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Central Minnesotans in difficult economic straits tell their stories to lawmakers

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LuAnn Carpenter escaped an abusive marriage with her children and disabled mother and came to St. Cloud 10 years ago without much of an idea of what to do or where else to turn.

Molly Ludwig is a full-time college student with a promising internship, a husband who works two jobs, a first child on the way and no medical insurance to cover any of them.

Pat Goodrum is a former real estate agent with epilepsy who can work only so many hours at her part-time job without losing the assistance she gets for her \$800-\$1,000 monthly drug bills. She doesn't know how she'll pay for the 20 percent of her cataract surgery not covered by Medicare.



PHOTO CREDIT: Jason Wachter, jwachter@stcloudtimes.com

Rep. Larry Haws (left) and Rep. Carlos Mariani (right) talk with people after having lunch at the St. Cloud Salvation Army Thursday. They are members of a legislative commission on ending poverty in Minnesota touring local organizations.

They're Central Minnesotans teetering on the edge of poverty, and they're some of the people visited Thursday by members of a legislative commission charged with putting together a plan to end poverty in Minnesota by 2020.

Commission co-chairman Rep. Carlos Mariani, DFL-St. Paul, commission director and former legislator Gregory Gray and local state lawmakers visited with people at Tri-County Action Program's offices, the Southside Boys & Girls Club, The Salvation Army and the Sauk Rapids warehouse of Bridging, a Bloomington furniture donation nonprofit group. Afterward, they headed to Brainerd and other outstate Minnesota stops.

Along the way, they heard some success stories, including that of Carpenter, who went back to school, found a steady job and bought a house after going through Tri-CAP's self-sufficiency program.

"There were just so many services that contributed to my success that if they were not there, I don't know where I'd be right now," she said. "It just means so much to have someone there in your corner."

But even Carpenter's victory was bittersweet — the program that helped her find and connect with the services she needed to get herself re-established was discontinued after the Legislature cut funding for it in 2003, said Paula Erdmann, Tri-CAP's executive director.

"We haven't been able to bring that program back," she said.

Seeking solutions

Poverty in Minnesota has been on the rise since 2000 after falling in the previous decade, according to the Minnesota State Demographer's office.

The 2005 American Community Survey estimated 9.2 percent of the state's population fell below the federal poverty threshold, up from 7.9 percent in the 2000 census but still lower than the 13.1 percent rate found in the 1990 census.

Proper funding levels for programs designed to end poverty is one of the big questions the commission will have to answer before crafting a comprehensive legislative package in 2009, Mariani said.

"But it's not all about money. We're looking to stimulate new approaches and partnerships between government, the private sector and communities," he said. "We also have to have a discussion about whether we want to end poverty or build a better welfare state. As a legislator, I can say with confidence that we can build a better mousetrap, but we still might not catch any mice."

At one point during the trip, Gray asked local advocates for the poor if they thought residents of the St. Cloud area would be willing to support higher taxes in return for more funding for programs aimed at ending poverty.

Cuts to successful programs used to balance the state's budget in 2003 and 2004 have never been fully restored, even as Gov. Tim Pawlenty warns of a budget forecast to be released today showing the economy pointed toward another downturn, said Sen. Tarryl Clark, DFL-St. Cloud.

"This is a community that has come up with a bunch of solutions, but frankly, budget cuts have made it a little more challenging," she said.

Many obstacles

The St. Cloud area has a unique experience with poverty, being a regional center with a VA Medical Center that brings veterans in from across the state and nation for chemical dependency and mental illness treatment and counseling, said Rep. Larry Haws, DFL-St. Cloud.

The area's growing ethnic and cultural diversity adds to the complexity of dealing with poverty, said Rep. Steve Gottwalt, R-St. Cloud.

Advocates agreed that a rise in the number of undiagnosed or untreated people with mental illness is making it more difficult to provide effective help.

Others said bureaucratic hoops and red tape do more to keep people from rising out of poverty than anything else.

Ludwig said she felt like the deck was stacked against her and her family as they waded through delays and rejections in their attempts to get on state-sponsored insurance programs.

"We'll be lucky if we have anything by the time the baby gets here in March," she said. "I saw a sign advertising a job the other day that said, 'Need insurance? Apply today.' Seven years of

college and what it's going to come down to is I'm going to flip burgers so I can get insurance for my child.

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