



MY VIEW

Cosentino: The complexity of living in poverty

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Last week's poverty simulation, put together by 10 local agencies, headed up by the Cayuga/Seneca Community Action Agency, to commemorate the 50th anniversary of Lyndon Johnson's War On Poverty, did more than show the complexities of today's landscape of poverty. As with the six-part series *The Citizen* published last week, the two-hour session at West Middle School also made it clear that war is far from over and, if anything, has made a resurgence, especially as displayed in the graphs that ran in last Friday's edition of *The Citizen*.

The simulation, which had a wide range of service providers and community leaders (including Cayuga County Legislative Chairman Michael Chapman, Auburn Fire Chief Jeff Dygert and Planning and Economic Development Director Jennifer Haines), took on the roles of individuals needing services, providing them or as employers. In two hours they lived their roles over a four-week period. While such a simulation can but scratch the surface of the poverty experience and its challenges, it did give the 100 or so participants an insight into what poverty means.

One of the greatest may have been how problems and challenges cascade. We have all heard of the notion of the "spiraling world of poverty" and how it is generational. The simulation made it clear to those in attendance how one problem leads to another and then another and so on. From missing an appointment or not filling out a form for services correctly, your entire world can be thrown off, with devastating effect. While a flipped over chair may have signified, at the end of a round, a participant's "eviction," that simple act results in further challenges to those in poverty, that multiply logarithmically.

By the way, the organizers consciously left out two scenarios that often are part of the complexity of poverty. The first and simplest, especially if someone doesn't get medical attention, because they can't afford it, can't get access to it or can't get to it (think about the lack of transportation in rural areas here) is that people die. In some simulations, organizers inserted the real possibility of death to participants (sometimes a breadwinner) or people close to them. Secondly, an even bigger factor, believe it or not, is that the simulation did not take into account mental health and addiction issues so prevalent in the nation and locally, that they can send participants, real or playacted, into a greater tailspin.

For many in the sweltering gymnasium, this was an eye-opening experience. Representatives in the room ranged from not for profits, such as the Human Services Coalition of Cayuga County and United Way to those who work with those in poverty either directly or on the periphery, such as members of the clergy, Walmart, bankers, the Cayuga County Department of Social Services and Cayuga County Community College. It can only be hoped, that this effort helps poverty become more humanized and that providers think about how services are delivered — that the "cascading" effect and time pressures are understood and holistic approaches to deal with the issues related to addressing poverty, reducing it in the short and

long term, incorporate them. It can also be hoped that the simulations also identified the challenges that service providers also face from with those in poverty.