

Keynote Speech
Community Foundation of Eastern Connecticut
“Nurturing Women Leaders”
September 22, 2017

I want to thank Maryam Elahi, Govind Menon and other members of the Board of Directors of the Community Foundation of Eastern Connecticut for inviting me to speak with you at this morning’s “Celebration of Women” breakfast. There are so many people here this morning whom I have had the honor and privilege to work with over the past few years — servant leaders all of you! Thank you for all you do for the people of eastern Connecticut!

For 34 years, this foundation has worked with local donors to meet the needs of the residents of 42 towns in eastern Connecticut, targeting more than \$43 million in financial contributions to nonprofit organizations to provide direct services to thousands of people each year in our region.

Last year the foundation received \$9 million in gifts, and handed out \$4 million to area nonprofits, as well as more than \$500,000 in scholarships to more than 200 college students. And the reach of the foundation grew, as 27 new funds were created to respond to emerging community needs and grant awards grew by 23 percent.

While the foundation is committed to supporting the lives of everyone in our communities, today’s breakfast and my comments focus on the lives of women. To set the stage for my remarks, I want to show you a very short video.

This video was a television advertisement for the University of Phoenix, but I think it has two messages that are relevant to the work of the Community Foundation of Eastern Connecticut and my University.

First, the video reminds us of the fundamental role that “family” plays in our lives. As women, each of us has a set of roles that we proudly carry throughout our lives.

As mothers, we wake each morning committed to providing the caring, nourishment, and protection needed to help our children grow and prosper. As grandmothers — raise your hand if you are a grandmother! — we want the same nurturing environments for our grandchildren.

Now I realize not everyone in the room is a mother or a grandmother. But each woman here has some role to play in her family’s well-being—as a sister, a daughter, perhaps an aunt.

And the men in the room also work hard to keep their families safe and secure—as husbands, fathers, brothers, uncles, sons.

But my focus today is on women, and the video we just saw speaks to the role of mothers and grandmothers. When mothers and grandmothers are not present in a child’s life, or when circumstances around us limit our ability to support and protect our children and grandchildren, the world becomes a dark place.

In those times, we need to find someone else to provide the anchor in a person’s life that family provides—that mothers and grandmothers provide.

That is when organizations like the Community Foundation of Eastern Connecticut and the agencies it supports come into play.

When local families are at risk, the people in this room step up and provide a range of services to ensure that babies can grow up to be healthy girls, and those girls can grow up to be strong women, raising their own families and becoming leaders in their communities.

The second takeaway from the video we just saw is the power of education in uplifting a person's life. I can think of no better preparation for a young woman who is pursuing life as a community leader than obtaining a college degree in a career field of her choice.

I would guess few if any girls and young women in eastern Connecticut who find themselves on a college campus — Eastern or somewhere else — have availed themselves of **all** the services provided by the more than 200 organizations supported by the Community Foundation of Eastern Connecticut.

However, in aggregate, what you represent is a life-saving network that enables young girls to grow up to be young women, ready to fulfill their personal dreams while making an indelible contribution to their families & neighborhoods.

I want us to think about the journey a young child—a little girl—takes in becoming a healthy, educated, successful adult.

For most of the people in this room, that path was comfortable, promising. Compared to the people our community agencies support and serve, we lived in affluent neighborhoods, enjoyed life's amenities, and were surrounded by supportive and stable families.

So it is very difficult for us to imagine what it is like to go to bed hungry—every night—or to go to a school each day where violence erupts in the halls or in the schoolyard and teachers don't have adequate resources. We cannot truly know what is like to come from broken homes where drug addiction, incarceration, and other struggles keep children from reaching their full potential.

But I want us to try to imagine what those lives must be like, for those are the lives being led by the poor, by minorities, by far too many women in America and right here in eastern Connecticut—the women and families served by the safety net you have helped create.

I want to share some data with you around **four major needs** that all people have, including those in our own local neighborhoods. When these needs are not met, people's lives are filled with trauma. **Domestic violence, homelessness, hunger, and lack of access to education** put girls and young women on an endless path of struggle and heartbreak.

Let me share some national and statewide data with you on how human lives are adversely affected by these challenges, and then describe some of the work being done here in eastern Connecticut to make people's lives a bit brighter as we tackle each of these challenges.

Let's start with domestic violence and its impact on the home. How much of a roadblock is domestic violence in the lives of women and their children? According to the **National Coalition Against Domestic Violence**, 20 women in America experience domestic violence every minute.

A third of all women have experienced some form of domestic violence or sexual assault in their lifetimes. 1.3 million women are victims of violence in the home each year, and most of the violence was committed by family members. In Connecticut, a third of all criminal cases in our courts are due to family violence — affecting 50,000 women a year, according to the **Connecticut Coalition Against Domestic Violence**.

Clearly, before putting a meal on the table or sending your daughter off to school, a home in chaos is no place to raise a child. What are we doing about this in eastern Connecticut?

Whether it's Connecticut Legal Services' Domestic Violence Legal Support Project or the Phoenix Transitional Living Program offered by Safe Futures, Local agencies are helping area women facing the terror of domestic violence.

Sometimes women are not dealing with a violent home — they are facing homelessness itself. The **National Alliance to End Homelessness** tells us that there are 500,000 homeless

people in our country; a quarter are children. Eighty thousand of those people are considered chronically homeless. We have about 4,000 homeless people in Connecticut, according to the **Connecticut Coalition to End Homelessness**.

While that number is going down, for the women in Connecticut who are struggling to maintain a home for their children, life is a daily act of survival.

In our region, programs like the Human Needs Program of the Windham Area Interfaith Ministry, the Covenant Shelter of New London, and Operation Fuel are putting roofs over people's heads and fuel oil in their furnaces in the winter time.

The next basic human need I want to talk about is nutrition. You would think that hunger and food insecurity would be a thing of the past in the most affluent country on Earth.

Yet almost 50 million Americans suffer from food insecurity—one out of every seven people, according to the national organization, **Feeding America**. That figure includes 13 million children.

The **Food Bank of Connecticut** says that in our own state, half a million people go to bed hungry each night. Young children cannot learn if they are always hungry.

Community agencies in our region are doing their part to remove this roadblock in children's lives.

Through the Food Security Program at the Martin House, the New London Area Food Coalition, the Covenant Soup Kitchen, and many other nutritional programs, local agencies are working hard to ensure that young girls get the nourishment they need to succeed.

So far, I have talked about meeting basic needs — life is difficult if not impossible without having those needs met.

As we ensure that our young people have their housing, food, and other basic needs met, we can begin to help young women who are pursuing professional careers have greater access to higher education.

As I noted earlier in my remarks, education has the power of changing lives. But not everyone has the same power.

How many of you have extensive personal libraries at home? As a Puerto Rican who grew up in Newark, New Jersey, I can tell you that many of our Spanish-speaking families have no English books at home for their children to read. And poor whites are not likely to have books or other materials in the home either.

That is just one reason why minorities and others living in poverty are challenged to perform academically at the levels that affluent whites perform.

Whether you look at high school graduation rates, college attendance rates, or college completion rates, the urban poor, especially minorities, lag behind affluent Caucasians. Did you know that the gap in academic performance between well-off students and poor students in Connecticut is the highest in our nation, according to the **National Assessment of Educational Progress**?

In eastern Connecticut, we are doing our part to level the playing field. Groups like the Connecticut Early Childhood Alliance, which supports preschool education, the New London Adult and Continuing Education Program, which works with non-native speakers on their English skills, or other organizations ranging from Norwich Public Schools to the Mystic Aquarium to Higher Edge, are giving girls and young women the promise that education can provide.

There are many other local agencies and nonprofits serving thousands of people through the support of the Community Foundation of Eastern Connecticut. Hats off to all of them!

My point this morning is this — when you map out the pathway of a child in eastern Connecticut as they work toward adulthood, and then look at the potential roadblocks in their way, our community agencies and nonprofits have created a comprehensive safety net of services. This safety net is the anchor I talked about earlier. It helps ensure that more of our children get their basic needs met and are given opportunities to lead healthy lives as they pursue their dream of going to college.

I want to close by sharing the story of one of the young women that the Community Foundation has helped—an Eastern student filled with gratitude.

A student who has leaped over astounding roadblocks to get where she is today. Liliana Figueroa graduated from New London High School in 2015. She will tell you that in itself was a miracle. Imagine her life for a moment.

As she freely will tell you, she hardly knows her father, who has been in and out of jail most of his adult life. Her mother is a drug addict, and because of that, Liliana was taken away from her mother by Protective Services when Liliana was in middle school.

She was told by those around her that she would never finish high school. Think about what her life was like! It was a living hell. A living hell!

But with the help of Higher Edge, one of the agencies that the Community Foundation of Eastern Connecticut supports, Liliana enrolled at Eastern where she is now thriving as a junior with a double major in criminology and sociology.

She is also one of the recipients of the Community Foundation's four-year Tim West Memorial Scholarship.

Liliana was unable to get away from her studies to be with us in person today, but thanks to the magic of technology, I would like to play a short video message from her.

With your support, young girls in eastern Connecticut like Liliana can grow up to be college students and tomorrow's future women leaders. You provide the anchor when mothers and grandmothers are not in position to do so.

Thank you again for all you do for the people of our state!