



Still more inconvenient -- and troubling -- truths

By Eric Siegel -- Urban Chronicles

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Jerry Longoria is a \$12-an-hour security guard in San Francisco who lives in a rooming house, has \$30 in his pocket to last him the four days until payday and fears being homeless.

Jean Reynolds is a certified nursing assistant and single mother in Trenton, N.J., whose housing costs equal her take-home pay. She worries that the next phone call she gets is going to be from the electric company telling her that her power is going to be cut off because she is behind in her bills.

Barbara Brooks is a supervisor at a juvenile group home in Freeport, N.Y., who takes home \$569 and faces a \$195 bill for prescription antihistamines and a decongestant that one of her five children needs for a breathing problem.

Longoria, Reynolds and Brooks are featured in *Waging a Living: Opportunities for Action*, an edited version of a documentary of the plight of low-wage workers that was screened Tuesday at a packed theater at the Reginald F. Lewis Museum of Maryland African American History and Culture. The film was followed by an hourlong panel discussion. (The entire 90-minute documentary, which debuted nationally on PBS stations last month and features a fourth worker, will be broadcast next Thursday at 9 p.m. on [Maryland Public Television](#).)

The shortened, narrated version of the film, sponsored by the Baltimore-based Annie E. Casey Foundation and the Ford Foundation to stimulate discussion of the issue, highlighted an uncomfortable and often-overlooked truth about the country, the state and the city: Many of the poor are in economic straits not because they don't have work but because the work they have pays too little in wages and benefits to provide a decent standard of living.

The issue touches on such bedrock topics as housing, health care, education and job training, and it resonates in Baltimore and Maryland this year for several reasons. There was the battle over the Wal-Mart health care bill, eventually upended by a federal court. There are the recommendations of a task force to examine affordable housing in the city, the subject of an Oct. 4 televised hearing before the City Council. There's this year's knock-down gubernatorial campaign, in which Mayor Martin O'Malley has lashed out at skyrocketing state college costs, and Gov. Robert L. Ehrlich Jr. has hit back at the inadequacy of city schools.

The latter, in particular, is hardly a semantic debate. The link between education and financial stability was simply and powerfully made in the screening: College grads can be expected to earn an average of \$45,400 a year; high school grads, \$25,900; those without a secondary school diploma, \$18,900.

Despite Maryland's overall affluence -it ranked second nationwide behind New Jersey in median household income, according to census data released last month - the number of the state's working poor is significant. According to the booklet that was handed out at the screening, 17 percent of the state's families make less than twice the poverty threshold, currently just under \$20,000 a year for a family of four.

In Baltimore, the situation is much worse. The median family income in the city is \$41,542, according to the Census Bureau's American Community Survey, and nearly 23 percent of the city's population lives below the poverty line.

As Rep. Elijah E. Cummings, a Baltimore Democrat, put it in remarks before the screening: "It is a story of too many of our neighbors here in Maryland."

But if the problems and pervasiveness of the working poor were the central overlooked truths to emerge from the film, three smaller but no less important points came out in a panel discussion that followed. The panelists included economist Anirban Basu; Jason Perkins-Cohen, executive director of the Job Opportunities Task Force, an advocacy and policy group; Jo-Ann Williams, career development manager at the University of Maryland Medical Center; and Dwayne Drake Sr., who took advantage of programs at the center to advance in six years from a \$6-an-hour dishwashing job to a \$16.75-an-hour position as a lead pharmacy technician.

The points came from Basu, chairman and chief executive officer of the Sage Policy Group.

The first is that, unlike Drake, "Many men have become disengaged from the labor force and their own families," Basu said. That's one reason, Basu suggested during the discussion, that he's so concerned with the 40 percent of city high school students who don't graduate. "Where are they, and what are they doing?" he asked.

The second point is obvious but pertinent. All of the people depicted in the film's screening, Basu noted, were single. "If you don't have a college degree and you have five children and you're single, you struggle," he said.

Recent census figures for the city highlight the problem. The median household income for a married couple with children under age 18 in the city is \$62,148; for single men with children, it is \$26,533; and for women with children, \$21,364.

The final point came in answer to a question from an audience member who suggested politicians were unresponsive to the needs of the working poor. Basu said they were responding to the electorate's desire to keep a lid on taxes.

"At the end of the day, we'd rather have iPods and flat-screen televisions than have young kids have health care," he said.

And that might be the most uncomfortable truth of all.

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