Deborah Adams has spent years working with colleagues at KU and beyond to end poverty. She is passionate about helping develop policies and practices that will address income and asset poverty. This passion was ignited by what she witnessed early in her social work career, directing a shelter for survivors of intimate partner violence and their children.

“Women with violent partners are often in a position of leaving home and falling into, or deeper into, poverty or staying with abusive partners and being more financially secure but less safe physically, sexually, and emotionally,” she says. Adams knows we can do better by these survivors and other people in crisis who face impossible choices because they lack financial resources. “Even a small nest egg to fall back on in the form of savings or other tangible assets can make a big difference when we are in crisis situations.”

“I wanted to study ways we might think about programs and policies to help end both poverty and gender-based violence. What policies and programs could we put in place that would help women survive and then go on to thrive by achieving their future goals?” Adams was appointed to a state-wide domestic violence task force and served as chair for a coalition of shelters in the state. In these roles, she worked with colleagues to better help survivors by advocating for new state legislation.

After that success in the policy realm, Adams felt called to contribute to the research on ending poverty and violence against women. She earned her Ph.D. at Washington University in St. Louis and began to work with colleagues there who had introduced the idea of building tangible assets in low- and moderate-income households and communities. In 1996, she joined the faculty of the School of Social Welfare at the University of Kansas and continued her scholarship with a growing number of colleagues at KU and beyond.
Adams is an associate professor and directs the Master in Social Work program, the largest degree program within the school, with more than 300 students. This year, the School is implementing a new MSW curriculum, which is competency-based and allows students to develop advanced skills in social work with individuals, families, groups, organizations, and communities.

On top of her administrative duties, Adams teaches classes in social policy and research and co-chairs a national social work association. But her north star is still her passion to study policies and programs that help people in poverty build tangible assets that may help create security in their daily lives, plan for more hopeful futures, and weather crises when they happen without facing financial ruin.

“‘Our policies for combating poverty in the US have been about maintaining at least a meager income flow so families can survive. And that is obviously of central importance. But in terms of people’s developmental goals, they also need hopefulness that is supported by financial resources. One of my colleagues wrote that assets are ‘hope in tangible form.’ Home ownership, having an account at a mainstream financial institution, the ability to be self-employed in a small business—to do that, we need policies and programs that support income security and asset building,” says Adams.

She believes we need to move beyond our current asset-building policies in the US that chiefly benefit those who already have resources and pursue more equitable approaches that help families who are living in poverty to build assets, such as “seeded” education accounts for children that will grow over time and help pay for college or trade school.

Adams has been involved with national demonstration projects that show how asset-building policies and programs can work. In one demonstration, education accounts were established for Head Start children and funded initially with $1,000 through a public-private partnership. Families received regular statements, addressed to the children, reporting how their accounts were growing so the children were aware from an early age that the government and other donors were investing in their futures.

Remembering a home visit as part of the demonstration, Adams said, “We had a 5-year-old run down the stairs when we were doing a home visit to talk about the asset-building program. He bounded in and said, ‘By the way, I’m the kid and I am going to college with you!’ He had the general idea that there was something exciting in his future and that other people were helping it happen.”

After 26 years of helping prepare social welfare professionals for their important work, she will retire from KU at the end of the 2021-2022 academic year. Her energy will then be focused on her two passions: furthering her scholarship and spoiling her grandkids.

“There are a bunch of hypotheses about how assets work in people’s lives. There is a research question about whether assets first change future orientation or a sense of hopefulness, then lead to other positive outcomes. I really am excited to get back to that question and learn more,” she says.

As she looks back over her career in social welfare, Adams is hopeful for the future of the field. She believes social workers will increasingly bring about positive change on multiple levels, from supporting individuals and communities, to changing systems that force people into poverty or keep them there.

“I would like to see us stop tripping over poverty in our social work practice and scholarship and work hard to eradicate it,” she says. “Not just taking poverty as a factor in people’s lives and helping them adjust, but centering poverty in our research so we can help inform policies and programs designed to achieve more income and asset equity and help close the gaps between rich and poor.”