We have put together some thoughts on themes and messages that can drive our collective work on poverty through the next presidential election. While each group has different constituencies, organizational goals, and policy ideas that they are pursuing, a promising approach is identifying common themes, ideas, agenda items, and direct language for all of us to use in ways that fit with each institution’s mission and style.

Along these lines, we believe that all of our organizations can work in their own ways to reinforce a larger ideological message **that we can move people up and out of poverty by providing families with stable and good paying jobs, building a strong social safety net, and removing barriers to opportunity that keep people in poverty**. Rather than produce one central “message triangle” we have opted to present in this memo a series of three related message themes that build a central ideological narrative to advance our policy ideas and combat right-wing notions about individual solutions to poverty, government dependency, and personal or cultural failures.

This message approach is designed to tell a story about the structural causes of poverty and the necessary governmental and private sector actions that should be taken to address these larger economic problems and open more doors for low-income workers to build stable and dignified lives. It is envisioned primarily for elite audiences working on poverty in politics, policy, advocacy, service delivery, and journalism. But we believe this message approach provides a good complement to the affirmative non-poverty specific messaging CCC is pursuing in its organizing campaigns as well as specific issue campaigns on the minimum wage, health care expansion, affordable housing, schools, and criminal justice reform.

These ideas below are just to help start our next discussion. These are all themes and ideas that test quite well based on existing communications research on poverty, opportunity, and the economy. But we believe the exact language and words employed should be tailored to fit the natural voice of our institutions and messengers.

Central Theme: By tearing down the barriers that keep people in poverty, we can ensure every American has the freedom to pursue their own happiness.          .

*How?*

**Theme One: People who work for a living ought to have a decent life.**

*Why?*

* Everyone who can work should be able to provide for their family.
* There are too few jobs today and the many of the ones being created are set to deliberately shortchange/deprive people of hours and wages sufficient for families to make ends meet. Many employers actually refuse to pay their low wage employees for every hour they're at work.
* Big corporations refuse to give their workers regular hours and wait until the last minute to set schedules, raking in more profits at the expense of the security, well-being and peace of mind of their employees.
* And the things families need to make it – a decent place to live, quality/affordable child care, good schools, transportation to get to and from work, basic health care, higher education – are beyond reach at minimum wage.

*What should we do?*

* Americans should get paid enough to take care of our families and set our kids off to a great future. If you work full time, you should have a functional quality of life.
* Create good paying jobs by investing in the industries and services necessary to make America prosper.
* Put people to work rebuilding America’s infrastructure and fulfilling necessary jobs in teaching, health care, and caring for the elderly.
* Allow us the freedom to join together to collectively bargain for wages and working conditions that reflect how much value we produce at our jobs.
* Enforce basic labor standards, give people fair and flexible schedules to meet their family needs, and provide paid sick leave.

*What’s wrong with the other way?*

* We’ve tried denying people a decent salary and telling them to just work harder.  It doesn't work.  Cutting taxes for the wealthy and slashing public investment in the economy doesn’t create jobs. It just creates more unnecessary hardship for people and leaves an entire generation of young people without the skills and education necessary to drive the economy in the future.
* We should use public investment wisely to spur economic growth and create jobs. These investments have proved to be effective throughout America’s history and allowed us to become the world’s leading economy.

Theme Two: In America, every family ought to have **housing, nutrition, education, healthcare, and a secure retirement.**

*Why?*

* There is a moral rationale for the safety net and an economic one. Both rest on the reality that people fall through the cracks through no fault of their own. Their jobs get eliminated or sent somewhere else; their wages get cut; they get sick or in an accident or need to care for someone who is sick or disabled; and they eventually get older and can’t work anymore.
* Since the early 20th Century, Americans have taken steps to protect people from economic hardship due to lost income and economic insecurity. That’s why we have unemployment insurance, tax credits for working families, Social Security, Medicare and Medicaid, housing, education and nutrition assistance for children and their families.
* These are problems that affect all of us. We owe it to one another to look out for those in need because we are stronger as a nation when all people live stable and secure lives.
* But the safety net also protects our economy. Imagine what would have happened if all the people who lost their jobs or homes in the financial crisis didn’t have some form of income and housing support? Not only would they have been in dire straits, our entire economy would have likely collapsed and harmed even more people as people stopped spending on food, housing related goods, education, and other vital needs.

*How?*

* We need public policies that are line with the realities of the 21st Century.
* First, do no harm. Policy changes should not increase poverty or inequality in society.
* We should make recent changes to the earned income and child tax credits permanent to help keep millions of working people out of poverty. Working families and their kids deserve and need this support. It immediately increases employment opportunities for the parents and boosts earnings for their kids over the long run when they become adults.
* Income assistance should not discourage families from building savings to help them weather economic shocks or to invest in future opportunities.
* Child care subsidies need to be increased and pre-K must be expanded. We can’t expect people to work full-time and take steps to improve their job prospects without good quality, affordable care for their kids.
* Income support for the unemployed should be sustained until the economy is fully recovered.
* Nutrition assistance and housing support for kids and their families must be maintained.
* Affordable health care through Medicaid or other means must be provided to all low-income families.

*What’s wrong with the other way?*

* Conservatives have it all backwards. The governmental safety net doesn’t force people into poverty. Not having a job or getting low pay like the current minimum wage is what forces people into poverty. Losing your house or getting sick can force people into poverty.
* The safety net helps those who are currently working but don’t earn enough to get by, save, and get ahead. It provides support for those who can’t work because of their age, a disability, or illness. It ensures that every kid gets a fair starting point in life regardless of their parent’s income. It helps those without adequate means secure the basic necessities of life – food, housing, education, and health care.
* The safety net is vital to ensuring every American family is secure and our overall economy is stable. In fact, the poverty rate would be nearly twice as high without the social safety net.

Theme Three: **We shouldn’t trap people in poverty that lasts and, in fact, deepens, over generations.**

*Why?*

* Everyone deserves a fair shot to succeed, but people often miss or overlook the artificial barriers that keep people stuck in poverty.
* For example, corporate profits are at an all-time high yet millions of low-wage workers haven’t gotten a raise in years. And shockingly in today’s world, some employers continue to steal workers’ wages by making them work hours without due compensation. This lack of fair and decent pay is an artificial barrier for people who need to earn more to stay afloat and move up.
* Expensive housing costs and discriminatory zoning policies often keep low-income families from accessing better jobs and schools. Poor people are often steered into certain parts of cities and towns where social problems run high. This is an artificial barrier to hardworking families trying to help their kids get ahead.
* Banks and other lenders often target low-income people with predatory lending rates and excessive fees they don’t charge others, sometimes profiting by trapping people in vicious cycles of borrowing. Why should poor people be treated any differently than others in borrowing money for a house or new business?
* Opportunity is cut off at every turn for people who have a criminal record. They face barriers to employment, education, housing, credit, and income support in trying to rebuild their lives and reunite with their families.
* People of color face numerous artificial barriers to moving up and out of poverty. Racism and discriminatory treatment keep many African Americans and Latinos from certain jobs, neighborhoods or schools. People of color face often face discrimination in the criminal justice system and then face additional burdens when trying to returning to normal working life after they have served their time.

*How?*

* All of the artificial barriers that keep people in poverty should be removed.
* The economy is picking up, profits are up, and workers should get a raise.
* We should stop putting so many people in jail for low-level drug offenses and remove barriers to employment, housing, education, credit, and the safety net for those who have served their time and are trying to rebuild their lives.
* We should help those in concentrated areas of poverty access the means for getting a good job and building a stable family life – better transportation, more affordable housing, schools that are as good as those in wealthy areas, safe public spaces and more cultural opportunities.
* We should eliminate all excessive fees and predatory lending tactics that unfairly target those least able to afford these high rates, and enact policies to make it easier for low-income families to save and borrow at fair rates.
* We should acknowledge and fully address the heightened barriers to success facing low-income people of color because of their race or ethnicity.

*What’s wrong with the other way?*

* Pulling yourself up by the bootstraps is the quintessential American story. But it only works if there isn’t some rigging the game against you and if you have a fair starting point.
* Rich people would never stomach the types of artificial barriers to success that exist for millions of people today. Unfair practices should be eliminated for all people. A person’s chance in life shouldn’t be determined by the place they were born. Why should low-income families put up with low-pay, stolen wages, discriminatory housing policies, and predatory lending if others won’t?
* People without a lot of money work as hard as anyone to improve their situation. We shouldn’t make it harder for them to get ahead or pretend as if they have same opportunities as everyone else.