

Local News

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Working poor in Todd County talk to legislators

by Karin L. Nauber



The faces and places of poverty in Todd County are those of our friends, families and neighbors. These photos were on display.

Editor's Note: The people who spoke at the session are identified only by their first names to help them maintain their anonymity.

The stories were much the same, people living and getting by on far less than they need. The stories of poverty. Edelia has three families with 16 people all living in the same small house. Lack of healthcare. Inability to pay for heat. People living in the land of opportunity with all the doors and windows being closed to them.

The war on poverty is not a new thing.

Ever since the beginning of time there have been poor and needy people. The Legislative Commission to End Poverty in Minnesota by 2020 has been traveling through Minnesota to hear the stories of those affected by poverty. On November 30 the Browerville Community Center was set up for people to come in and tell their stories to senators, representatives, commissioners and others at the session.

Following is some of the stories that were heard at the session.

· Sister Donna brought in information about the Long Prairie Foodshelf. Use fluctuated monthly, but most months showed an average of 100 adults and 100 children using the food shelf each month. In October, 163 adults and 169 children used the food shelf.

Sister Donna also told legislators about the immigration issue in the county. She said that many of Hispanic origin were being cut out of the workplace and that wages were diminishing for them. She said some can't pay their rent or buy food and it is affecting their families. She said that most do not have health insurance.

The elderly, who are living on fixed incomes, are also having a lot of difficulties paying their bills.

· Alan, a farmer, said that there are a lot of poor people in the county because wealth has not been distributed. Agriculture is a major part of the county, but is not compensated fairly.

"You can drive up and down main street of any town and you can see it. When three farmers go out of business, a business (in town) goes out of business," he said.

Alan said that there are approximately 12,000 acres in the county that are planted with poplar trees.

· At another table, a woman told her story of being kept in poverty because whenever she earns more, she loses the benefits that she needs to survive. She

suffers from fibromyalgia which causes her pain and wears her out.

"I have no incentive to work more, plus I hurt more when I do," she said. Currently, she is not paying for her heat because there is just not enough money for everything.

· Renee has a four year college degree. She was married and farmed with her husband. After the marriage ended she found it was hard to get a job. After seven years of working at one job, she only had raises that amounted to \$1.60. Later, she got a job with her degree in criminal justice and made \$12 an hour. She drives 42 miles a day to work. She had been unemployed for four years prior to that.

Her job now provides no healthcare and no benefits. She finally qualified for MinnesotaCare.

Renee has two majors with two degrees.

"I should be more employable, but I'm not," she said.

She is \$11,000 deeper in debt and tries to make everything work on \$500 a month income.

"I'm doing what I should be doing, but I can't get ahead," said Renee.

· Judy works a couple of jobs. She works many hours a week, but is being forced to file bankruptcy.

Judy makes too much money to be eligible for Minnesota Care, but not enough money to afford insurance and the two jobs she works at do not provide insurance.

"I have no cable, no Internet, I don't go to McDonalds. I do everything right, I work hard and I still get no where," she lamented.

· Doug served for 14 months overseas and became disabled.

While he was on active duty, his income was cut in half and he only brought home about \$1500 a month. His house payment, which had been calculated on his income when not on active duty, was \$1500 a month.

It took 16 months for him to get disability and his house is now in foreclosure.



While serving overseas, Doug said that much of his gear he had to purchase himself. He was issued an M-9 with one clip and one box of shells. He had no holster for his weapon and had to purchase one. Doug participated in 257 combat missions.

"That doesn't work with one box of shells," he said.

He was young and strong and now suffers from a traumatic brain injury. He served his country and now can't make ends meet and is losing his home.

· David's wife made the money in his family. When she was killed three and a half years ago, his income diminished to his disability income which is \$941 a month. After his bills, he has \$41 a month to live on.

David didn't know what to do about paying for his heating fuel this year so when he was offered a no interest/no payments for 12 months credit card with a \$1700 credit line, he used that to secure \$1700 worth of fuel.

"I don't know how I am going to pay it back," he said.

· Rachel was born in poverty and continues to live that way today. She has three children.

"I don't know how to get out of it (poverty)," she said. "Show me, tell me what I need to do. These houses look like mine," she said picking up one of the photos on the table and looking at it.

She said she was able to get fuel assistance which pays for about 50% of her heating costs.

"But we keep turning it down so we don't use as much, so we get less assistance each year."

- Darlis is a volunteer driver. She drove 600 miles last month. She wondered how she could continue to do this volunteer work (she gets mileage paid) and yet make enough money to make some ends meet.

- Marge is on a fixed income. Her income doesn't go up, but her rent does.

- Maria has five children. She said it is difficult to get help, even for her children who were born in the United States.

Maria said she pays high rent and that three other families live in the same house as she and her family. Each family is charged the whole rent.

After the citizen presenters spoke, some people from the business community spoke.

First was Alex Weego. He talked about the obstacles facing the county. He said that the county continues to be largely ag based. However, in talking to one of the Hewitt mail route drivers he was told that on this particular route, 27 years ago there were 160 dairy farms. Now there are 12.

Dr. Susan Wasson also spoke about her experiences serving this rural area for the past five and a half years.

Some of the legislators were so impressed with Dr. Wasson's handling of her practice that they invited her to come to speak to the health committee in February. When she said she wasn't sure she could get away, Senator Dan Skogen said they would bring the committee to her.

Wasson felt that the problem in Minnesota wasn't insurance or the lack of it, but that healthcare is "just too blasted expensive."

The legislature is on a one year mission. During the 2009 legislative session, recommendations will be given for ending poverty in Minnesota.