

# The Fergus Falls Daily Journal

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## Lawmakers tackle poverty

Pelican Rapids site of hearing

By [Lauren Radomski \(Contact\)](#) | The Daily Journal

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Even when Lisa Mickelson showed symptoms of a heart attack, she refused to go to the emergency room.

“I was thinking, ‘No, this is going to be nothing — I won’t go,’” she said. “I hadn’t gone to the doctor all year because of that \$350 deductible.”

Mickelson — whose chest discomfort and arm pain was later linked to fibromyalgia in her back — is one of the millions of Americans struggling to make ends meet. Though Mickelson is covered by her husband’s health insurance through West Central Turkeys Inc., deductible costs rarely fit into her family’s budget.

It is for families like the Mickelsons that a group of Minnesota lawmakers are touring communities in the state’s northwest this week. Members of the Legislative Commission to End Poverty by 2020 (LCEP) visited Pelican Rapids Wednesday, talking with some of the educators, city officials and community members working to address poverty in the region. Established in 2006, the LCEP is a bi-partisan, 18-member group designing a set of recommendations on how to end poverty throughout the state.

“I’m hoping that by December of next year we’ll have some real concrete initiatives that the 2009 session will be taking a look at,” said LCEP member Rep. Bud Nornes (R-Dist. 10A).

Nornes, Rep. Morrie Lanning (R-Dist. 9A) and Rep. Nora Slawik (D-Dist. 55B) spent part of Tuesday visiting with students at Viking Elementary School. Joined by a handful of high schoolers, the group touched on topics such as paying for college and job opportunities in Pelican Rapids.

Later at Pelican Rapids Public Library, Debra Carpenter of Northern Connections in Perham

described some of the challenges facing low-income families. Northern Connections, a non-profit human services organization serving several west central Minnesota counties, sees many people struggling to find full-time employment with consistent hours, Carpenter said. Some are trying to juggle two part-time jobs, running into childcare and transportation problems, among others.

“Our families are working — and they’re working hard — but they’re just not making enough,” said Davis Leino-Mills, director of Otter Tail Wadena Community Action Council, Inc. Leino-Mills recommended that legislators expand their definition of poverty and consider the detrimental effect of rising property taxes on seniors and low-income families.

LCEP staff acknowledge the difficulty of the job ahead of them.

“We have a daunting task: to determine what solutions there are to ending poverty,” said LCEP Director Gregory Gray.

“It comes in different shapes and sizes,” Nornes said of poverty throughout the state. “Every community has a different way of looking at it.”

The LCEP tour continues today in Moorhead, where legislators will meet with the Moorhead Community Action Agency, visit the Dorothy Day House of Hospitality (a food shelf) and talk with local residents. They will later travel to Bemidji, meeting with residents and tribal officials at the Red Lake and Cass Lake Indian Reservations Friday.

According to 2006 data collected by the LCEP, poverty rates in Minnesota’s northwest and northeast regions were higher than the state’s average, while rates in the southwest and southeast areas were slightly lower. In 2006, Minnesota’s poverty rate of 9.8 percent was lower than the national poverty rate of 13.3 percent.