

Martin Luther King, Jr., shaping our hopeful future: A reflection on a lasting legacy

Written by A. Barry Rand - CEO, AARP
Wednesday, 31 August 2011 12:33

"Take the first step in faith," Martin Luther King, Jr. Told us. "You don't have to see the whole staircase, just take the first step."

Inspired by his eloquence and his moral courage, ordinary Americans took the first step in faith, and then more and more steps up the staircase to justice and opportunity.

As our nation marks the 48th anniversary of the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom on August 28 by dedicating a memorial to Dr. King on the National Mall, we at AARP understand that the journey to fulfill the promise of our country is far from over. We can see the whole staircase, but we haven't gotten to the top yet.

As a proud donor to the Martin Luther King, Jr. Memorial, we recall Dr. King's soul-stirring call to see, affirm, and uphold the worth and dignity of every person. If you go to aarp.org/blackcommunity, you can see a video that shows the effects of his legacy, as well as read the reflections of a diverse group of Americans about what Dr. King meant to them.

That is a message we take to heart every day at AARP, as we apply the lessons from Dr. King's words-and his life. He taught that the path to justice requires not only overcoming prejudice but also overcoming poverty. Especially in the last stages of a life cut tragically short, he led a farsighted struggle for economic opportunity.

Like his earlier leadership against legally-enshrined discrimination, this was terribly difficult work, but Dr. King always put conscience over convenience. Today, at a time of high unemployment and widespread economic pain in our country, his example can once more light the way for us. Let's not forget the event 48 years ago was called a march for jobs and freedom.

The current economic downturn in America has hit the African-American community with special fury. More than one-third of African-American households had zero or negative net worth in 2009. The median wealth of African-American households was only one-twentieth that of white households. That is the largest disparity since the government started publishing this data a quarter century ago, as reported by Pew Research Center last month.

The Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies has found that for two in five households of retired African-Americans 65 and older who receive Social Security retirement benefits, these monthly checks are the sole source of income.

This sharp drop in assets and continued heavy reliance on Social Security shows how critical it is to protect and strengthen Social Security and Medicare.

As AARP gears up for the next round of this battle in Washington, we're reminded of something else that Dr. King said, "Change does not come on the wheels of inevitability, but comes through continuous struggle."

That was true in the days of segregation. It was true in the fight for voting rights. It is just as true today when it comes to health care and retirement security and, indeed, all the efforts to

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assist those who are vulnerable.

AARP itself was born of struggle-a long, uphill battle for fair treatment and dignity for every older person. For all the progress our country has made, we recognize there are many battles yet to be won. For instance, six million Americans who are sixty and older face the threat of hunger every day. People who have done so much for so many for so long now need to turn to others for help. That is why The AARP Foundation is leading the Drive to End Hunger: so we can help make sure that older men and women get the food assistance they need, whether from volunteer-supported community food banks, a caring neighbor or the federal government.

At AARP we treasure the ethic of service that Martin Luther King, Jr. embodied. He understood so well the awesome responsibility we all have to look out for each other. We know that lifting the lives of those in need is not just the work of government. It is also a matter for each of us-as a caregiver for a family member or friend, as a mentor or tutor to a child, as an active and informed citizen in our community.

We reflect on the life of Martin Luther King, Jr. not only to study the past but to shape a more hopeful future. With the glorious life of Dr. King in our minds and in our hearts, we can climb the staircase together.