



COMMUNITY

Community service agencies sound off on poverty's impact in Cayuga County



20 HOURS AGO • [GREG MASON](#) | GREG.MASON@LEE.NET

AUBURN | It will soon be 50 years since former President Lyndon B. Johnson's "War on Poverty" speech, and local community service agencies can attest that war still rages on in Cayuga County.

Representatives from four such agencies participated in a panel discussion during the monthly Wednesday Morning Roundtable at Theater Mack in Auburn.

Participating panelists included Laurie Piccolo from the Cayuga-Seneca Community Action Agency, Sandie Gilliland from Cayuga County Health and Human Services, James Breslin from the Rescue Mission of Cayuga County and Christina Thornton from Chapel House.

Each panelist had a different perspective on the levels of poverty in Cayuga County given their agency's service jurisdiction.

For Gilliland, the county's health and human services department currently has 700 open cases of at-need parties. Sixty percent of those cases are families, which include about 1,500 people, including many children. The other 40 percent are individuals.

Poverty-stricken people struggle with homelessness, living in their cars, hotels or anything to shelter their children. They have trouble providing for themselves or their families. The children in these cases, Breslin said, may have never experienced a summer vacation or a typical birthday party.

Thornton said those living in poverty often deal with encumbering circumstances that could have led them there in the first place. This could be physical, such as disabilities that prevent employment; or mental, which could be rooted in addiction or past trauma.

Sometimes it's a matter of not having a strong family or community support system, Gilliland said.

"These are people that have no resources," Gilliland said.

One of the reasons for the panel was not just to provide the county's perspective on the issue, but to dispel myths, Evelyn said, surrounding the problem.

A fact about at-need parties, Gilliland said, is there is a lack of funding for single individuals living in a financially unstable situation. Some individuals are expected to live on \$362 a month, she said.

In today's poor economy where employment is not as readily available as before, Piccolo said that anybody can reside in a financially insecure state for some time, not just long-term.

"We are seeing more of a need for that immediate help," she said.

But poverty, Breslin said, is a problem that can be solved.

The county agencies represented at the roundtable are just some of the spearheading efforts put forth by the community to help those in need.

On the education front, Auburn Enlarged City School District Superintendent Constance Evelyn said the district is working toward a more online-oriented summer school model to keep children involved and educated.

Currently, she said, 52 percent of the children in the school district live in poverty, with some schools experiencing poverty levels much higher. The district, Evelyn said, is trying to combat that.

On a countywide level, Chapel House and the Cayuga-Seneca Community Action Agency are committed, for example, to providing emergency food and shelter. The Rescue Mission's family transitions program is servicing more than 50 families and 100 children.

Breslin said Auburn is a small enough community, dealing with a larger city's problem, to be able to discuss and conduct solutions to this issue productively.

"What we do each and every day matters," he said.