

U.S. Sen. Rob Portman Says Ohio Economy Hasn't 'Turned the Corner'

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U.S. Sen. Rob Portman told a Cleveland audience on Tuesday that Ohio's economy needs to improve if poverty and joblessness are to be reduced. ideastream's Nick Castele reports the Ohio Republican sounded a sober note about the state's outlook.

Portman was the keynote speaker at this year's annual lunch for the Legal Aid Society of Cleveland. The organization offers free legal help for low-income Northeast Ohioans on such issues as handling debt and working through foreclosure.

Recalling his own days as a volunteer lawyer, Portman praised the society's work, saying it removes barriers that prevent people from getting out of poverty. But he stressed that broader opportunity comes from an improving economy. Portman said he's traveled around Ohio, and hasn't been satisfied with the pace of its recovery.

"I've talked to people at every business level and every walk of life and we haven't turned the corner," Portman said. "In some of our cities we're doing better, but still we have in Northeast Ohio, unfortunately, relatively high unemployment again, and we're struggling."

Unemployment in the Cleveland-Akron-Elyria area was at 7.3 percent in July—a bit higher than it was in the spring, but just a tenth of a percentage point lower than its place in July 2012.

Portman hailed area prisoner reentry programs for their work connecting former inmates with employment. And he called for action on issues he's often spoken about, such as easing regulations on businesses and reducing the debt.

Democrats have accused Republicans of trying to stall the president's agenda on economic issues. As to the nation's economic health, Portman said it shouldn't fall victim to partisan gridlock.

"Whether it's education and worker retaining, whether it's smart regulations—we need regulations, but we've got to have them make sense for our economy," he said, adding, "Our tax code doesn't work."

Portman said he hopes to make some progress on these issues when Congress comes back in the fall, acknowledging that Ohio and the nation face a dual challenge: spurring the economy and addressing a growing gap between the rich and the poor.

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