

COPE program offers participants a taste of poverty

The Cost of Poverty Experience, known as COPE, at Pine Street Elementary School gave participants a simulated first-hand view from below the poverty line

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Gene Simmers, left, background, and Chuck Yasinski of Palmyra discuss their family strategy. Meanwhile, another simulated family portrayed by Vicki DeLoatch, vice president of finance and marketing at Lebanon Family Health Services, and Matt Wickenheiser of Palmyra, determine how they will pay their bills. (Lebanon Daily News — Barbara West)



Bad news for this family, which is in danger of being evicted and has been dealt a fate card. Families received random notices like this throughout the COPE simulation. (Lebanon Daily News — Barbara West)

PALMYRA >> It was only a test — a thought-provoking, humbling, heart-breaking test, in the words of participants.

"This has opened my eyes. The blinders are off," Karen Lynch, a second-grade teacher at Palmyra Area School District's Forge Road Elementary School, admitted after completing the Cost of Poverty Experience simulation Saturday morning at the Pine Street Elementary School. "I knew there were needy people, but I didn't know that the needs were so great." More than 40 participants spent a simulated month living in poverty during the workshop, jointly sponsored by the Caring Cupboard of Palmyra, Palmyra Circles of Lebanon County and Jonestown Bank and Trust.

It was also an exercise to challenge their perceptions of the poor.

"Poverty is a national issue, and it has local dimensions. One in five families is doing without in some way," said Lee Smedley, coordinator of the Palmyra Circles of Lebanon County program. "These are not lazy people. They are people who have a job. The purpose (of the simulation) is to understand moment by moment what that life is like."

Participants were assigned an identity for a character within a family unit. For most of the participants, there were many unfamiliar challenges as they juggled home and family in a low- or no-income household during an accelerated month-long simulation.



Marilyn Baker, a volunteer with Caring Cupboard and Palmyra Circles, explains to participants in the COPE workshop that it's not just the people who fall under the poverty level that need help. (Lebanon Daily News — Barbara West)

The ringing of bells every 15 minutes, which added to the pressure felt by the participants, signaled the end of a simulated week.

Unless fortunate enough to have a vehicle and gas money, participants were required to get a bus or walking passes.

Patience became a major challenge as they encountered long lines for employment, public assistance or to register with their parole officer at the various stations set up on the cafeteria's perimeter.

One woman admitted mounting frustration caused her temper to flare at the banking station, and she apologized for it.

It was a stressful education for everyone as they learned how and where to apply for needed assistance.

And the consequences for failing to follow the steps in the application procedure in the proper order meant you didn't qualify for food or other aid. Many found it an exhausting juggling act. And sometimes, they dropped the ball.

No amount of pleading with the judge was enough to keep Laura Whitman's character, Jessica 4, out of (simulated) jail.

"It's a big mix-up," the Ono woman explained, "I missed my probation appointment because I was trying to deposit my paycheck, and then I had to go to the pawn shop. Now I'm in jail, and by two kids are at school."

A college student majoring in social work, Whitman referred to the workshop as a valuable experience since she's encountered clients with similar problems.

"I'm getting a sample of the stress my clients experience," she admitted. "It wears on you, and I've just done this for a short time.

There were signs that some were learning to adapt. By the time the fourth week rolled around, participants were anticipating the ringing of the bell, ready to spring out of their seats to be the first at the head of the line.

"Environment has a big impact on how we behave," Smedley said. "In these circumstances, we do things we never would imagine."

So how did the simulated families fare during their month of poverty?

The system, most agreed, appeared to offer more obstacles than assistance.

On the positive side, one group managed to help their neighbors while living in poverty themselves. A group, associated with the Church of the Brethren, managed to share money with another group in need.

However, none of the groups managed to purchase groceries every week or make their loan payments on time. One family was evicted. Few were able to meet their health-care needs, and a few had emergency health situations arise during the simulation.

Chuck Yasinski's character was unable to afford his seizure medication and had to sit out the first five minutes of the second week of the simulation. Yasinski, who registered for the workshop after receiving an email from the Palmyra Area School District, set out to learn more about the struggles of the poor and homeless.

"I've driven through Harrisburg and have seen people living in tents. It's always left an impression on me," the Palmyra man explained. "I've wondered what they go through; what their lives are like. As a member of this community, it makes me want to learn how I can help."

No stranger to helping those in need, the Rev. Denise Founds of the Campbelltown United Methodist Church was deeply touched by what she encountered in the simulation.

"I realize that these people are desperate, and it breaks my heart," Founds admitted. "How difficult it is for these people to be literally begging for this food."

And as Marilyn Baker, a volunteer with Caring Cupboard and Palmyra Circles, reinforced, it's not just the people who fall within poverty level that have a need for assistance.

"There are many 'near poor' people here; those just making from paycheck to paycheck," Baker said.

As people continued to inquire how they could help make a difference for families for whom poverty is a reality, Smedley was notably pleased. "What touches me and gives me goosebumps is that none of these people were required to come here," he says. "They felt compelled to come and do something positive."