
Family Living Programs

Poverty Simulation Works: Raising Awareness, Spurring Community Action

Situation

According to 2000 Census data, 8.7 percent of Wisconsin citizens and 10.8 percent 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 stamps and Badgercare health insurance. In total, over one-fifth of our population, or more than one million Wisconsin citizens, are considered to be in poverty or low income.

There are indications that the situations faced by low-income families may be getting worse. Statewide unemployment rates are increasing—5.6 percent in 2003 compared to 3.0 percent in 1999ⁱ. Families are seeking help. For example, participation in the state's food stamp program increased 82 percent between Oct 1999 and Oct 2004ⁱⁱ. This increase ranks among the largest in the nation. And emergency food providers, such as food pantries, report that demand is at an all-time high.

Increasingly, the face of poverty is that of the working poor. From 1989 to 1999, the share of poor households in Wisconsin with at least one employed worker grew from 50.2 percent to 53.0 percent. In 2001, more than one in five Wisconsin workers earned poverty-level wages, or wages too low for a full-time worker to support a family of three above the poverty lineⁱⁱⁱ.

Response

County-based UW-Extension educators develop and facilitate education programs in local communities to meet a variety of community needs, and are therefore well-suited to assist communities as they seek to understand and address poverty issues.

Throughout Wisconsin, UW-Extension has facilitated over 75 local poverty awareness programs reaching more than 4,000 people using the ROWEL Poverty Simulation, a program created by the Reform Organization of Welfare (ROWEL) Education Association of Missouri. This poverty simulation experience is designed to help participants begin to understand what it might be like to be part of a typical low-income family trying to survive from month to month. In a simulation, participants are put in the position of role-playing a low-income family member with various resources and barriers scripted for them. For example, they may play a single mother with two children, no cash and very few assets. The simulation families move through a condensed "month" of poverty consisting of four, 15-minute weeks.

Typical poverty simulation participants are staff or volunteers from agencies and organizations that serve low-income people. Sensitizing these individuals to issues faced in poverty results in better understanding and changes in programming that can benefit low-income families.

Outcomes

This program clearly benefits local communities, playing an important role in increasing awareness about the situation for individuals in poverty. Survey results show striking increases in understanding of the difficulties and stresses faced by individuals in poverty. The simulation programs reach a large number of people who work with low-income individuals. Typically, participants are professionals or volunteers from local human service agencies, food pantries, job centers, health departments, social workers, and may also include local elected officials, clergy, business owners, educators, school administrators, and others. Community professionals and volunteers say that the experience is an "eye opener," and overwhelmingly say they are very satisfied with the experience and would strongly recommend it to others.

The experience provides a jumping off point for community action to address poverty issues. One community formed a network to meet and discuss resources and needs of people in poverty in their own community. Another community took the momentum gained from the simulation and conducted training to provide skill development to help staff work more effectively with low-income people.

For me to go through this, it really made me aware. I just can't imagine getting up in the morning getting out of bed and going through that struggle again.

It helped increase my awareness to the emotional toll that it takes...many, many people who seek out these services are embarrassed, frustrated.

Post-event participant surveys were administered and summary results were collected from a sample of seven counties, with a total of 562 respondents. Results clearly showed an increase in understanding of situations faced by low-income people.

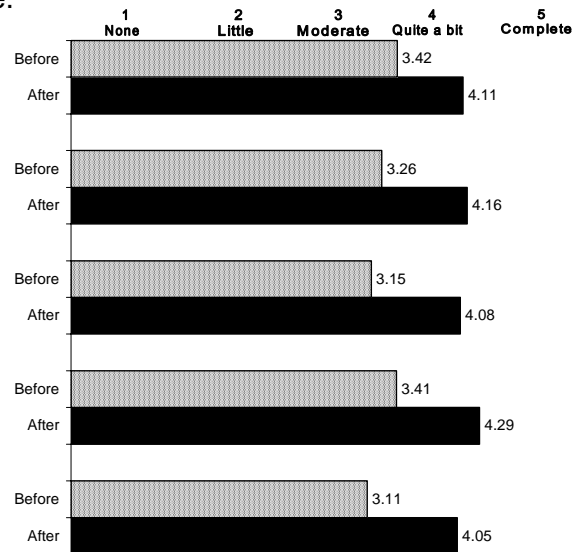
My understanding of the financial pressures faced by low income families in meeting basic needs.

My understanding of the difficult choices people with low resources need to make each month when stretching limited income.

My understanding of the difficulties in improving one's situation and becoming self-sufficient on a limited income.

My understanding of the emotional stresses and frustrations created by having limited resources.

The positive and negative impacts of "helpers" on people with limited resources.



Focus group interviews were conducted three to 12 months after individuals had participated in a simulation to identify long-term impacts of participation in this program. Findings include:

- The poverty simulation increased participants' awareness and understanding of the situation of individuals in poverty.
- The poverty simulation changed the way individuals related to low income families.
- Participants offered a wide range of ideas for "next steps" that could be taken in the community to address the plight of individuals in poverty.

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ⁱ Wisconsin Department of Workforce Development, Local Area Unemployment Statistics

ⁱⁱ Wisconsin Department of Health and Family Services. Eligibility Management Data Warehouse

ⁱⁱⁱ Dresser, Laura, and Joel Rogers. 2002. The State of Working Wisconsin. Madison, WI: Center on Wisconsin Strategy: <http://www.cows.org/current/soww.asp>