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LETTER: Poverty issues deserve attention

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LETTER: Poverty issues deserve attention

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February 29, 2012 9:30 am • By MICHAEL GILLESPIE, Charleston

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As Newt Gingrich has fallen off of the political radar and behind the republican presidential front-runners, Mitt Romney and Rick Santorum, the biased conservative views of poverty and inequality have abated from the popular press.

This is a problem because the real issues of poverty and economic inequality have not disappeared, and any momentum of keeping them in public discourse is also threatened. While Newt's misinformed characterization of "food stamp recipients" as a lazy, Black surplus population has been a proven obfuscation of reality, in recent speeches, Romney and Santorum have all but dismissed the conditions of existence for America's poor. Just this past week Santorum, in a speech to the Detroit Economic Club, stated that income inequality is a good thing, "Because people rise to different levels of success based on what they contribute to society and to the marketplace and that's as it should be."

It is important to keep these issues in the public discourse because for people who live and work in areas of the country like Coles County, everyday is another example of economic injustice.

According to the latest Census figures, the poverty rate in Coles County is 18.7%, 5 percentage points greater than the State of Illinois. Further, for children under the age of 18, the poverty rate is 21.9% and for all families with children, the rate is 20.8%.

If, as Santorum suggests, people are rewarded based on their contribution to society and the marketplace, then the unemployment rate in Coles County, nearly 9.5% and less than the 10.5% for the State of Illinois, should be encouraging. However, the median household income in Coles County is \$38,242, which, in 2010-the latest year for which these data are available-is just \$16,000 (170%) above the federal poverty threshold for a family of four with two children.

For families in Coles County, these numbers are real. For example, according to Feeding America, in 2010, 59% of individuals in Coles County lived within 185% of poverty, meaning they are officially at risk for food insecurity. In addition, over 82% of families receiving food assistance from the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (formerly the federal Food Stamp program) had at least one adult worker employed in the previous 12 months.

Though the unemployment rate is low by comparison, access to resources to make ends meet is insufficient. Income inequality and poverty are real issues and, in Coles County, determine the lived experience of too many of our families, neighbors, and friends.