



# Meeting Human Needs

*Georgia Family Council Looks to Civil Society for Solutions to the State's Most Dire Problems*

By Randy Hicks and Eric Cochling

**T**here has been no shortage of news lately about economic instability, poverty, and government overspending. The debate continues over cutting budgets and the size of government, while at the same time addressing the growing number of people in need, particularly those living in poverty. The critical questions are: Who should respond to the problem?; What is the most effective way to do so?

It's clear that poverty is a problem in America. It causes tangible suffering in the lives of many people. And it most often leads to more government intervention to deal with the social consequences that follow in its wake.

Despite the challenges of the current political and economic climate, these times present a great opportunity to introduce meaningful reforms that address the needs of people without relying on bigger government and more taxpayer dollars to come to the rescue.

Looking back, there has been effective “out

the lives of Americans and attempts, among other things, to address social breakdown and poverty. After trying for decades and spending trillions of dollars, there is little to show for the effort.

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of the box” thinking that has tackled poverty and government dependence head on, while making measurable change for the better. In the late 1980s, Gov. Tommy Thompson overhauled Wisconsin’s welfare system making it the first state in the nation to institute work requirements for welfare recipients. The result was a precipitous drop in the number of welfare recipients and an increase in the number of people working.

Wisconsin’s reform became the blueprint for reform across the nation and showed how changes in policy can affect the extent to which government is involved. More importantly, it created conditions for people to achieve self-sufficiency and improve their own lives.

### TIME TO ACT

If the current economic climate has shown us anything, it’s that government is going broke trying to do too much. It is stretched way too thin as it assumes a greater role in

programs, but espousing the principles of conservatism—however eloquently—and pointing out government’s shortcomings are not enough. Conservatives must be intentional in promoting solutions that address poverty and other social problems in a way that upholds the dignity of the individual, promotes personal responsibility, and emphasizes the pre-eminence of the institutions of civil society (churches and civic organizations, among others) in fighting poverty and promoting human well-being.

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Governments are in the red, optimism about the future is low, and the public is being forced to acknowledge that there is a limit to what the government can do. Just as reformers took on welfare in the late 1980s, now is the time to examine public policies aggressively and draw attention to solutions to human problems that make sense.

These beliefs are often manifested in successfully articulated principles, ideas, and values, but not always in a manner that clearly connects them to human well-being—to how these ideas can translate into greater opportunity and improved lives for the disadvantaged. As a result, the common narrative about conservatives is that they don't really care about the plight of people; they only care about morality, big business, and the bottom line.

But this doesn't need to be the case. The message of less government can be coupled with an effort to find meaningful alternatives that are better suited to meet the real needs of people.

### **A MORE THOROUGH RESPONSE**

Current economic instability in America provides an opportunity for new ideas. Governments are in the red, optimism about the future is low, and the public is being forced to acknowledge that there is a limit to what the government can do. Just as reformers took on

welfare in the late 1980s, now is the time to examine public policies aggressively and draw attention to solutions to human problems that make sense.

This is the journey we are about to embark upon at Georgia Family Council. Too many of our fellow Georgians are suffering or failing to thrive and we believe that more can be done to improve their lives across virtually all measures of well-being. However, we don't believe that the solutions or responsibility rests solely, or even mainly, with government.

Instead of waiting around for lawmakers to act or for government bureaucracy to take on an even greater role, we are turning to communities and private groups that are best positioned to address human needs. The idea isn't just to make government function more efficiently; it's about reaching outside government to find effective solutions to suffering. It is about turning to groups like Wellspring Living, a private nonprofit in Georgia that, despite receiving no government funding, has



managed to develop a holistic and effective approach to restoring victims of human sex trafficking. It is also about turning to groups like the City of Refuge in inner-city Atlanta which has partnered with other nonprofits, businesses, and local government to provide long-term, restorative, and compassionate poverty relief on a very local level.

The initiative we are launching is called “Breakthrough Georgia,” and the goal is to propel Georgia forward as a leading state in the nation on key measures of human well-being. This effort will be a multiyear, intensive, research-driven initiative that will gather state and national policy experts, as well as leaders of effective community-based organizations (like those just described), into five working panels. Each panel (family and community, education, financial stability, health and wellness, and justice) represents a key avenue through which one typically passes on his way to a better life. The panels will identify barriers to well-being in their respective area and then propose solutions for helping people overcome these barriers. This phase will be followed by a multiyear implementation and assessment phase.

Each phase of Breakthrough Georgia will be guided by core values that we believe are central to human thriving. These values will inform the entire initiative’s work and include: marriage, family, personal responsibility, faith, education, charity, civil society, responsible government, private property, and free markets.

## WHY GEORGIA?

States have historically proven to be incubators of innovation. After all, state government is closer to the people it serves and the problems it attempts to solve. Most often, good ideas originate in states and are then adopted by other states and the federal government.

Georgia is a leading state in terms of population, economic opportunity, and demograph-

ic diversity. It is also an international hub for business and transportation.

Georgia also faces many challenges that call for the kind of comprehensive public policy approach of this initiative: high unemployment, foreclosures and bank failures among the highest in the nation, public school students that rank near or at the bottom in academic achievement, large prison populations, and unwed births and crime rates that outpace the national average.

Solutions discovered through Breakthrough Georgia will have application across the nation.

## ECONOMIC VERSUS SOCIAL CONSERVATISM

In recent years, some have perpetuated a false dichotomy between social and economic conservatism, as if the two were independent strains. One of the objectives of Breakthrough Georgia is to dispel the myth that conservatism can be divided in this way. Showing how these two strains work together is vital if we’re going to be successful in offering policy prescriptions that effectively change lives for the better.

In our own work at Georgia Family Council, for example, we have found that the socially conservative concern about the decline of marriage is directly related to the size and scope of government. Simply put: As families fail, government grows. Research we conducted with the Institute for American Values found that the annual cost to taxpayers of divorce and unwed childbearing is at least \$112 billion nationally (\$1.46 billion in Georgia alone).

While government does grow partly because of inertia and the prodding of special interests, its growth can be traced primarily to its attempts to respond to the impact of poverty and family breakdown. For those self-identifying economic conservatives who rightly





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In addition to breaking down this false dichotomy, we also hope to expand the conservative lexicon to reflect what truly motivates our work: our concern for the well-being of our neighbor. Too often, policy ideas are communicated in ways that give the false impression that conservatives are primarily motivated by a concern for morality or institutions or systems, but not by a desire to see people live well. The use of catch-phrases like “free markets,” “limited government,” and “traditional marriage”—while useful at times—have unfairly obscured a deep concern for the human condition. Breakthrough Georgia will promote a style of communication and language that always relates policy initiatives to how they ultimately will help individuals,

families, and communities to truly thrive.

An ideology that correctly diagnoses the condition of people’s lives and what’s necessary for people to do well is important. So too is recognizing the limitations on government’s ability to address these needs. All of this should compel us cautiously forward to act on behalf of people who need help.

Breakthrough Georgia will be a journey to build a comprehensive plan of action that reduces government overreach and relies more heavily upon the strength and compassion of private organizations to measurably improve the lives of citizens in the state. Our hope is that as the initiative moves forward, other states and the nation can benefit from the reforms as well.

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