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GUEST COMMENTARY

Program helps change lives

Based on the Census Bureau's latest poverty data, New Hampshire's 7.3 percent poverty rate is the lowest in the nation. Nevertheless, 7.3 percent works out to about 94,000 people living in poverty – more than the entire population of Nashua.



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More than 20 percent of the people living in poverty are kids. Plus, the Census Bureau only counts people as living in poverty if their income is less than \$24,339 for a family of four. There are tens of thousands more Granite Staters who are living "a lost job, an illness, or a new baby" away from poverty.

And poverty discriminates. As is true all over the world, the lion's share of poor Americans are women and children. For as long as the United States has measured poverty, women have been more likely to live in poverty than men. The New Hampshire Women's Foundation recently reported in its Gender Matters series that nearly three out of every five New Hampshire adults living in poverty are women. In every single county in New Hampshire, the percentage of females living in poverty exceeds the percentage of males. More than 20 percent of families with children headed by a single woman are

living in poverty. That's more than one in five – nearly twice the rate for families with children headed by a single man, and a shocking 10 times the rate for married couples with children. Among all New Hampshire families with children who live in poverty, nearly two-thirds are headed by a single woman.

The Front Door Agency's Transitional Housing Program fights poverty for women and children by providing opportunity for single mothers to achieve education or job skills that can lead to higher wages. All of the 32 families headed by single mothers that we served last year were low-income. Eighty-six percent were victims of domestic violence. All moms wanted to make a better life for themselves and their children.

The Transitional Housing Program helps single moms in poverty stabilize, transform and ultimately flourish as self-sustaining members of our community. Our client Jillian left a very abusive situation with her baby daughter. She worked two jobs and lived with friends and finally at a motel. Through the Transitional Housing Program, she earned a degree and was licensed as a dental assistant.

"In a few years, I went from being just a teen mom and struggling waitress – worried about where we would sleep next – to being a college graduate with a career as an oral surgery assistant," Jillian said.

Jillian is proof that we can lift women out of poverty.

The Front Door Agency is proud to be part of the solution to poverty for women and children. And we know New Hampshire can do better for women like Jillian. We can expand women's career pathways into traditionally "male" industries, like construction and automotive technology. We can reduce the gender pay gap with greater transparency about compensation and zero tolerance for pay discrimination. We can broaden our understanding of domestic violence to include financial abuse and the resulting economic vulnerability. We can make high-quality childcare more affordable. We can ensure that every worker has access to paid family leave to ensure against financial devastation because of illness or injury. And we can support a safety net that is there for people who need it without shame or ridicule.

As New Hampshire lawmakers prepare to return to the State House for another legislative session, we encourage them to join us in tearing down the barriers that keep women and children in poverty. We're doing better than every other state – let's keep it that way.

Maryse Wirbal is CEO of the Front Door Agency, which serves people in Greater Nashua facing homelessness through its Transitional Housing and other programs. Learn more at www.frontdooragency.org.