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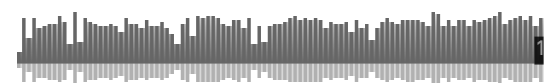
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East St. Louis forum to tackle persistent childhood poverty



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The Chicago nonprofit Children’s Advocates for Change will host a policy forum focusing on persistent childhood poverty in East St. Louis on Tuesday, Sept. 10. (Credit: Paul Sabelman, via flickr, <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.0/>)

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Educators, health officials, lawmakers coming together on Tuesday in East St. Louis, where one in two children live in poverty

By MOLLY PARKER

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Illinois has the potential to eradicate childhood poverty, but it will require a concentrated, sustained effort in partnership with families and disadvantaged communities, says Tasha Green Cruzat, president of Children’s Advocates for Change, a Chicago-based nonprofit focused on childhood wellbeing.

This hope drives the focus of the policy forum her organization is hosting in East St. Louis next week. The event will bring together social service providers, educators, health officials, and lawmakers to address the barriers to lifting families out of poverty in one of the nation’s most disadvantaged cities.

It is scheduled to take place from 1 to 4 p.m. on Tuesday, Sept. 10, at Southern Illinois University’s Wyvetter H. Younge Higher Education Campus in East St. Louis.

Cruzat said the state has made important advancements in helping families and communities in recent years, such as through increased funding for schools in high-poverty communities, expanded early childhood education access, and increased benefits that help people access and pay for housing, food, health care and other necessities. She is particularly proud of the passage of Illinois' first child tax credit, a measure for which her organization strongly advocated.

Cruzat notes that despite these strides, deep-rooted poverty persists, especially in communities like East St. Louis, which has long suffered from systemic racism, industry decline and government disinvestment.

The city's population has dwindled from over 82,000 in the 1950s to just under 18,800 today, with nearly a third of people living in poverty, more than double the state rate of about 12 percent. The child poverty rate is even higher – encompassing nearly one in two children in East St. Louis, compared to about 16 percent of children statewide.

These statistics underscore the challenges confronting East St. Louis' residents, which is 93 percent Black. The median household income is just under \$29,000, compared to about \$78,000 statewide. About half of adults own their own home, compared to 67 percent statewide.

East St. Louis is not alone in these challenges and Gov. J.B. Pritzker and lawmakers have pledged to do more through the Intergenerational Poverty Act that became law in 2020. As part of that legislation, state leaders pledged to cut deep and persistent poverty in half by 2026 and lift all children from poverty by 2031.

The law created a 25-member commission made up of public and private sector officials who have come together to discuss barriers to economic security. But its recommendations are only advisory – implementing changes would require further action from lawmakers. Capitol News Illinois and the Saluki Local Reporting Lab previously reported on challenges to overcoming poverty in Cairo, a rural majority Black town located about 160 miles south of East St. Louis.

Read more: [Illinois made a bold promise to end poverty. In Alexander County, it's hard to tell.](#)

Cruzat will moderate panels on health, education and policy that include East St. Louis officials, Metro East lawmakers and other nonprofit representatives. The event will feature keynote speaker Starsky Wilson, president and CEO of the Washington-based Children's Defense Fund.

A key focus of the panels, Cruzat said, will be analyzing why poverty reduction efforts have stalled despite substantial new and expanded federal investments and state programs. Across the country, poverty rates temporarily fell thanks to federal pandemic support including enhanced unemployment and child tax credit benefits.

But many are now in a worse position as that extra support has ended and the costs of housing, food, and other essentials rise with inflation, Cruzat said. In Illinois, poverty rates have remained relatively unchanged for decades, raising the question: "Why haven't we seen significant movement in poverty?"

The forum will also explore the broader implications of poverty on education and health care.

Keisa Garrett, chief of schools for East St. Louis School District 189, who plans to participate in the event, said an education is one of the most important things a community can provide to a child to set them up for success. The schools in the city are also a place that many children rely on for stability, access to mentors and other trusted adults, regular meals and help with special needs, she said. But like many school

districts across Illinois, East St. Louis is grappling with growing attendance issues post-pandemic.

Garrett, who grew up in East St. Louis and returned after college to help her own community, said that teams of people have been hired to find the underlying cause of “why is this happening per student, per family” and work to address their needs. Community partners have been eager to offer their services, and forums like this, she said, can bring people together to brainstorm how to make the most impact with the resources available.

Through starting in East St. Louis, the organization plans to continue these discussions across Illinois, aiming to foster dialogue, uncover unique strategies and advocate for new state programs.

Though it can feel like a daunting task, Cruzart said she is hopeful that Illinois can move the needle on poverty.

“I think we have to be intentional and do it right,” she said. “We can't treat it like a pet project. We really have to make sure that we are putting the real effort behind this.”

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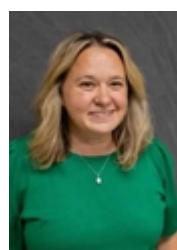
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Molly joined Capitol News Illinois in July 2023. In 2022, Molly and Beth Hundsdorfer won the domestic print award in the Robert F. Kennedy Human Rights journalism contest for a series of stories exposing patient abuse inside a state-run developmental center. Molly is also an assistant professor of journalism at Southern Illinois University and a distinguished fellow with ProPublica's Local Reporting Network.

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