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Advocates to help world's poor get some Seattle muscle

Well-connected group meets with top Bush aide

By Jenna Wolf

WASHINGTON -- A group of some of Seattle's most prominent civic and political figures asked the White House and Congress yesterday to get more aggressive -- and generous -- in the fight against global poverty.

But while others have lobbied unsuccessfully for the same goal, the group from Seattle -- Seattle Initiative for Global Development -- carries higher ambitions, in part because it is very well connected and includes some well-known names.

Among the founders are Dan Evans, former Republican U.S. senator and Washington governor; Bill Gates Sr., who oversees the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation that was created by his son, the founder of Microsoft; and William Ruckelshaus, who has served in government roles ranging from acting U.S. attorney general to the first director of the Environmental Protection Agency.

The group met for an hour with Condoleezza Rice yesterday, bringing their message to one of President Bush's most trusted advisers.

"She was very happy to have received the briefing and happy with what we had undertaken," said John Shalikashvili, a retired four-star Army general and

former chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff who has also joined the group.

While Rice, the White House national security adviser, made no promises or commitments, "She said that if she could help us in any way, we should call on her," said Shalikashvili, who moved to the Puget Sound region after retiring.

Senior lawmakers in the House and Senate will meet today with the group, capping a three-day whirlwind that marked the public launching of an effort that they conceded will be drawn out.

The group's goal is to build public and political support for initiatives that will ease the most abject poverty worldwide, defined as people who earn less than \$1 a day. With a membership of well-known people and access to money, members said during a news conference, they're confident they will make progress.

"We're just looking to make the pie bigger," Ruckelshaus said. "We're trying to build public support which can translate into political support."

That goal, however, may be difficult. Congress in recent years has turned away requests for more foreign aid, choosing instead to use the money for programs at home.

The Seattle group hopes to overcome that resistance by emphasizing both the humanitarian need as well as the direct benefits to the United States, noting that lifting poor countries out of poverty will create markets for U.S. goods and defuse resentment toward America.

"From my point of view this is a humanitarian issue. People are dying. People are starving to death and we can save them. And really, that ought to be enough," said Gates. While the group said it wanted only to gain more public support for its agenda rather than present new policy or ask for money, it said the United States should allocate an extra \$20

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billion to take a more leading role in the fight. That is double the \$10 billion currently spent each year.

Evans and Gates both said, however, that the group would not recommend specific ways to spend the money. "We're resource advocates," Gates said, adding that there are plenty of experts available who can help decide how the money is used.

The money would be well spent, the group said, because easing poverty would stabilize countries, serving America's national security but weakening radical elements that promote terrorism.

Evans and others conceded that the money won't come easily, but they argue that it's a relatively small price to pay. "Here we have a chance to make an investment in our long-term future and the world's long-term future that will pay off many-fold," Evans said.

But to sell the idea to lawmakers at a time of tight money and competing needs, Gates said the group is emphasizing the benefits that would come directly to the United States if poverty is reduced in such far-flung places as Ethiopia and Bangladesh.

"If we're ever going to get anywhere on the public agenda in this country, it is because people accept the notion that it is an economic issue and it is a national security issue and that alleviating poverty will contribute in a way to our country's security," he said.

The group came together after 9/11 largely because of the efforts of Bill Clapp, Weyerhaeuser heir and founder of Seattle-based Global Partnerships. Clapp, his wife, Paula, and others in the Northwest business community founded the non-profit Global Partnerships in 1994 with the mission to help people in Latin America overcome poverty through micro-lending programs.

For the Seattle Initiative, Clapp brought in Evans, Gates, Ruckelshaus and other leaders "to figure out what America's role in the world ought to be," Evans said. After considering a broad range of activities, the list was narrowed to 10. Ending global poverty was the unanimous choice, Evans said.