

Community members aim to understand poverty through simulation

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(Photo: Laura Schulte/USA TODAY NETWORK-Wisconsin)

WAUSAU - A family in poverty is routinely faced with impossible choices: Buy groceries or pay the gas bill. Pay rent or buy school supplies.

Those were the sorts of choices a poverty simulation held Wednesday afternoon at G.D. Jones Elementary School was designed to demonstrate.

Participants moved from station to station at the event, paying bills, buying groceries and taking children to school. The poverty simulation was held by the Wausau School District, the North Central Area Congregations Organized to Make an Impact and the University of Wisconsin-Extension office, with the goal of immersing participants in a month of the life of a family or individual dealing with poverty.

About 20 people participated in the simulation, including teachers from the Wausau School District, who were there to help get a better understanding of what some of their students face daily.

Some simulated "families" were caring for multiple children. Some went through job layoffs, and some had an incarcerated member. Others had high medical bills that conflicted with their home mortgage. But the reason behind the simulation was the same for every participant, said Jackie Carattini, the family living agent from the UW-Extension: to try to understand poverty.

"We're raising awareness and encouraging empathy," Carattini said. "If you can give a glimpse, you're going to be a little more empathetic."

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The simulation put participants together in families, each member with different roles. The participants had one hour, broken up into 15-minute segments that represented one week. During the four weeks,

children went to school, parents went to work, bills came due and food had to be bought. Thrown in throughout were chance cards, which brought either good or bad fortunes to each family.

"It gave you insight," said Abby Reeder, who teaches music at Maine and Grant Elementary Schools. "You felt the frustration and stress of the situation."

In Marathon County, about 10 percent of the population is in poverty, according to the Applied Population Lab report from 2014. By measures that include the working poor and those families whose financial stability is fragile, it is more than one-third of Marathon County's population, according to a 2016 report by the United Way of Marathon County. And there are six schools in the Wausau School District with 50 percent or more of the students using the free or reduced-cost lunch programs.

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"It made me think twice about what (the kids) are experiencing at home," said Christa Savage, a speech and language pathologist for Stettin Elementary and John Muir Middle School. She said she'd look differently in the future at why a child is acting up. It could be because she only gets one meal a day, or because he's worried his parents are going to lose the family home.

"It was eye-opening," said Amanda Melville, a school psychologist for Thomas Jefferson and South Mountain elementary schools. "We had to problem-solve instead of just taking notes like we usually do."

The UW-Extension plans to continue hosting simulations for the community. Carattini hopes it also inspires people to help create solutions in the community.

"We're just trying to plant that little seed," she said.

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Want to learn more about poverty? Take part in a poverty simulation.

When: 1 p.m. Aug. 22

Where: Riverview Elementary School, 4303 Troy St.

What: Walk in the shoes of a family struggling with poverty for a one hour simulation, followed by community conversation.

How to register: Email scharbar@wausauschools.org. All participants must pre-register.