

# ECHO PRESS

Alexandria, MN

## Poverty gets personal

By Erin Klegstad, Staff Reporter

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What does poverty mean to you?

To an area 11-year-old boy, it's not having what his family wants, but instead only what they need; of utmost importance – that his mom and dad love each other and they stay together as a family.

For his 15-year-old brother, it means not having enough money to pay the bills on time.

Poverty takes many forms; those were just two shared at last Friday's Legislative Commission to End Poverty by 2020 community forum at St. Mary's Church in Alexandria.

"We don't have homeless shelters, but we have people who have needs in our community," said Linda Roles, director of United Way of Douglas and Pope Counties. "By the turnout today, it shows there are a lot of people who care and have a passion about making a difference."

Steve Nagel, executive director of West Central Communities Action (WCCA), Inc., agreed. "It's the whole community. It's very encouraging to see all the folks here today to do what we can to end poverty."

Along with several state representatives, about 150 people listened to fellow community members tell their stories of not only living in poverty, but also about the help they've received along the way.

Here's what a few had to say.

- One local family of six relied on Rainbow Rider as their transportation. Having their children attend the early childhood program Head Start "built up our self esteem [and] made us feel like we were worth something," the mother said.

- For a computer voice networking student at Alexandria Technical College, his education wouldn't have been possible without the assistance and scholarships he received.

"My education was made possible because of the generosity of others," he said. "It's tough out here in Greater Minnesota to make education as readily available as it should be."

- Despite being small business owners in Elbow Lake, one family struggles to make ends meet. When their income increases, their health premiums increase and access to other assistance – heating, for example – is lost.

"It all gets eaten up by needing to pay for all these other things you were getting help with before," the woman said. "Living just above that threshold is a very bad place to be. We're stuck on this cusp, and we just can't get ahead because all that extra income is going to meet basic needs again."

- That was echoed by another single mother. Following a \$1 per hour raise, her childcare and MinnesotaCare premiums increased. She makes \$59 too much each month to qualify for food stamps, so she ends up charging her groceries.

"It's just a vicious cycle," she said.

- Because her children are on MinnesotaCare Blue Plus, another woman has to drive them to the dentist in either St. Cloud or Fridley.

"How good is that for me or for them?" she asked.

- There would be no way one elderly woman could afford to heat her home without help. “I would be a very cold person if I didn’t have this help,” she said, adding that being raised during the Depression taught her not to waste anything.
- Following her divorce, one woman was left raising three children, ages 3 to 14, on her own. Without Head Start and assistance with heat, childcare and food, “I probably would be living on the street or in my parents’ basement. All of our programs and agencies are so excellent; I would hate to see them get lost.”
- Although she works full-time at Douglas County Hospital, one woman and her husband – he’s on disability – are always about \$30 over the limit to qualify for assistance.

With \$3 per gallon fuel oil, they’re “heating with the kitchen stove” so the pipes don’t freeze.

“There are those of us who fall through the cracks,” she said.

- Another Alexandria man was grateful for the help his family received from West Central Communities Action. After their mobile home park closed due to storm shelter requirements, WCCA helped them qualify for a low-income loan to purchase a home.

“We want to thank them for all the help they gave us,” he said, adding that he knows many who struggle every day, including one woman who had to choose between putting gas in her car or buying groceries.

In summary

The legislative commission will continue visiting communities around the state, listening to similar stories.

“Our charge is to come back in one year with legislative recommendations that will continue to help end poverty in the state of Minnesota,” said commission chair Carlos Mariani, DFL-District 65B.

The full Legislature will hear those recommendations by December 15, 2008.

Mariani said that although it’s the role of government to help end poverty, that goal can only be reached if government and the community work together.

Mary Ellen Otremba, DFL-Long Prairie, added that they will continue to look at and listen to all the pieces to put together a solution.

“I see it and I hear it all the time,” she said, adding that most living in poverty are the working poor. “Right now is the beginning of our journey to find that solution.”

Mike Woods, Douglas County Social Services director, reminded representatives that every item they vote on “has an impact on each and every person in this room right now.”

COMMISSION TO END

PROVERTY BY 2020

The Commission to End Poverty by 2020 is a collective group of 18 legislators – nine senators and nine representatives, half Democrats and half Republicans – as well as two citizen members.

The group is conducting listening sessions throughout Minnesota this fall and winter. It is an opportunity for legislators to meet people who are living in poverty, see the impact poverty has on communities throughout the state, and hear whether citizens have the will to support significant new efforts to eliminate poverty in Minnesota.

The commission is required to make recommendations to the full Legislature by December 15, 2008 on how to end poverty by 2020.

For more information, log on to: [www.commissions.leg.state.mn.us/lcep/](http://www.commissions.leg.state.mn.us/lcep/).

## COMMUNITY

### IMPACT COALITION

The Community Impact Coalition represented by Douglas, Grant, Pope, Stevens and Traverse counties and is comprised of the following area organizations:

Douglas County Public Health

Habitat for Humanity

Douglas County Senior Liaison/Outreach specialist

Brandon Early Childhood Initiative

Douglas County Early Childhood Initiative

Pope County Early Childhood Initiative

The Salvation Army

Alexandria School District 206

Someplace Safe

United Way of Douglas and Pope Counties

West Central Minnesota Community Action, Inc.

## WINGS

Widmark's LLC