Preface

In 2006, the Nassau County Executive and county legislators with the approval from New York State appointed Dr. John Imhof as the new commissioner of the Department of Social Services. During Commissioner Imhof’s first meeting with the Advisory Council’s Executive Committee, he raised the question, what is the Advisory Council doing to challenge the public’s stereotypes and beliefs regarding the poor in Nassau County? This book, New Perspectives of Poverty: Policies, Programs, and Practice is a product of that question, posed more than six years ago.

This book has been a labor of love. When we embarked on this journey, our goal was to educate our readers and challenge the old beliefs about people living in poverty. This book is intended to increase awareness of social workers, helping professionals, trained volunteers, and college students by answering the question “what is poverty?” exploring employment policies and the role they play in United States inequality, and describe various populations at risk of poverty. It also provides targeted examinations into social welfare history, identifies key issues affecting vulnerable populations, and highlights government and community-based assistance programs. The text additionally offers discussions designed to get readers to think critically regarding social and economic justice and asks readers to consider fundamental issues related to individuals and families struggling with poverty in the United States. While we have incorporated major populations at risk, we regrettably acknowledge that there are other groups and we cannot cover all of them in a textbook. At the same time, we realize that poverty is a global issue although we deliberately kept the focus on the United States in order to bring attention to the new face of poverty in America—particularly because the poverty rate has surged to its highest levels since 1993. In this book, we also hope to challenge some of the stereotypes about the poor and educate readers about how our past plays a role in where we are today.

This book is unique in that it combines theoretical, empirical, and clinical knowledge in a jargon-free, reader-friendly manner to equip readers with current trends about the new reality of poverty in America, particularly since the Great Recession began in 2007, leaving many middle-class families in poverty or vulnerable to harsh economic conditions and a sluggish recovery. It attempts to present readers with balanced coverage regarding the multidimensional issues related to poverty.
and social inequity, while exploring issues related to social injustice and empowerment. Readers will also learn about the contemporary public and private sector approaches used to address poverty, and examine how value-based beliefs and political ideologies influence social welfare policies. We believe that social workers and other helping professionals must be aware of social welfare history as well as contemporary approaches used to address poverty in order to affect meaningful change. Knowledge in these areas is important as trends shift over time, and has a monumental impact on human service workers and people in need.

Throughout the book, we attempt to provide relevant information to readers that helps foster a better understanding of the salient issues facing people who live in poverty and to encourage professionals and students to challenge their thinking about this key social problem. The content is presented in three sections and primarily focuses on the misconceptions about people who are poor, what really constitutes poverty in America, and offers suggestions for challenging some of the myths about poverty. Accordingly, part I defines poverty and social welfare in historical and contemporary contexts, explores various ideologies, addresses contemporary approaches to reducing poverty, and includes an investigation into employment-related policies. Part II offers in-depth explorations of various populations at risk including people who are homeless, families and children, older adults, people with disabilities, immigrants, and refugees, individuals with co-occurring disorders, and veterans and military families. While the book is intended to be read in its entirety, chapters can also be read separately. Most chapters contain relevant case studies, which are designed to enhance readers’ critical thinking and provide examples of interventions at micro, mezzo, and macro levels of practice. Each case study also includes questions for consideration and discussion that can be used for personal reflection, or full class lectures or in small groups. Finally, the last chapter offers some concrete suggestions on how individuals and groups can change the face of poverty in their own communities through multilevel approaches such as advocacy, education, and policy development. Faculty may find this section useful for student assignments as it provides hands-on strategies geared towards education, advocacy, and effecting policy changes.

Helping must go beyond the initial desire to do something—to advocate successfully people need to have a deep understanding about the causes and effects of poverty and its effect on populations at risk. Only then can we truly challenge the myths about the poor in America and encourage readers to develop knowledge that
is essential to address this serious social issue. It is our sincere hope that social workers, helping professionals, trained volunteers, and undergraduate and graduate students alike will find this material accessible and useful in their work. Together, we can proactively make positive, long-lasting changes that benefit vulnerable groups facing or experiencing poverty.

We want to express our gratitude to Lyceum Books for recognizing the importance of this book and for their commitment in bringing this project to fruition. There are also many people along the way who deserve acknowledgment. Special thanks go to Nassau County Department of Social Services Commissioner John Imhof for challenging the Advisory Council to educate the public. We are indebted to him for his refreshing belief that stereotypes can be challenged in meaningful ways. Thanks also go to the Advisory Council members for their support and subject matter expertise. Most importantly, the chapter authors receive our highest appreciation for their hard work and dedication to this project. We must additionally thank all the significant people in our lives and our colleagues for reviewing early chapters and helping to construct case studies. We would also be remiss if we did not mention the inspiration we obtained from the individuals and families who are at risk of becoming poor or who are already living in poverty. Surely, their struggles must serve to encourage students, professionals, and members of society to recognize and undertake actions which will promote a serious change in how we address unmet needs in America.