

Daily Globe

Group aims to put end to poverty

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WORTHINGTON — Four members of Minnesota’s Legislative Commission to End Poverty by 2020 visited Worthington Friday to hear southwest Minnesotans speak about their experiences in and with poverty and the government programs that deal with it.

“My definition of poverty is when you’re so low that you run into this tunnel and you can’t find your way out and there’s no light at the end,” said Madeline Vander Wol of Slayton, whose four children attended the Southwestern Minnesota Opportunity Council’s Head Start program.

Vander Wol was one of several people to tell their stories to commission members Rep. Morrie Lanning, Sen. John Marty, Gregory Gray and Donna Bauer.

The image of someone in poverty is often someone who doesn’t have an education or who cannot think for themselves, Vander Wol said, but she already had a bachelor’s degree in social work when she needed help.

She also had four children and lived on a farm with only 100 dairy cows that had to support the entire family. The children had severe food allergies that forced Vander Wol to spend \$30 a day just on formula for one baby. Although Vander Wol herself was willing to try to find help for her children, her husband worried about the social stigma of asking for it.

Eventually Vander Wol received assistance from SMOC’s Head Start, even though she had already been refused by the welfare program. Head Start was there for the family, Vander Wol said, not just the children.

“Sometimes poverty is just (for) a season,” Vander Wol said. “For me, it was.”

Through involvement with Head Start, she became interested in early childhood education and went back to school to get licensed to teach. Vander Wol’s family no longer needs assistance — their situation was only temporary.

Jessica Zuniga’s encounter with poverty in Worthington was also temporary. She found herself pregnant, desperately poor and essentially homeless. After receiving help from SMOC and a Habitat for Humanity home, she started working for SMOC and now her family needs no assistance.

A refugee from Eritrea spoke about his experience with poverty through a translator, noting that he was receiving job training and taking English classes. SMOC helped him have hope for the future.

Others at the meeting stated their concern that poverty-related issues seen as urban issues would increasingly become rural issues as people migrate from the Metro area to rural Minnesota in search of jobs and cheaper housing.

Financial assistance for childcare was another issue people were concerned about, as well as the availability of childcare in general.

Sen. Jim Vickerman asked the Commission to look into veterans’ poverty issues.

After the meeting at SMOC, the commission headed to SMOC’s Head Start and then to the Manna Food Pantry, where they learned about the programs and facilities available to the poor.

The Legislative Commission to End Poverty by 2020 also visited St. Peter, Mankato, St. James, Windom, Mountain Lake, Jackson and Marshall.