

'This should be unacceptable'

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It took courage and involved a few tears, but a genuine reality was unmasked.

Sick of barely getting by and ready to ask for change, several members of the local community living in poverty shared their stories with three metro legislators who were in Grand Rapids Thursday evening and Friday morning. The legislators are members of the Legislative Commission to End Poverty by 2020.

Created by the Minnesota Legislature in 2006, the commission's task is to develop guidelines toward ending poverty. The visit to Grand Rapids was one of four stops in northeastern Minnesota, including Duluth, Floodwood and Virginia, that launched a statewide tour meant to allow commission members the opportunity to talk with communities about the poverty issues they face.

The 20 legislators on the commission will split into small groups to visit all corners of the state from now until January, 2008. Those who took part in the northeastern tour included Senator Scott Dibble (DFL-Minneapolis), Senator John Marty (DFL-Roseville) and Representative Carlos Mariani (DFL-St. Paul). Marty and Mariani serve as co-chairs on the commission.

The visit to Grand Rapids was two-part; a dinner and listening session Thursday evening at St. Joseph's Church and a breakfast and discussion Friday morning at GRACE House at Zion Lutheran Church.

Thursday evening's event was sponsored by Circles of Support, a program which fosters community support networks for those living in poverty. Participants in this program took chairs beside the legislators to bravely tell of their hardships. And, the theme that unfolded was that of a cyclical pattern—poverty crossing generation to generation



with little improvement toward living wages.

Shannon Marshal explained how a sudden divorce had left her to raise her three children on her own with no transportation. Growing up in poverty, she vowed never to let her children experience the same. While she was fortunate enough to find a job close to home, yet just a 25 cent raise meant she lost government subsidies and was left to tackle her bills on a very low income with unreliable child support funds.



"Employers used to be more supportive of single parents," said Marshal. "Now, I have two jobs. I get every

other Sunday off, otherwise I am always working. I'm barely scraping by, but I'm not on government subsidies."

The Itasca Economic Development Corporation did a case study on how a promotion can actually worsen a person's situation. If a person is promoted from a \$6/hour position to \$7.50/hour, food stamp support would be lost at approximately \$140/month, housing subsidy would be lost and could mean an increase in a monthly rent from \$312 to \$350, and the person would no longer qualify under the county's medical insurance program. This promotion may mean more money in a person's pocket but higher expenses and a loss of medical insurance which could be a huge stress especially if the employer does not offer any benefits.

"Growing up in poverty, I didn't learn what education was however I learned how to survive by utilizing the system but there are limits to that," Jessica Larson told the legislators.

Like Marshal, Larson is living with the same the poverty of her childhood. Larson said she and her significant other live paycheck to paycheck, deciding which bill they can skip which week as it is with so many living in poverty. Larson urged the commission to help improve living wages because she said "two people working full-time jobs should not have to struggle to make ends meet."

According to information compiled by the Minnesota Department of Employment and Economic Development, 42 percent of Itasca County workers earn less than \$10 per hour. IEDC found that a family of four with two workers would need to make \$10.53 per hour, per worker, to live comfortably.

Faith Swanson also grew up in poverty and said she vowed she would never live in poverty again, "but here I am." Swanson addressed the issue of a lack of affordable childcare in the area.

A former drug addict who climbed her way out to recovery, obtained her GED and attended school to become a nursing assistant, Kristy Caverly, agreed that availability of affordable childcare is a big concern. For Caverly and many others who strive to become self-sufficient, once they secure a job, that most often is at the bottom of the payroll, they no longer qualify for childcare assistance funding which can make it very difficult to make ends meet and find adequate care for their children.

Other concerns were health care and transportation. Several of those who spoke Thursday said it is frustrating when they live in outlying areas of Itasca County, yet all the services are in Grand Rapids. Without reliable transportation of their own, it can be a real challenge to get the help and support they need.

Another big issue is the availability of affordable housing. Currently homeless, Stacy Fideldy explained how hard it has been for her family with five children to find suitable housing that they can afford. Fideldy's husband works full-time at a low wage job while she attends school full-time. She said she contacts the local homeless shelter, GRACE House, every other day but is told it is full.

"There isn't much for three-bedroom apartments in town," said Stacy. "I've found \$675 [a month] is the cheapest but we make around \$900 a month. We can't put that much into rent, especially with all the utilities on top of that."

Rochelle Cuff and Alana Hughes, two more women who said they have lived in poverty their entire lives, explained how they want so much more for their own children.

"It's so hard for people in poverty to let our children experience this without any help," said Cuff who wants to allow her daughter to realize her dream of becoming a cheerleader but without any transportation worries about how she would get her daughter to practice and back home.

Hughes, a single mother of two, said it took her nine years working at Wal-mart to break the living wage mark. Still, she said if it were not for childcare assistance, she would not be able to work.

"I am grateful for where I am today, but I could get further," said Hughes

What keeps these women going?

Marshal put it into perspective when she said, "I still have my self respect that it will get better and I'm hopeful that there will be some other path down the road for my kids."

"Most of us aren't in poverty but those of us who aren't should find this unacceptable," commented Senator Marty. "This commission was created because of anger and frustration that we don't need poverty. This is not the stereotypical poverty; these people are not lazy. We as a commission have to understand that and when we report back to the legislature, we have to make that obvious."

On Friday morning, the legislators talked with guests of GRACE House and heard from representatives of IEDC and the Blandin Foundation as well as KOOTASCA Community Action and Itasca County on specific local initiatives that are currently targeting the poverty issue.