

Bill seeks to eradicate ‘concentrated poverty’

State Sen. Fonfara wants neighborhoods to have a fighting change at prosperity



State Sen. John Fonfara, left, and resident Corrie Betts talk on Mahl Avenue in Hartford on Friday. Aaron Flaum photos/Hartford Courant



Resident Jean Holloway talks about the closed businesses along Albany Avenue near Center Street in Hartford on Friday. She envisions a community where families and residents can choose to put down roots.

BY ALISON CROSS HARTFORD COURANT

Hartford's Clay Arsenal neighborhood borders encapsulate three of the poorest census tracts in the state.

Of the more than 6,000 residents that call the Clay Arsenal neighborhood home, roughly 50% live below the federal poverty line, data shows. More than 27% of the adult population lacks a high school diploma. Nearly 48% of residents between the ages of 20 and 64 do not have a job, according to census data. And home ownership rates are so low that less than 10% of the housing units in the neighborhood are owner-occupied.

But when Jean Holloway walks through her Clay Arsenal neighborhood, she sees endless potential.

Holloway envisions a community with more homeownership opportunities, a place where small merchants can fill the now abandoned storefronts — a Clay Arsenal where families and residents will choose to put down roots, instead of treating it as a stop “until you can do better.”

“If I wasn't working for my neighbors, I really would not know what to do,” Holloway said. “You have to want your neighborhood to grow.”

A plan for change

State Sen. John Fonfara also wants Clay Arsenal, and other neighborhoods plagued by high concentrations of poverty to have a fighting chance at prosperity.

Fonfara said Clay Arsenal served as the inspiration for Senate Bill 456, “An Act Requiring the Development and Implementation of Ten-Year Plans to Eradicate Concentrated Poverty in the State.”

It’s a plan to tackle a problem that Fonfara said society has accepted as something that “always will be” — an acceptance he described as “criminal.”

The proposal would declare concentrated poverty a crisis in the state and lay the groundwork for its eradication by allowing qualifying census tracts to partake in 10-year-plans to achieve and sustain a reduction in the number of households living below the federal poverty level.

Under the bill, a “concentrated poverty census tract,” is any tract where 30% or more of the population makes less than the federal poverty guidelines. A total of 64 census tracts in 11 municipalities in the state meet that distinction.

Fonfara emphasized that concentrated poverty differs from other forms of poverty by walling off access to educational and career opportunities that might be available to youth without economic resources who grow up in wealthier towns.

Fonfara also said residents who grow up in neighborhoods with high concentrations of poverty are disproportionately “Black and Latino.” He said the residents also are more likely to become involved with the criminal justice system and live shorter lives than their peers, regardless of their income.

“It’s just not a place where a lot of poor people live. It is a generator of poverty,” Fonfara said. “It dooms a high percentage of folks who grow up there and live there to a substandard living experience.”

Fonfara’s proposal would establish an Office of Neighborhood Investment and Community Engagement in the Department of Economic and Community Development that would partner with local Community Development Corporations to oversee and develop 10-year-plans to reduce poverty to a rate of 20% or less.

The initiative’s rollout would start with a three-year pilot program in the four municipalities with the highest number of qualifying census tracts — Hartford, Bridgeport, New Haven, and Waterbury.

“Unfortunately not a lot has been successful in the country at dismantling concentrated poverty. But I think a lot of it has to do with the fact that we were obsessed with investing in people, and nowhere near the same amount investing in place,” Fonfara said. “This is an opportunity in our community to really not just transform lives, but transform communities because communities impact lives.”

Fonfara’s bill cleared a major hurdle Wednesday when it passed the Finance Revenue and Bonding Committee in a 38 to 14 vote that drew the support of four Republican members, but also some questions.

The proposal that passed through committee, eliminated a provision that would have allowed any aggrieved resident of a qualifying census tract to bring civil action against the state or municipal officials who failed to carry out their responsibilities or execute the 10-year plan in a timely manner.

Instead, the bill now reserves the right of action to community development corporations — a change that Fonfara hoped would alleviate some of his colleagues’ concerns.

But Republican Rep. Holly Cheeseman, a ranking member on the committee, said she still considers the right of action language, and other portions of the bill, problematic.

“I think there are question marks on how this is going to happen,” Cheeseman said.

Cheeseman said she questions whether the Department of Economic Community Development has the skill set to administer this initiative. Additionally, Cheeseman feels the bill could do more to specify the fine points in the pilot program, define some of the steps in the 10-year plan, and identify the criteria used to determine the programs success.

Cheeseman said she would feel more confident if state lawmakers could invest in proven best-practices.

Despite her concerns, Cheseman said she supports the bill's mission and hopes to work with her colleagues to craft a proposal she believes will have a "reasonable chance of success" in the real world.

"I am committed to finding a way to pass legislation that will give every man, woman, child in Connecticut the options they need to have a successful life," Cheseman said.

"We want everyone in Connecticut to succeed. And if there are obstacles to that success, we need to find ways to remove them," Cheseman said. "We have shared goals, it's how we get to those goals."

Fonfara said he feels confident that his bill will pass, but cautioned that eradicating concentrated poverty "won't be easy."

"This would be the toughest thing that we've ever done, because in America, generally, we don't reverse this kind of thing, but we owe it to the people who live there," Fonfara said. "Until we, as a state, say, 'We are going to end this, we're going to eradicate concentrated poverty,' we are accepting of it. We are OK with it."

Making it work

Fonfara highlighted three key aspects that distinguish the proposal from previous initiatives — the bill focuses on place, puts the state "on the clock" to solve the problem, and promotes community-driven and community-owned development.

"The idea of the CDC (Community Development Corporation) here is that it is ground up, it's not top down, it's residents and businesses that are committed to the future of that neighborhood."

Connecticut adopted its official CDC framework during the 2022 session, but the concept dates back to the 1960s.

Fonfara said he was inspired by Chicanos Por La Causa, a nonprofit CDC that operates in five southwestern states that works to expand health and human services, housing, education, economic development and advocacy in member communities.

"I said this is what we need in neighborhoods, to be able to say 'When that building across the street there is foreclosed on, we're going to have the first right of refusal with the bank or the financing company,'" Fonfara said. "They'll pay the same thing to the bank that the bank would have gotten elsewhere, but now it's to a responsible owner and we will rehab it with our people."

Jeffrey Stewart, a Hartford native who serves as the chair of the Clay Arsenal CDC, said the thought of being among the first CDCs to take on the 10-year initiative would be both exciting and nerve wracking.

"The spotlight will be on to see how we do," Stewart said.

Stewart said the Clay Arsenal CDC has worked to break down silos and partner with residents, local organizations and community stakeholders to build on small wins while chipping away at long-term projects.

Stewart said Clay Arsenal is working to boost its curb appeal by offering fence repairs, planting trees, and renovating abandoned buildings into new housing units. The community has its eye on eventual home-ownership initiatives and human capital projects that offer wrap-around services for youth and families including financial literacy, job training and other services.

Stewart and Fonfara said the goal is to revitalize the community, eliminating factors that push people out while building a culture that attracts more residents to move in.

Fonfara said that one of the drivers of concentrated poverty is that wealth does not stay in the community — when people start to do better economically, they leave.

“You hear often in the community about ‘he got out’ or ‘he never got out, the streets got him,’ what have,” Fonfara said. “Place matters when it comes to that level of poverty.”

“I don’t want people to have to leave their neighborhood,” Fonfara said. “This is about saying to the folks that live there, we’re going to invest in (this) place.”

For Corrie Betts, turning his back on the community that raised him was not an option.

Betts grew up on Martin Street in the Northeast section of Hartford, in a census tract that houses the third-highest concentration of poverty in the city.

As a boy, Betts remembered a sense of community that tied his neighborhood together. He recalled running through the plaza, chatting with neighbors as he bagged their groceries and getting his first job at the Hartford Public Library.

But resources, support and guidance were limited. At the time, Betts said he saw few “legitimate avenues” for success. The idea of college was a “distant dream” and crime seemed like the “only option.”

In 10th grade, Betts dropped out of school and eventually found himself trapped in the criminal justice system’s revolving door.

“When you’re living in poverty, the pressure to survive can push you towards desperate measures. I saw friends and family members turn to illegal activities just to make ends meet. And it felt like that was the only path,” Betts said. “Deep down, I knew that it wasn’t the life I wanted for myself.”

Betts remembers 2013 as the year that “things turned around.”

He was stipulated into a faith-based substance abuse program that allowed him to understand his fears and confront them. Other interventions gave him the final push to break the cycle.

“There was a judge who had asked me a question and her question was ‘Corrie, when are you ever going to love yourself and be committed in anything?’ ” Betts recalled, “It was like a light came on. With the right support and the right people speaking into my life, I challenged myself.”

Betts said he went back to school, got his associate’s degree and worked his way up to a bachelor’s, master’s and an honorary doctorate.

Today he is the president of the Greater Hartford NAACP, director of the substance abuse program he once went through, and the founder of “Wake Up Wednesdays,” a youth violence prevention program..

For Betts, continuing to work and live in his neighborhood was critical.

“I don’t mind being a poster child for a community in which I love,” Betts said. “We live in a society where people have to believe it to see it...That’s what keeps me coming back because I’ve been through it.”

Betts said he believes the 10-year plans will be a game changer and allow neighborhoods to retain residents who too often see moving away as a threshold for success.

“We’re so fast to leave a neighborhood not understanding if we stay here and strive together and fight for what our neighborhoods need in a more meaningful way, you don’t have to leave,” Betts said.

He said he “really believes” in this proposal, the oversight it guarantees, and its potential to improve economic, educational and health outcomes for youth living in Connecticut’s poorest communities.

“When it comes to addressing this, I think it (goes) way beyond just what the statistics say. It’s personal, it’s about breaking the cycle that trapped me and continues to trap so many countless others in this despair of hopelessness,” Betts said. “By eradicating concentrated poverty, we’re not just addressing economic disparities, we’re giving young people like myself hope for a brighter future.”

“Their circumstances don’t have to define their destiny,” Betts added.