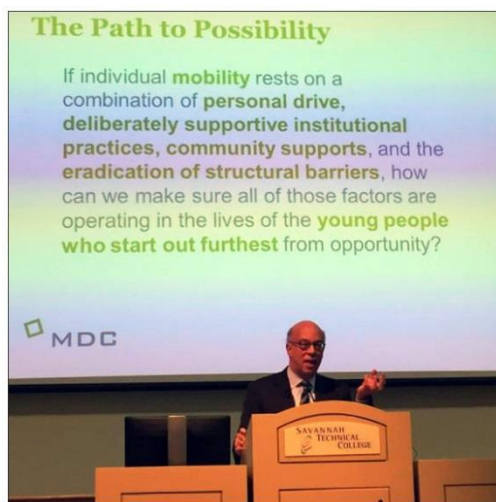


Advocate: Step Up Savannah must continue efforts to seek poverty cures



By Jan Skutch, October 2, 2015, 1:30 PM

A national leader in advancing opportunities for low-income communities on Friday urged Step Up Savannah leaders to continue their efforts to advance upward social mobility as a cure for poverty.



MDC President David Dodson

"Mobility is a powerful answer to poverty," David Dodson told the 10th anniversary breakfast meeting of the Savannah poverty-reduction coalition. "Inequality scares me."

He challenged leaders to "turn small pockets of opportunity into an infrastructure of opportunity to promote mobility, success and opportunity."

Suzanne Donovan, executive director of Step Up, told the breakfast gathering that with local poverty "hovering at 26 percent," the anniversary poses "a time of reflection, not so much celebration," for the local effort.

"Our community can do more, and to move the needle we have to do more. At 10 years old, we have to do more."

Also Friday, Step Up presented three new annual awards. Winners were:

- Outstanding Business Champion to International Paper for creatively working to increase opportunity for Savannah/Chatham County residents by creating a sabbatical for Michael O'Neal to direct the Parent University effort for a year.
- Teinique Gadson Advocacy Award to H.U.G.S. – Heads-Up Guidance Services – for counseling and related help as a direct service provider who has gone above and beyond in offering assistance and services to residents in need.
- Outstanding Neighborhood Leader to Molly Lieberman and Project Inspire in a tie for a grassroots or neighborhood-based leader who has worked to create positive change in the community.

Dodson, president of Durham, N.C., based MDC and its poverty-alleviation efforts, challenged the local audience to answer whether they believed that where a person starts out in life should not determine where they end up in life.

He said statistics show lack of mobility is more centered in the South than in any other part of the country despite fertile sites for business in such places as Charlotte and Atlanta.

"Inequality would not be a problem if upward mobility were strong in America," Dodson said, quoting former labor secretary Robert Reich.

“We’ve got some real work to do.”

Statistics show a 70 percent chance that children born to parents at the bottom end of the economic spectrum will not make it too far up the family income ladder.

“That, I would say in the nicest way, is unacceptable.”

Education is a critical key to change, he said.

“Getting credentials (post-high school degrees) is liberating. ... with education we can do something about mobility,” he said.

In Chatham County, 53 percent of students from low-income families attend high-poverty schools, while only 13 percent of pupils not from low-income families attend similar schools.

Also in Chatham County, 55 percent of black student are in high-poverty schools while only 11 percent of white students are in those schools, he said.

“Economic diversity in schools has a powerful effect,” he said.

He said the local problem mirrors a national trend of “re-segregating economically.”

“There’s a lot more real work to be done,” Dodson said. “It is being done here.”

Online: <http://savannahnow.com/news/2015-10-02/advocate-step-savannah-must-continue-efforts-seek-poverty-cures>