



POVERTY IN BRAINERD

Legislators get a close look at tough times in lakes area

By [MIKE O'ROURKE](#)

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State politicians took a back seat to Crow Wing County's poor last week.

The officials stood in line at a soup kitchen for dinner, learned how to budget for a family with a minuscule income and heard stories of domestic violence, racism and desperate poverty in Brainerd.

The Legislative Commission to End Poverty in Minnesota by 2020 toured Brainerd Thursday and listened to gripping testimony from Brainerd's poor. The tour included stops at the Lakes Area Senior Activity Center, the Sharing Bread Soup Kitchen and the Interfaith Hospitality Network, hosted last week by Trinity Lutheran Church.

It was in Trinity's Fellowship Hall that six women told their stories to Rep. Carlos Mariani, DFL-St. Paul, co-chair of the panel, and commission members Sen. Paul Koering, R-Fort Ripley, and Rep. Frank Moe, DFL-Bemidji. Also taking part in the session was Rep. John Ward, DFL-Brainerd.

Sarah, 17-year-old mother of a 2-year-old, told of her frustrations in being unable to find a decent job or access food shelves or Christmas toy programs for children because she's under 18.

The Brainerd girl is a senior in the Brainerd School District who said she maintains a 3.4 grade-point average. She'd like to be a teacher some day but for now she struggles to buy essentials such as groceries, toothpaste, diapers and toilet paper.

She recounted trying to cut corners by buying the discount brand of diapers but her son ended up getting diaper rash from them.

"I may be 17 but I'm also raising a child," she said. "My son doesn't get Christmas presents."

Victoria said she moved to Brainerd about a year ago after suffering through a situation that involved severe domestic violence. She lived at the Women's Center of Mid-Minnesota for awhile.

One potential employer told her she was being turned down because she was

black and her hiring would decrease business. The region's limited mass transportation also made her job search challenging, she said. A cumbersome and time-consuming application process for medical assistance also was criticized by Victoria.

"They want to know everything," she said. "You're writing a novel."

Jennifer, a Central Lakes College student who is also the mother of a 5-year-old, said her stint in poverty was generational not situational. She said she makes about \$450 a month but has total debts of about \$14,000. Despite her debts she wants to stay in school.

"If I do quit, well, we'll just never be able to have the life she deserves," Jennifer said.

She recalled having only two pair of pants while growing up. While her mother fought addictions Jennifer and her siblings "were left to fend for ourselves."

Jennifer said she dreams of being able to pay her bills and have enough left over to take her daughter to a movie or out for a pizza. Despite her hard times Jennifer noted instances of "individual goodness" such as when her boss took a chance and hired her.

Clarissa, who has been on her own since she was 17, said Lutheran Social Service has provided her with housing assistance. Before help came she was homeless.

"I lived in my car and bounced around friends' houses until I wore out my welcome," Clarissa said.

Melissa, who is white, agreed with Victoria's complaint of racism in the area. Melissa cited the experiences of a black friend of hers.

"If you're black in Brainerd and Baxter, finding a job is almost impossible," Melissa said.

Child-care assistance could only be obtained if the applicant had a "squeaky clean record," Melissa, of Brainerd, said. Despite child-care problems she said kids "are what make us keep going."

Connie, 46, who was staying at Trinity Lutheran Church Thursday as part of the Interfaith Hospitality Network, said her family's fortunes declined after buying a house and discovering that it needed a new sewer. Connie suffers from depression and has been unable to find work because of her medical problems.

Since March Connie and her family had been living in a travel trailer that they

parked on a minimum maintenance road outside of Pequot Lakes. In late September someone stole the generator, which robbed the family of its only heat source. Connie also said that neighboring school districts were arguing about where her homeless daughter should go to school. Ward and Koering said they would help her with that issue.

The legislators thanked them for their courage in speaking out about their situations.

Rep. Mariani said his group would make recommendations to the Legislature for the 2009 session. He said earlier in the day that his commission intends to delve deep into the root causes of poverty.

Rep. Moe said many Minnesotans visit Bemidji and Brainerd and think everything's fine.

"There's a lot of deep poverty in the communities where we live," he said. "It's more hidden up here in the north."

Earlier that day the lawmakers visited the Brainerd Lakes Area Senior Activity Center where they were assigned profiles of low-income families and then sat down with the actual people whose situation matched the profiles.

"There's no way this is going to work," Gregory Gray, director of the legislative commission, said as he sat down with a budget worksheet.

He said the group's target is those who suffer from chronic poverty. While some people are skeptical of the name of the Legislative Commission to End Poverty in Minnesota by 2020, it does serve a purpose, Gray said.

"It's because from the legislative standpoint things don't get done unless there's a deadline," Gray said.

Koering said he's not really sure if poverty can be ended by 2020 but it's useful for lawmakers to learn to walk in someone else's shoes.

"It's a good thing we as policymakers are looking at this issue," Koering said.

Ward said his participation in the workshop reaffirmed what he's been learning while serving on the Health and Human Services Disabilities Working Group.

"So many folks really have critical needs that can't be met because of poverty," he said. "We're all an event away from being in poverty. We've got to change this."

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