

Welcome to the State of Poverty; Understanding Families in Poverty

Situation: According to 2000 Census data, 8.7% of Wisconsin citizens and 10.8% of Wisconsin children are in poverty. In many more households, incomes are considered above the poverty line but are still low enough to qualify families for government assistance programs such as Food Share and Badger Care. The economic downturn is contributing increased stress for families and increased use of emergency food resources.

In Door County a record number of 617 families are currently receiving Food Share. That number represents five percent of all families in Door County and nearly seven percent of families with children. The pre-buy cost of propane has risen to \$2.89 per gallon compared to \$1.99 per gallon last year for those families who can afford pre-buy contracts; oil is priced at more than \$3.00 per gallon. Propane and oil are the primary heating sources for homes located in mostly rural Door County. Many families have been unable to meet rising energy costs and nearly 600 families have applied for limited energy assistance funds. The Lakeshore CAP food pantry, one of two pantries serving the county, served 298 households in September. For the first time, Sawyer Elementary School in Sturgeon Bay has indicated that more than half of their students are free or reduced lunch eligible.

Poverty is a serious but often overlooked concern in Door County which is promoted nationally as a family vacation destination. County government is the largest single employer in the county. The bulk of other jobs are in the service sector, many of which are seasonal employment. Per capita income in 2000 was \$21,356; the median rent was \$481. Adding to woes of workers is the lack of any public transportation in the county. Those with vehicles struggle with fuel costs, often among the highest in the state. Growing numbers of families continue to be invisible as they fall further behind in their struggle to provide basic needs for their families.

Response: Door County Family Living Programs and WNEP partnered to deliver a poverty simulation program, an experiential learning activity which helped participants understand what it might be like to live in a low-income family trying to survive from month to month. The goal was to sensitize participants to the realities faced by low-income people and dispel some of the myths about people in poverty. Participants then experienced a “poverty” or “higher income” lunch activity. Afternoon breakout sessions included making ends meet, food insecurity, class/race issues and poverty, and building bridges from schools to community followed by a call to action; personal, agency and community action planning to address poverty.

Results: Eighteen area agencies displayed resource exhibits; 56 individuals including a County Board member and the County Administrator participated in the poverty simulation. An additional 139 teachers and school personnel attended luncheon activities and afternoon breakout sessions (195 total).

Evidence: Using a pre-post retrospective evaluation, on a scale of 1 (no understanding) to 5 (almost complete understanding), 100 percent of participants reported “quite a bit” or

“almost complete” understanding of the financial pressures faced by low income families *after* the workshop, a 50 percent increase from *before*. Ninety-eight percent reported “quite a bit” or “almost complete” understanding of the difficult choices low income families need to make each month *after* the workshop compared to 43 percent *before*. Ninety-eight percent reported “quite a bit” or “almost complete” understanding of the emotional stresses and frustrations created by having limited resources *after* the workshop compared to 45 percent *before*. Sixty-nine percent of participants indicated the workshop motivated them to take action to alleviate poverty in the community and created personal action plans.

Comments from workshop participants included:

This workshop is absolutely necessary for “policy makers.”

This workshop was excellent, although not necessarily pleasant!

Great activity – engage business people.

Excellent ideas! Do again with clergy!

This was an eye opener.

This experience was incredibly valuable: it increased my awareness of the accumulation of small daily decisions that affect the whole life of a person in poverty.

In response to “As a result of this program what changes in your work will you make that will help you better reach individuals and families in poverty,” participants made the following comments:

Reconsider fees.

Try to eliminate the ‘run around’ as much as possible.

Recognize that some ‘excuses’ are actually reasons.

Be more sensitive to transportation issues.

Look closely at our requests for money from families.

Longer hours to be more accessible.

Perhaps even more important than how the program was rated or comments from individuals was an opportunity to reach a new audience with poverty education. A school principal who attended the poverty simulation requested the simulation be presented to all staff at her elementary school which found this year that 58 percent of their students are free and reduced lunch eligible. In order to reach all of the staff at the school, the poverty simulation will have to be presented a minimum of twice.

As a follow-up activity, a book read/discussion of *Nickel and Dimed* by Barbara Ehrenreich was held approximately six weeks after to the poverty workshop. Eighteen individuals participated in the discussion including elected officials and an area attorney. Additional activities including a hunger coalition are being planned to continue the community discussion about how to address the issues that affect poverty in Door County.

WELCOME TO THE STATE OF POVERTY

Understanding Families in Poverty



October 1, 2008
Bay View Lutheran Church
340 W. Maple Street, Sturgeon Bay

Call to Action

Introduction

The poverty simulation, luncheon program and breakout session portions of the program focused on experiencing what it feels like to live in poverty, raising awareness of issues and building skills to address poverty. The Call to Action segment provided an opportunity to focus energy into an engaged, active response and move participants from poverty awareness to community engagement.

Learning Objectives

Participants will:

1. Identify and learn about community resources/initiatives with which they can become involved. (*Network Building*)
2. Commit to personal, workplace and/or community action steps. (*Action*)

Participants were asked to respond to the following:

- What are some of the things you can do to address poverty individually, in your workplace or in the community?
- What can you do to increase awareness and understanding regarding poverty on these three levels?
- How could it help you become an advocate for low-income individuals?
- Are there some workplace or community-level action steps you could take?

Community

Participate in Give Kids a Smile Program

Encourage dentists to volunteer at Open Door Dental Clinic

Education about poverty issues

- utilize cable TV
- programs in the community for general public

Support Transportation Consortium (encourage requests to document need)

Shift focus of fund raising

Agency/Organization

Promote utilization of free/reduced lunch programs
Work to reduce stigma associated with poverty
Collect supplies needed by other agencies/organizations
Promote wish lists and program needs
Encourage/promote volunteer opportunities and needs
UW-Extension partner with Loaves & Fishes to promote most efficient use of limited food dollars
Participate in Hunger Coalition
Develop resource libraries/displays
Make connections/collaborate with other agencies to avoid supplication/address common goals
Share info on events/programs
Educate through a variety of methods
Share statistics and info with elected officials
Distribute “Other Side of the Door” video/share video with staff
Promote use of DoorTran
Fundraising for programming needs (change the focus i.e. donors eager to fund a building or something “with their name on it” – need to understand the importance of funding programs and that impact to the community can be greater than just creating another building/facility)
Review agency policies to identify barriers/attitudes regarding families in poverty

Individual

Promote utilization of free/reduced lunch programs
Donate supplies/money/time to Altrusa Back to School Program
Volunteer to serve/prepare meals at Loaves & Fishes
Participate in book discussions
Join Hunger Coalition
Realize poverty exists in Door County, sensitize/educate others
Call to request transportation assistance (DoorTran, Red Cross, etc so need can be tracked)

Sponsored by:
Children's Services Network &

UW
Extension