

## 10 things we learned

Throughout her career leading organizations seeking to increase economic mobility for all, Nisha Patel has fought relentlessly to ensure that the voices of those living in poverty are included in conversations about poverty. Therefore it was fitting that her role as keynote speaker at this year's Faith & Action Push Back Poverty Conference was complemented by interviews with people who have lived experience with poverty. The former Managing Director for Narrative Change and National Initiatives at Robin Hood Foundation and a national expert on economic mobility and philanthropy, Patel spoke with Indianapolis developer and CTS trustee Rodney Byrnes during the April 15 event, and Faith & Action Project Executive Director Lindsey Nell Rabinowitch spoke with local residents who have faced the challenges of poverty firsthand. Following are 10 things we learned from these conversations. To listen to the entire event, go to [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e\\_HSiAn8vE8](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e_HSiAn8vE8).

- 1. Engage the people closest to the problem.** Historically, poverty programs have been created by institutions and policymakers without engaging people who have experienced poverty, Patel noted. "It's kind of wacky when you think about it," she said. "There's no private sector company that would create a product and roll it out without testing it with consumer, but we do that with poverty programs all the time." To create effective programs, we must engage people with that lived experience. The added benefit? We'll engage people who have been forced to be creative by their circumstances. "Innovation happens at the margins," Patel said.
- 2. Promote mobility, not just economic metrics.** Federal poverty definitions create artificial metrics. We think we will succeed if we can get a family \$1 over that poverty level, Patel said, but the truth is, that family will still struggle. What we really need to do is change the way we define poverty, recognizing that it's about more than a lack of money. It's about a lack of power to set the trajectory of one's life.
- 3. Quit "othering" those living in poverty.** We tend to make a lot of assumptions about people in poverty, Patel said. Most notably, perhaps, we stigmatize poverty and "other" the people who live in poverty, often assuming that they somehow brought their predicament on themselves. "What we really need, what would go a long way, is creating a sense of belonging," Patel said, giving people value in the community, or what sociologists call social capital or social networks.
- 4. Set another place at the table.** On one project, Patel and her team made it a point to meet with people living in poverty, to sit down and have meals with them, compensating them for their time as they would any other consultants. She advocates similarly today. Furthermore, she urges creating "room at the table" for people who would not normally be included in the conversation, and letting them have a voice. If they aren't given a seat at the table, she added, give them yours to ensure that they are heard.
- 5. Collaborate across sectors.** When Byrnes asked Patel about programs that work, she pointed to Minneapolis' Jeremiah Program, applauding its cross-sector approach to poverty mitigation. A partnership involving congregations, the business community, nonprofits and government, the program addresses multiple structural elements that contribute to poverty. And it continues to evolve, Patel said, with a focus that is shifting more and more toward social justice issues.
- 6. Remove barriers to housing.** Of the many factors that block the path out of poverty, housing looms as especially challenging. Alisha Bell, who works with Heart Change Ministries, said she faced continual hurdles in her efforts to find safe and affordable housing for her and her children. People seeking housing face wait lists and have opportunities blocked by past financial issues, evictions and other troubles, she said. The result is too often that people settle for bad situations, she added, and end up with more problems. "All of these things kind of set you up to fail," she said. "They will put you in a financial strain."

7. **Provide basic navigation.** “When you get out of prison you get two lists,” Shron Rucker said. “Of things you have to do and of financial obligations.” Court costs, restitution, child support and more hang over your head, he added, but you can’t take care of them unless you get a job ... but no one wants to hire you because you have a felony. PACE helped him address fundamental issues to get back on his feet, getting an ID, health insurance, public benefits, banking accounts and more. The organization also simply helped him navigate processes, showed him where to go and how to get there, Rucker said, which was instrumental in helping him move forward.
8. **Create community.** “When I walked into those doors, there were people there with open arms, and they treated me like a human being, like a person.” Jeannie Reed said of PACE. “They treated me like Jeannie.” Reed added that PACE helped her find housing, connected her with a support network and more, but the sense of community that she was offered might have been the biggest contributor to her ongoing success.
9. **Recognize the complexity of the issue.** Like Patel, the local speakers pointed to the fact that poverty is not simply about money. It can be a product of countless factors in a life, and therefore can’t be addressed with simple solutions. Edna Martin Christian Center’s Ashlyn Hopkins said a lot of organizations miss the mark because they don’t address poverty holistically, instead trying to mitigate poverty by addressing a single issue. Tia Williams, from Heart Change, echoed that concern, adding that people in the community should take the time to learn about poverty and the factors that contribute to it. “Do some research and learn what people are going through,” she said.
10. **Advocate.** Because people who live in poverty often aren’t consulted about what they need or have to offer, it’s important that others carry their stories forward. “You do have to advocate,” said TaQuasha Manns, who works with the Edna Martin Christian Center. “You have to be their voice until they can learn to speak up for themselves.” Jeannie Reed agreed that this kind of support is essential. “We need people speaking for us because sometimes I was scared,” she said. “I had no idea how to apply for a lease and application, and when I got there it was a lot of closed doors.” Perhaps most important, as her advocates worked to open those doors, Reed said, they helped her learn to advocate for herself, and to believe that she could.