
- Improved community infrastructure including public transportation, improved roads and public and recreational facilities.

In looking at possible strategies to address these priorities these were some of the suggestions:

- Increase funding for enhanced and expanded pre-K efforts, afterschool programming and quality child care.
- Encourage more parental involvement,
- Focus on adult and early childhood literacy.
- Increase job training opportunities
- Enhance law enforcement and security in communities to address the very high crime rates.

The challenges to addressing poverty in our area are significant.

- First and foremost is apathy. For the 25 years that I have lived in northeast Louisiana, I have heard these awful statistics about poverty and children in our area. It is why the Children's Coalition was formed 13 years ago and it is the inspiration behind what we do and why we advocate. However, that is not true in most instances. Our biggest challenge is apathy. People have become numb to the numbers and overwhelmed at the thought of taking on the challenge of addressing such a multi-faceted problem such as poverty.
- A lack of transportation-- Most of the resources available to families are centered in Ouachita Parish. However, transportation to access those services is a major

barrier for families seeking health care, assistance and even job opportunities.

There is no transportation system other than in Monroe in Ouachita Parish. While Medicaid offers transportation for health care purposes, many times a family member who is working must leave their job and risk losing it to be able to travel to the health services available in Ouachita Parish.

- A lack of collaboration--willingness to work together for the common good
- A lack of reciprocal respect from those in “power” towards those that are “powerless” to help themselves.
- Lack of education--low literacy. Only 14% of our population has a college degree. 33% have less than a high school education.
- Lack of funding
- Fear of change.

The Children’s Coalition believes that to break the cycle of poverty we must intervene when families are the most vulnerable--that is when their children are the youngest.. Children must have quality environments that promote their social-emotional development--including quality child care, access to health care and parents who have support in learning how to nurture their children. That is why we join our voices with the Children’s Cabinet Advisory Board to support these important programs proven to help break the cycle of poverty:

- Child Care Assistance Program
- Quality Child Care, Quality Start
- Nurse Family Partnership
- Early Childhood Supports and Services
- LA 4 pre-school programs
- School Based Health Centers
- Triple P parenting program
- Effort to reform Juvenile Justice--including prevention and diversion
- Early Steps
- New LA Behavioral Health Partnership and the Coordinated System of Care

In closing, let me say--A defining event in the history of Louisiana was the catastrophe and destruction brought on by Hurricanes Katrina and Rita. All of us in this state were affected--not just in south Louisiana. For the first time we saw, and the nation saw, the face of poverty in the faces of those left behind in the evacuation of New Orleans. There was no discrimination. They were old, they were young, they were black and they were white. All of them were without resources, and all were looking for rescue.

Long before Katrina and Rita, LA had been experiencing the catastrophe and destruction brought on by poverty. Poverty is pervasive; it does not discriminate by age and by race; it affects all of us in this state. We all have to be committed to find solutions to break the cycle and to bring hope back to our communities.