

CNN American Morning: The Chicago Urban League's president Cheryle Jackson interview

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O'BRIEN: This morning we're taking a look at some new solutions to some very old problems. Forty years after a war was declared on poverty, the media household income for African-Americans is still \$18,000 less than it is for whites. And then listen to some of these numbers. Twenty-two percent of blacks in America live in poverty, compared to 7 percent of whites.

The Chicago Urban League was looking at these same numbers and made what some people are calling a very controversial decision, phasing out traditional social service programs like health care and case management. That led us to ask the question, why?

Well, the president, Cheryle Jackson, is with us this morning as part of our Uncovering America series to explain it.

Nice to see you, Miss Jackson. Thanks.

CHERYLE JACKSON, PRESIDENT, CHICAGO URBAN LEAGUE: Thank you for having me.

O'BRIEN: Many people say this is completely the wrong time. Did you not hear those numbers? things are dire in many of the African- American communities, so why cut those services?

JACKSON: First of all, the services are important, but here's the thing -- there are thousands of agencies in Chicago that are providing those services. There are precious few that are focused on economic development.

I just decided that it's time for the Chicago Urban League to change its focus. It's not enough to just -- looking at those same numbers, it's not enough to just manage the problem; it's time to manage us out of the problem.

O'BRIEN: How does focusing on economic development then manage you out of a problem? And is that too long of a long-term solution?

JACKSON: Right. Well, first, it's about building economic infrastructure within the community. It's about getting folks with few skills or no skills more skills that lead to better paying jobs. You know, small businesses are one of the most important factors in creating jobs. That's much, much more so for African-Americans. So nurturing and growing African-American-owned businesses is such an important way to grow jobs right in the communities, and that's a focus that we've decided to take. How to get people better paying jobs, how to grow more black businesses. Black businesses hire black

people more than any other business. So that's where we're focused. And I think that there needs to be one organization that's dedicating itself to creating the kind of society where fewer and fewer social services of any kind are needed. That ought to be the goal.

O'BRIEN: I was talking to folks at the Seattle Urban League not long ago, and it sounded to me like they were doing a similar thing, not necessarily getting rid of some of the social service programs, but certainly beefing up the economic services, if you will. Is there any risk, though, that sort of the poorest of the poor are going to fall through the cracks?

JACKSON: Absolutely not. Like I mentioned, there are thousands of agencies in Chicago. We did a scan. There were literally thousands of agencies that were providing social services, and none that were focused in this way.

Certainly, our job is to partner with these agencies. Anyone that comes to the Chicago Urban League, it's our responsibility to connect them to the resources that they need. And we're not saying they're necessary. We're saying that there are lots of agencies that do it and do it very well, and we're going to connect our constituency into those, but we're going to put our sweat equity in helping them find a better job, and helping black businesses grow so they can create and hire more people. That's where we'll focus.

O'BRIEN: And when you look at someone like Barack Obama, who we just saw in the story, raised a million-some-odd dollars in one night, which is pretty good business, or you look at someone like Cory Booker, who I interviewed earlier in the week, or you look at yourself, you're the first female president after a hundred-year history there.

JACKSON: Right, right.

O'BRIEN: Is this a generational change? I mean, Is part of the reason you're making this change is because there is sort of a new way of looking at problems?

JACKSON: I think so. Certainly, this new generation has a different take on it. And I think that's the role and responsibility of every generation, to bring their experiences to bear, to look at the problems and find a way that's relevant to what people are struggling with, what people are dealing with. And you might get different answers, you might get approaches, approaches like Senator Barack Obama, that is so inclusive, so far, wide-reaching, appeals to a lot of people. This approach -- you know, I wouldn't be here if it weren't for my forefathers, if it weren't for the folks that came before me and made important sacrifices. I'm able to take this focus because of those that have, you know, come before me and fought the battle.

O'BRIEN: The last guy held a job for something like 29 years...

JACKSON: Thirty-five.

O'BRIEN: Oh, I'm shorting him, 35 years.

JACKSON: Right.

O'BRIEN: You might be doing the same thing.

Cheryle Jackson, nice to see you. She's president of the Chicago Urban League.

JACKSON: Thank you for having me.

O'BRIEN: Thanks for talking with us. We appreciate it.