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Effort aims to end state poverty by 2020

Ruth's House clients speak to commission

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FARIBAULT - Ending poverty in Minnesota by 2020 is an ambitious goal for a legislative commission whose representatives visited Faribault on Friday.

"I really don't like the name of the commission, but love its focus, which is to determine what the state might do to help people out of poverty," said District 35 State Sen. Claire Robling.

She was among a small contingent of the overall Legislative Commission to End Poverty in Minnesota by 2020 who took testimony from people in poverty Friday. Hosting the commission visit was Ruth's House, a local shelter for homeless women and their children.

Robling said small groups from the commission are touring different regions of the state to listen to the stories of people in poverty to get an idea of its causes. Thursday and Friday her tour group stopped in Winona, Rochester, Albert Lea and Faribault.

Friday at Ruth's House, clients from the shelter, Three Rivers Community Action Inc., HOPE Center, and several other agencies in town spoke with members of the commission. To allow them to speak freely, no media was allowed in the "listening sessions."

"The Legislature hasn't done something like this in 20 years, so I think it is great that they are going out in small groups and listening to the stories of those who are living in poverty," said Michael Thorsteinson, executive director of Three Rivers Community Action, an agency that provides services to low-income people in Rice, Goodhue and Wabasha counties.

Robling discovered that transportation is a bigger issue for low-income people in rural areas than in the Twin Cities.

"If you don't have a car, you can't go to another community for a job," Robling said. "That limits you to looking for one in the community you live in, and also one you can walk to, or else find a carpool to get to. It becomes harder for you to find a job."

Homelessness also, Robling found, is a bigger factor in resolving poverty than she realized before she joined the commission.

"If you don't have a permanent address, it's hard for agencies to deliver services to help you find a job to get on your feet again," Rohling said.

Many people working at minimum-wage jobs do not earn enough for them to afford the rent for an apartment, plus all basic living expenses, she said.

"To someone barely making ends meet, a car breaking down and no means to pay for it might mean they lose their job," Rohling said.

Causes of poverty are more complex than most people think, she said.

"I doubt that we can end situations that cause people to fall into poverty," Rohling said. "But what we can hopefully do as a state is put programs in place so being in poverty is a short-term trial rather than a long-term situation for people."

- Staff writer Pauline Schreiber may be reached at 333-3127.

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