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Tour provides legislators an up-close look at poverty the Northland

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Carolyn Hill stood in the midst of more than 30 people in the Churches United in Ministry drop-in center Thursday and gave four state legislators a glimpse of how it feels to be poor and homeless.

She told of having a successful career as a corporate bookkeeper, seeing her job shipped overseas, living on the streets and now staying at the CHUM homeless shelter.

People seem to feel entitled to treat those in poverty as less than human, Hill said.

“Don’t we matter?” she asked the crowd.

Hill, 59, was one of dozens of people living in poverty who testified during a tour of Duluth’s many assistance agencies aimed at helping the struggling of the city.

Duluth was the first of four stops by the four legislators and some of their staff. They’ll stop in Floodwood, Grand Rapids and Virginia today.

The 16 members of the Minnesota Legislative Commission to End Poverty by 2020 will make nine such trips across the state, to better understand what poverty is really like.

“The real experts are here, in the streets,” said Rep. Carlos Mariani, DFL-St. Paul, a commission co-chairman.

Almost from the start, poverty slapped them in the face.

As part of the tour, the group boarded a bus at 7:15 a.m. for their first stop, and met a passenger who was out of work.

Then they stopped at the Damiano Center, which offers food and clothing to the poor, followed by the San Marco, which provides a place for the poor and alcoholics to stay indefinitely.

There, they met people who told tales of living on Duluth’s streets for years, sometimes because of long bouts of alcohol addiction.

Tony Ladeaux, 60, of Duluth, who sits on the city’s Native American Commission, complained of continued racism and other problems that hurt minorities in the cities.

And too often, churches turn a blind eye to the poor, he said.

“Churches are very self-serving to their own congregations,” he said.

Eugene Remus, 44, who dressed in a brown suit and black wingtip shoes, looked like he belonged in a high-end Wall Street firm and not in the San Marco, where he’s been after he needed heart surgery and his health insurance cut him off.

Until the surgery, Remus said, he’d never been homeless.

“They’re not pleasant stories,” said commission co-chairman Sen. John Marty, DFL-Roseville. But on the plus side, it’s nice to see how far Duluth has come in working on the problem, Marty said.

He cringed at hearing from some people who have a job, but don’t earn enough to pull themselves out of homelessness.

But hearing those stories is what these trips are all about, Marty said.

“We connect with people and we put a face on poverty,” Marty said.

One theme that developed Thursday for Sen. Tony Lourey, DFL-Kerrick, was that sometimes in trying to help, government only creates more barriers to getting people out of poverty, such as someone becoming ineligible for public assistance checks because they took a second job to help with the rent, leaving them with the same amount of money they had before.

No matter how grim or frustrating, legislators must hear those stories if they’re going to persuade the Legislature to enact any serious change in an effort to wipe out poverty by 2020, commissioners said.

“When you see the faces,” Marty said, “you realize how important each of these people is.”

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