

Post-Bulletin

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Local News

Members of poverty panel see and listen to the 'unseen'

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By **Christina Killion Valdez**
Post-Bulletin, Rochester MN

One of Rochester's most invisible populations got a chance to be seen and heard Thursday.

People like Sam Vo, who at age 19 already knows what it feels like to be homeless. And what it feels like to go unseen.

"When you are sleeping on the streets you look exactly the same as when you are living in a home," he said.

He's since started to turn his life around with the help of information he got while on probation, he said.

"With opportunities, things can happen," Vo said.

Listening to his story were people who can help create opportunities for other Minnesotans like Vo -- the Legislative Commission to End Poverty in Minnesota by 2020. The 20-member committee includes members of the state Legislature and people appointed by Gov. Tim Pawlenty.

Representatives of the commission traveled to Rochester as part of a months-long statewide listening tour to unearth the root causes of poverty and what can be done to end it.

"It's a powerful, big idea but a doable idea," said Carlos Mariani, co-chairman of the commission.

The commissioners visited several places in Rochester where poverty is seen, including the Salvation Army Free Clinic, Riverside Central Elementary, Good Samaritan Dental Clinic and the Dorothy Day Hospitality House, a homeless shelter. There they met with staff and patrons to find out what's working and what isn't.

They also met with about 50 people at a public forum on poverty to hear painful stories of economic hardships that often go unspoken.

"It's hard as a mother to choose if you will eat or pay your child's medical bills," said a woman dressed in scrubs, who was one of several people who said their families are without health insurance.

Another woman said she never imagined herself in need of welfare assistance, but her life turned around after becoming the victim of a violent crime, then again as the victim of domestic violence.

She urged the commissioners to look at education and training as a way to break the cycle, saying, "Lost dreams tend to lead down that path of lost

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Minnesota Sen. Sandy Pappas, left, listens to Rochester resident Laurie Abell describe some of the problems she has been facing, while she waits to be seen at the Salvation Army Clinic in Rochester on Thursday. Pappas is a member of the Legislative

Commission to End Poverty in Minnesota by 2020, which toured several sites in Rochester on Thursday and held a listening forum.

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hope."

Other people called attention to the need to address "invisible diseases," such as chemical addiction and mental illness.

There were also calls for affordable housing that's not plagued by crime, additional public transportation and child care, especially for sick children. One man said he lost his job after his car broke down because the bus stops running at 6 p.m.

Urging this often invisible group to continue speaking out, Mariani told the crowd, "You have brothers and sisters all over the state. Thousands of people want to do what was thought to be impossible. This is not the end of the conversation."

Web links

- [Legislative Commission to End Poverty in Minnesota by 2020](#)

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Concerned_Reader wrote: January 25, 2008 5:05PM

I am glad they are finally addressing this issue. It seems like the middle class has disappeared and now become the struggling working class. I have met many wonderful homeless people here in Rochester and there isn't enough support. Speaking from personal experience I can say it is extremely hard to remedy the situation without a kind and helping hand. I really hope they create some kind of aid for the homeless and those struggling and working scarcely getting by.



Thelen wrote: January 25, 2008 7:45PM

Hmmm, I know a lot of middle class people. Not sure why anyone thinks they have disappeared, except as a talking point that's part of a Wellstone Democrat agenda. Things are so bad in this country that we have millions of people crashing the borders, and being successful after they get here. To paraphrase the old saying about New York, "If you can't make it here, you can't make it anywhere".

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