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## Fairfax's Digital Divide

by Lynn A. Curtis

The news that Fairfax County's economic boom is accompanied by a dramatic increase in homeless families is unfortunately no surprise. It mirrors a national reality.

Today, almost a quarter of all children age 5 and younger live in poverty. The digital divide -- as reflected by the lush life offered to Fairfax County's affluent techies in contrast to growing poverty is widening the gulf between haves and have nots. The top one percent of Americans have more wealth than the bottom 40 percent. The average CEO makes 419 times as much as the average worker, and that ratio has greatly increased in the past three decades.

In Fairfax, as in the rest of the nation, the working poor are disproportionately people of color.

Last year, our foundation prepared an update on the Kerner Commission, which was appointed by President Lyndon B. Johnson in the 60's to probe the causes of rioting in America. That report declared that "our nation is moving toward two societies, one black, one white -- separate and unequal." That dire warning of 30 years ago now has expanded to include greater numbers of working poor as well as other minorities.

In a sense, the nation's housing policy for the poor and minorities has become prison building. During the 1980's and 1990's, we tripled the number of prison cells at the same time we reduced housing appropriations for the poor by more than 80 percent. States such as Virginia spend more per year on prisons than on higher education.

Virginia also has harsh drug laws that disproportionately affect people of color. What will it take for Fairfax and the rest of our nation to begin to close the wrenching gap between the rich and the poor?

Investment of more resources in programs that we know work. Full-service schools, for example, in which nonprofit organizations provide health, community, cultural and recreational initiatives, have been proved to reduce poverty and crime. Job training programs that help individuals

improve their skills and secure higher paying jobs also have been successful for decades. These initiatives ensure that families can make a living wage and afford housing.

Unfortunately, Fairfax County's welfare program, like those of many other localities, compels recipients to work first, a policy that usually results in minimum wage jobs, often without benefits or opportunity for advancement or training. It leaves families in poverty without a safety net. Thirty years ago, the Kerner Commission called for the nation to invest in solutions on a scale equal to the problem. Yet instead of higher education, we fund prisons. Instead of training, we trap families in sustained poverty through work first welfare programs. Instead of affordable housing, we pay for tax breaks for the rich. There has to be a commitment to change the inequality sweeping the country and our nation. If we don't do it now in a time of unprecedented prosperity, when will it be done?