

Tuesday, October 09, 2001907

Volume 18, Issue 40

Legislators visit area on poverty tour  
By Marshall Helmberger



Lack of transportation and childcare, homelessness, and state and federal regulations that punish the poor are among a number of barriers that keep generations of rural residents in poverty. That was the message heard by members of a legislative commission on Friday during a visit to Tower and other parts of the Iron Range late last week.

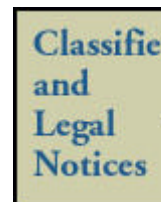
The Commission to End Poverty, which includes Sens. John Marty, Scott Dibble, and Carlos Mariani, was in northeastern Minnesota to take testimony from low income residents and their advocates. Commission members plan to introduce comprehensive anti-poverty legislation in the 2009 legislative session and the fact-finding tour was a part of that effort.



The commission held one of its informal meetings at the home of Jim and Becky Gawboy, of rural Tower, where they learned more about some of the challenges facing special needs individuals as well as residents of the Bois Forte reservation.



Becky Gawboy said many of the dozens of special needs children she and her husband Jim have adopted or fostered over the years are condemned to a life of poverty under the current system. Many of them suffer from Fetal Alcohol Syndrome or other disabilities that will limit their earnings in the future.



“It’s not that they are unemployable. They can work, and they will,” said Becky. “They just won’t have the things that middle class families do. It’s heartbreaking, but we have had to teach them to love being poor.”

Gawboy noted that punitive state and federal rules, that take away benefits from those who try to better themselves by working, keep people trapped. “It’s an unfriendly system,” agreed Bill Maxwell, with Legal Aid in Virginia, noting that federal rules essentially condemn those with mental illness or other mental disabilities to a life of poverty.



The system also condemns the poor to mountains of paperwork, according to Becky

Gawboy, who told commission members she spends about 25 hours a week on paperwork for her 12 adopted or soon-to-be adopted children.

Sen. Mariana said he hopes to hold hearings soon on the ways that all the rules and regulations are making life harder for those already suffering from poverty. Sen. Marty said many of the rules appear to have been put in place in order to punish people for being poor.

### Reservation issues

While the success of Fortune Bay Resort Casino and other businesses owned and operated by the Bois Forte band has created new jobs for band members, the economic growth has provided new challenges as well. “We’re seeing an influx in population and that’s creating housing and homeless issues,” said Ray Toutloff, who represents the Vermilion Reservation on the tribal council. Limited housing is forcing some families to double up, and sometimes “triple-up,” according to Toutloff. “And we still have a serious problem with homelessness,” he said.

While the band has put housing at the top of the list of its priorities, he said getting the funding to provide the infrastructure is difficult. He noted that smaller casinos, like Fortune Bay, don’t generate the kind of profits seen at larger casinos, which limits the ability of the band to fund such infrastructure independently.

While Fortune Bay has provided new opportunities for band members, Toutloff said reliable transportation and childcare remain barriers for some employees.

Becky Gawboy said transportation is a neglected issue in rural Minnesota, and one that plays a major role in keeping people in poverty. “There is no bus or taxi in Tower. If you need to get somewhere, you need to own a car,” she said. While an older used car can be less expensive, she said the cost of gas and high repair bills can put even an older vehicle out of reach for many in poverty. Gawboy advocated for greater public sector involvement in addressing the issue. “The private sector hasn’t done it up here. Transportation is something the public sector needs to address. Public transportation shouldn’t just be a right for people in urban areas,” she said. Gawboy called the lack of public transportation a form of taxation on rural families.

### Hope for change?

Despite the fact that many of their adopted children will live their entire lives in poverty, Becky Gawboy said there is hope for the next generation. She said she and her husband were focused on giving their children the parenting skills they will need to raise healthy children of their own, children who will hopefully have a chance to achieve a middle class life. “The abuse these kids suffered will not be the defining experience of their lives. We can heal them emotionally and break the cycle for the next generation. At least their kids won’t have to be condemned to poverty.”

Gawboy said the costs of poverty to society are much higher than most people realize, and fighting the problem can often cost less. “We don’t need for those at the top to pay very much to bring up those at the bottom,” she said.



## Abou

[Who we](#)  
[Contac](#)  
[Subscripti](#)

## Secti

[New](#)  
[Classif](#)  
[Area we](#)  
[Timberjay](#)

Sen. Marty said commission members hope to put the issue of poverty back on the state's agenda. "We sort of accept it in society today and we don't even talk about it," he said. "We have to change the conversation."

---

[Top Stories](#) | [Tower Area News](#) | [Ely Area News](#) | [Orr Area News](#) | [Opinions/Letters](#) | [Archives](#)