

COMMUNITY-WIDE POVERTY SIMULATION HELD IN AUBURN

Auburn poverty simulation walks people through living on the edge



MAY 16, 2014 6:05 AM • [CARRIE CHANTLER](#) | CARRIE.CHANTLER@LEE.NET

AUBURN | Turning a blind eye to the logistics of living in poverty wasn't easy for those who chose to walk a mile in the shoes of those who struggle to make ends meet every day.

More than 100 people took part Thursday in the Cayuga County Community-wide Poverty Simulation in the West Middle School auditorium. A partnership of 10 state and local social service agencies sponsored the event where community members crammed a month's worth of living on the edge into two hours.

The simulation's goal, said facilitator Kim McMann, was to reveal how hectic life is for low-income families.

In chairs arranged in fours and twos, people assumed the roles of family members identified in real case histories managed by a community action agency in Missouri, where the simulation

exercise originated.

"These families are not the poorest of the poor," McMann said. They were awfully close, however.

Families varied, some members were unemployed others not, some were on disability and school-aged children babysat younger siblings instead of heading to class at "Reallife Public School."

Each set of chairs represented a home in which families had to keep the lights on and pay rent, while also paying car loans, arranging transportation and keeping food on the table.

Around the gym stood tables that represented familiar places such as a bank, police station, grocery store and a workplace. Other tables were a pawn shop, homeless shelter, quick loan store and a food pantry.

In eight-minute weeks, family members went about their days going to work and school,

arranging day care and running errands before businesses closed, often standing in long lines.

Thwarting these tasks were notices of good and bad news. At random, cards were slipped to people letting them know their food stamps or their television had been stolen. On the other end of the spectrum, they'd be told they had found \$20 on the sidewalk.

Attendees said they began to feel frustrated at being treated unfairly. Despite getting children to school on time they'd be deemed late to work and docked pay, or worse, fired.

"I'm confused all the time, but I'm not bored," chuckled Catholic Charities worker Lois Hughes, who portrayed a school student.

Laurie Halliwell is a Head Start pre-kindergarten teacher who says she sees parents struggle with transportation issues. She knows of two sets of parents who don't know how to drive and struggle to get their 3- and 5-year-olds to school.

"They get around by other people driving them," Halliwell said.

As the exercise ended, the adults who played schoolchildren discussed the pros and cons of raising the minimum wage to \$10.10 per hour.

Responses were mixed. Some said the wage bump will help workers, but small business owners will struggle. While still another said that consumers will end up paying more for goods to cover an increase to the minimum wage.

In a larger discussion, several people expressed a better understanding of the sometimes chaotic plight of the poor.

"Share this knowledge," McMann said. "Offer to have discussions at your church, or PTA meeting, synagogue. ... spread the word."

Auburn native Tammy Grant admitted she'd not thought very much about how the poor make it through a day. Hers was a fortunate upbringing, she said, surrounded by a loving family and never wanted for very much.

She said she'd like to see more opportunities for people to learn how to manage and be responsible with the money they earn.

Leaving the building, Grant and her friends talked about how the poor are simply people like themselves - "they're everyday people just trying to make it."

"Now I realize," she said. "Seeing this today, you don't realize how hard it is for people to get to the resources they need, to have a job and get to it, daycare and pay the bills."

If you go

The Harriet Tubman Center for Justice & Peace is in need of new members to help plot a course for how Auburn addresses social justice issues such as poverty and racism.

What: Brainstorming session

When: 6 p.m. Wednesday, June 11

Where: Booker T. Washington Community Center, 23 Chapman Ave., Auburn

Contact: RSVP htc4jp@gmail