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Martin Luther King & Montana Medicaid Expansion

A Montana Public Radio Commentary by Evan Barrett

January 19, 2015

As we recently celebrated Martin Luther King, we were not just celebrating the actual impact of the man but also his inspiring vision of an America of equality. That vision was of an America of racial equality but also an America of economic justice. Martin Luther King saw the two as inextricably intertwined.

Consider his emphasis in the weeks before he was assassinated in 1968, when he spoke eloquently of two Americas. “One America is flowing with the milk of prosperity and the honey of equality ... That America is the habitat of millions of people who have food and material necessities for their bodies, culture and education for their minds, freedom and human dignity for their spirits [but]... there is another America, and that other America has a daily ugliness about it that transforms the buoyancy of hope into the fatigue of despair.”

People who populated that other America suffered from “inadequate, substandard and often dilapidated housing conditions ... [from] substandard, inferior, quality-less schools” and their job choices were often a choice between unemployment and jobs that paid so poorly that they couldn’t put food on the table.

With his usual clarity of vision and words, King said of our economic/political system: “[t]his country has socialism for the rich, rugged individualism for the poor.”

Just before he was shot in Memphis, he spoke to the striking sanitation workers. “Do you know that most of the poor people in our country are working every day? ... and they are making wages so low that they cannot begin to function in the mainstream of the economic life of our nation. These are facts which must be seen, and it is criminal to have people working on a full-time basis and a full-time job getting part-time income.”

This economic injustice was a constant focus of Martin Luther King back in 1968: “Now our struggle is for genuine equality, which means economic equality. For we know that it isn’t enough to integrate lunch counters. What does it profit a man to be able to eat at an integrated lunch counter if he doesn’t earn enough money to buy a hamburger and a cup of coffee?”

The Martin Luther King challenge of economic justice is an important element in the so-called debate about Medicaid expansion in Montana.

Yes, Medicaid expansion is a moral imperative, helping to insure better health for 70,000 Montanans earning less than \$16,000 per year.

And the high-level macroeconomics are compelling: an infusion of \$5 billion of our federal dollars into the Montana economy creating 11-12,000 new jobs, including 8,500 in the medical sector.

But it is the smaller, family-based micro-economics that reflect the issue of economic justice of Martin Luther King. In this wealthiest nation in the world, part of the “fatigue of despair” he spoke of relates to the current inability of working families to afford to keep their families healthy. Uninsured families inhabit the emergency rooms of the system if they seek healthcare at all. Preventative care is almost unheard of. The economic choice of feeding or housing family members OR seeing a doctor, dentist or purchasing needed prescriptions is an unfair choice that is currently forced upon the neediest among us. Medical costs help keep or push families into poverty status. Finally, medical bills are the biggest cause of US bankruptcies.

If we believe that we should secure economic justice for all Montanans, then providing medical insurance options for the “last and the least” is the minimum of what we should do. Medicaid expansion in Montana demonstrates both compassion and respect for all Montanans and Montana families. And the money, our money, is just lying there in a pot to be used here, but is now helping families in other states.

Honoring Martin Luther King and advancing his vision of economic equality is just one more compelling reason for the 2015 legislature to support Medicaid expansion.

This is Evan Barrett in Butte on Martin Luther King Day, thinking about King’s commitment to economic justice and the 70,000 Montanans who do not have health insurance coverage.

Evan Barrett of Butte, has spent the last 45 years at the top level of Montana economic development, government, politics and education. He is currently the Director of Business & Community Outreach and an instructor at Highlands College of Montana Tech. These are his personal views.

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