

# WEST CENTRAL TRIBUNE *Online*

## Commission hopes tour sheds light on poverty

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WILLMAR — Being poor, and unable to afford decent housing, is one reason why victims of domestic assault often return to their abusive partners.

Usually women will return to the batterer seven times because they can't afford to live on their own, said Sharon Mace, the advocacy programs coordinator for Shelter House Inc. in Willmar.

Mace told members of the Legislative Commission to End Poverty by 2020 that more affordable housing is necessary in rural communities like Willmar and that transitional housing "would be like a dream come true."

Without affordable housing, women trying to escape domestic abuse are at risk of being homeless or living in substandard conditions that aren't healthy for the woman or her children, said Mace, who had the ear of the 18-member legislative group during a tour Wednesday.

Established by the Legislature in 2006, the commission spent Wednesday touring Meeker and Kandiyohi counties. Under state law they are charged with making recommendations for how to end poverty by 2020.

They will use a set of "guiding principles" that includes the tenet that "things that protect human dignity and makes for a healthy life, including adequate food and shelter, meaningful work, safe communities, health care and education" should be provided to "all people."

Sen. Steve Dille, R-Dassel, said the goal is laudable but not realistic.

"Frankly, I think this is an impossible goal. To eliminate poverty by the year 2020 — can't do it," Dille said.

What the state can do, Dille said, is help raise up those living on the bottom of the economic spectrum and decrease the poverty rate. One of the best ways to do that, Dille said, is to improve education.

Low-wage jobs, inadequate housing, transportation issues and rising costs for health care and food all present challenges that make it difficult for families to afford the "basic needs" of life, said commission member Sen. Scott Dibble, DFL-Minneapolis.

The commission members have toured rural and urban areas. "Folks who are struggling with issues around poverty have a lot in common all over the entire state," he said.

Deb Brandt, from Heartland Community Action Agency in Willmar, said some components of poverty that exist in urban areas are "magnified" in rural areas.

Brandt, who accompanied the legislators during the day-long tour that included going to about a half-dozen different communities, said the metro lawmakers got a firsthand look at how many miles people living in small towns have to travel to get to their jobs.

And, Brandt said, those jobs may pay \$8 to \$9 an hour, leaving \$5 to \$6 an hour as take-home pay.

"A lot of people are working and they're still poor," Dibble said.

One crisis can "launch a family living on the limits" into an economic disaster, he said. "It seems as if something has changed in our society that when people fall into poverty, it's more difficult for them to get out."

Dille said higher-paying jobs are needed.

Brandt said a business owner in Buffalo Lake told the legislators that he would like to pay his workers more, but he has to protect his bottom line and can't afford to pay workers more than \$8 an hour.

While traveling on the tour bus Wednesday, Brandt said legislators heard from several Willmar students about growing up in poverty. They did not have money for computers or extracurricular activities and sometimes had to miss school to take care of a sick sibling so that their parents could go to work.

"They eloquently spoke from their hearts. They had us all in tears," Brandt said.

New immigrants who are trying to improve their economic standards are taking chances and opening new businesses in Willmar.

There are currently 36 ethnic businesses in downtown Willmar, said Roberto Valdez Jr., coordinator for the Willmar Area Multicultural Market.

Some of those immigrant entrepreneurs need a financial boost to get started, and new residents may need education about the economic culture of this country that could help address poverty issues, said Abdi Duh, executive director of the Coalition of African Community Services Center in Willmar.

Duh showed legislators seven new ethnic businesses that opened within the past five months in the Centre Point Mall in downtown Willmar. The lawmakers also got a quick look at the mosque in the upper level of the mall. Duh said there are nearly 3,100 East Africans currently living in Willmar.

Dibble said legislators "won't come up with the magic solution from St. Paul" to eliminate poverty. Some of the current successes are happening because of community programs and support.