

Who are the poor in the Twin Cities suburbs?

By Jean Hopfensperger, Star Tribune

Last update: December 7, 2007 - 9:21 AM

When Maria Lafreniere goes shopping near her home in Woodbury, it's with a calculator in hand to precisely add up her purchases.

"I'm trying to figure out whether I can afford to spend \$10 on a set of baby bottles, and I see other new moms loading up their carts with all sorts of things for their babies," said Lafreniere, who says she was in the same position as those moms a few years ago.

"I drive by McMansions all the time, by beautiful town homes all the time. But for now, a home is an unattainable goal," she said. "It's hard."

Lafreniere, 29, doesn't usually talk about such private matters to strangers. But on Thursday, she was among about 100 low-income Twin Cities suburbanites who told legislators their stories during a daylong "listening tour" by the Legislative Commission to End Poverty.

Lawmakers talked to unemployed workers in Blaine, immigrant families in Brooklyn Center, young folks in Burnsville and homeless mothers in Eagan, and lunched with Head Start parents in Coon Rapids.

"I'm hoping legislators learn that poverty is clearly in the suburbs ... and [about] the psychological effects it has on parents trying to keep up with the Jones," said JoAnn Tesar, a tour coordinator for Community Action Partnership of Ramsey and Washington counties.

"I want them to feel the pain of having to tell a child they can't play sports because you don't have a hundred dollars to pay for it."

The first stop was in Roseville, where Lafreniere and others were awaiting appointments at Bridging Inc, which offers free furniture and household items for disadvantaged people. Before grabbing her red shopping cart, she told legislators that she had grown up in a prosperous Connecticut suburb, later lived in Columbia Heights, but fell into poverty after leaving a difficult relationship with her husband.

It's a classic example of suburban poverty, namely newly single moms who are in no position to land on their feet, said Bridging officials. Three-quarters of their clients are single women, they said, and 85 percent earn less than \$15,000 a year. Many come from abusive relationships.

"Right now my child is sleeping on an air mattress," Lafreniere told legislators. "To have a bed for my son, a couch for my living room, and a table to eat on will be incredible."

Meanwhile, over a lunch of chicken wild rice casserole at the Head Start Family Development Center in Coon Rapids, parents observed that suburban poverty has its advantages and disadvantages. Neighborhoods and schools tend to be safer, they said, and the housing stock is often in better shape. But services still are concentrated in the central cities, they said, which means long, often expensive commutes.

"In north Minneapolis, there's North Point Wellness Center. Isn't there anything like that here?" asked commission director Greg Gray, a former legislator from Minneapolis.

Head Start mom Sheree Schusted of Ham Lake said she drives all the way to La Clinica medical center in St. Paul for medical care for her family. The only reason she knows it exists is because her husband is of Mexican heritage, she said.

Another feature of suburban poverty is that it is less concentrated than in the central cities, advocates said, and the poor often look no different than well-to-do neighbors.

Kristen Ruschmeyer, for example, looks like any working professional in her tasteful wool jacket and tweed pants -- except they were purchased at a thrift store. She has a college degree in education, but she's earning about \$1,300 a month working in a group home because she's not an accredited teacher in Minnesota.

Ruschmeyer, another newly single mother, said her rent is \$800 a month, plus utilities. And like many other women in this group, she'd be homeless if it weren't for her family. Said Ruschmeyer: "If I didn't have them, I don't know what I'd do."

Just as the poor are less visible in the suburbs, so are many of the apartments they tend to live in. Legislators, for example, gathered at Maple Pond Apartments in Maplewood, an inconspicuous beige complex of buildings, dotted with trees. Residents told lawmakers how hard it was to move out of poverty because once they start earning money, they begin losing benefits -- such as housing and health-care subsidies.

Debbie Ray, like many on this tour, told legislators she had a medical problem that kept her from working full time. But even applying for a job can be difficult in the suburbs, she said. At Maple Pond, for example, there's just one bus line that makes a stop.

The poverty tour made 14 stops during the course of the day, with about a half-dozen legislators or legislative officials at each location.

Commission co-chairman Sen. John Marty, DFL-Roseville, reiterated at each stop that it was important for legislators to hear these personal stories as they prepare for the next legislative session.

And for legislators relatively new to the poverty issue, it was an eye-opener. As Rep. Leon Lillie, DFL-North St. Paul, told the Maplewood group: "You read stuff all day long, but to look you in the eyes and hear your stories makes a real difference."

Jean Hopfensperger • 651-298-1553

© 2007 Star Tribune. All rights reserved.

Find this article at:

<http://www.startribune.com/local/12234381.html?page=2&c=y>

Check the box to include the list of links referenced in the article.