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## Putting faces on poverty

By Deb Gau

Poverty can take many forms, and as the Minnesota state legislators visiting the region Thursday and Friday have learned, it affects everyone differently.

It could mean struggling to pay the rent or the heating bill. It could be a situation brought on by circumstance, like an injury or a lost job. It could mean going without medical or dental care, even if you have insurance.

"I just talked to five people. Three of the five said they have insurance but they can't use it because it's too expensive," said Sen. John Marty, DFL-Roseville. "This is so valuable when we're talking about the debate on health care costs."

Marty is one of the legislators who make up the Commission to End Poverty in Minnesota by 2020. Members of the commission have been touring the state since September to hear firsthand how poverty affects Minnesotans, and to see some of the resources available to help them.

Thursday and Friday brought commission members to towns in southwestern Minnesota, including Jackson, Worthington, Marshall and Walnut Grove. The tour made a lunchtime stop at the Kitchen Table Food Shelf in Marshall, where local residents had a chance to share their concerns with legislators.

Sidney Dodge said his concern in talking to the legislators wasn't so much for himself, but for an acquaintance who could not afford dental care and was having difficulty finding assistance for it.

"One big thing we need is dentistry," Dodge said. "We've got a lot of holes in the system."

At the next table, Larry Montello was discussing the need for energy assistance programs with the commission's executive director, Gregory Gray. Montello said he was facing the possible loss of electricity in his home, although he could afford gas heating for now.

"I think we need more local resources to continue assistance on the ground in Marshall," Montello said. "That should be part of a greater umbrella, utilities and rent."

However, he added, "I'm reluctant to use the word poverty, really when we're all so fortunate." He said a strong local community and the existence of groups like Western Community Action were a blessing for Marshall.

Gray said events like Friday's lunch were vital for the commission to see more than the statistics of poverty.

"This puts a human face on all that information," Gray said. "What's it like for them? We can't answer that question at a committee meeting in a board room. We also want to build grassroots support for this program."

The decision to have lunch at the food shelf was the commission's, said Western Community Action Community and Family Support Director Angela Larson.

"It's to give them a clearer picture of poverty," Larson said. "They really stressed that they wanted to talk to people who have been there, to hear about the different struggles they have had."

"There are a lot of misconceptions about poverty," she said. "Because this is Minnesota and it gets cold in the winter, we don't see people living on the street or sleeping on park benches . . . There are people who think it's only immigrants (who are affected). But poverty knows absolutely no class lines or racial lines."

After lunch, commission members toured the food shelf, which Larson said had "a huge increase" in customers in 2007, as well as its new mobile food market. The group would later go on to visit Marshall's Head Start classrooms and local homes rehabilitated by the Minnesota Urban and Rural homesteading program.

"We thought it would be difficult to find people" to attend the lunch, Nelson said, but there was a strong response from WCA clients. "Most of the people we asked said yes, I want to share my voice."

"I think it's good," said Megan Vasquez, a Marshall resident who attended the lunch. "It should happen more, though."

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