

Cayuga County children experience what it's like to be homeless



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AUBURN | Sleeping inside a cardboard box for a night, away from home and with a meager dinner in their bellies, area children put themselves inside a social issue that annually affects 350 Cayuga County children.

The Youth Homelessness Experience brought together approximately 200 children from the Booker T. Washington Community Center and area Girl Scout troops for a "cardboard" camp

out in the Casey Park Arena.

Designed to make these children aware of how it feels to live without the certainty of a familiar home, or a change of clothes, a shower, foods of choice and a cellphone at the ready, the event was an eye-opener.

"It's not fun being homeless," said Allie Schavemaker, 10, of Troop 40229.

Children in grades four through 12 arrived by 5 p.m. Friday. They carried with them flattened cardboard boxes, a sleeping bag or blanket, duct tape, a small pillow and a refillable water bottle.

Cellphones, air mattresses, mp3 players and iPads were prohibited.

"I thought they'd complain about not having food or their phones, but no one's batted an eye," said troop leader Sherri Springer.

Non-perishable food, pet food and personal care items from the children overflowed containers on the sidewalk meant for area shelters and food pantries.

Campers were handed a bag containing a bottled water, a peanut butter and jelly sandwich and a package of rice crackers – the only food allowed until breakfast.

Within an hour, the indoor soccer field became a cardboard housing colony. Sleeping quarters were inventive, some were tunneled, some were expansive and communal.

Jen Lawton, 15, is intrigued by homelessness. She's had to stay with family and friends during unsure times, she said, and while not the same as being homeless that experience piqued her curiosity.

"I want to know how people get like that," she said. "I want to know their story."

Excess materials were shared with neighbors and extra duct tape became soccer balls or jump ropes. Physical energy abounded when children awaiting the next scheduled activity began playing games, turned cartwheels and round-offs and spontaneous dance routines materialized.

In four rotating discussion groups, the campers spent time learning how homeless men, women, children and families are helped by The Red Cross, The Rescue Mission, Chapel House and the Cayuga-Seneca Action Agency.

James Breslin, of The Rescue Mission, asked campers to think about how homelessness occurs for people who are not very different from themselves.

"Think about how hard school is now," he said. "Then think about how hard school would be if you didn't have a place to stay, what if you didn't have anything to eat, what would you think about then?"

Chapel House is a male residence and is Cayuga County's only homeless shelter. Recently, the number of its residents has spiked in the 18 to 24 age group.

"We had 19 last year," said Chapel House Executive Director Christina Thornton. "We're already at 20 of this same age group this year."

The homeless experiment hit home for the campers once it was lights out. The floor was hard, they said, the temperatures dipped and structures failed, several fell over.

Saturday morning, during a breakfast cooked by the Rotary Club, the campers were wearied by the tough night, but wiser for it.

"I learned there are a lot of people out there who need a lot of help," said Girl Scout Skyler Albino, 12. "Children, families, they need school and homes."