

## **Simulation gives people a taste of life in poverty - 'It's important we know who we are serving so we can understand them'**

Suzi Gantz of Antioch is a retired Chicago Public Schools teacher now on the board of the Mother's Trust Foundation who thought she knew something about the challenges facing people living below the **poverty** line.

Then Gantz participated in a 90-minute simulation and realized she had much more to learn about those situations than purchasing school supplies out of her pocket for the youngsters in her classroom.

"Being a brat from the northern suburbs, I didn't grow up knowing anything about what we learned," Gantz, a Skokie native who raised her children in Northbrook, said. "You have to have a lot of help to navigate the system."

After the simulation, Francisco Garcia, a risk manager for a bank who lives in Waukegan, said he realized there were many more situations which could befall a person or family than he encountered in the session.

"I left thinking, what can I do to help," Garcia said. "I could volunteer, contribute and be a very educated voter so I know the (candidate) is going to be an advocate for our people."

Garcia and Gantz were among more than 50 people participating in a **poverty** simulation conducted by the Grayslake-based Alliance for Human Services Oct. 22 in Lake Forest designed to give participants a feel for a situation where help is necessary to get food, shelter and more.

Gayle Nelson, the alliance's executive director, said the simulation is offered to build knowledge and empathy for people who do not comprehend the challenges faced by individuals who must take a bus to pay a utility bill because they do not have a bank account doing automatic transactions.

Nelson said the alliance is composed of not-for-profit organizations in the area such as Mothers Trust and HACES, where Garcia's wife works. Each participant was given a role to play within a small group.

While in groups, Nelson said they had to navigate things like homelessness or the challenge of getting to a food pantry or grocery store to get nourishment. The participants went through a month of **poverty** in the 90-minute span. There was never enough income for basic needs.

Fear of institutions is also a problem. Nelson said people choose not to have a bank account because they are afraid of fees which might be withdrawn by the institution. Instead they cash their check at a currency exchange, where they have to pay fees.

"It's important we know who we are serving so we can understand them," Nelson said. "So often volunteers do not understand what it is like to live in **poverty**. We want to support them, not judge them."

Gantz said she played the role of a 15-year-old girl living with her mother, father and a grandfather who was a stroke victim. Before the simulation was over, family members experienced what happens when money runs out before needs are met.

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"My job was to go to school," Gantz said. "When I wasn't in school, I worked. I handed my pay to my parents. One time my mom said, 'There's no food because the line (for food stamps) was too long and I had to take care of Grandpa.' At least I got breakfast and lunch at school."

Other issues Gantz said people experienced included not having the money to pay for transportation to work when they had a job, or going without food for a period of time because a loved one had to be bailed out of jail.

Garcia said in his simulation, he was living in a shelter with his girlfriend and her child. He had a child with a previous partner. He had a job. His take-home pay was \$128 a week because the check was being garnished for child support.

Though they made the choice for her not to work, Garcia said the situation had its benefits and detriments. Her job was getting them out of the shelter and into a permanent home, while he did maintenance work at a cafeteria.

"My job was going to work," Garcia said. "Her job was taking care of everything else like finding a place to live. I don't know how we could have done all that if she worked. We would have had to find child care."

Though there are social services which provide assistance to those below the **poverty** line, helping with food and rent, people must learn how to navigate the system. Once done, the challenge is staying out of **poverty** without the help.

"Once you're above the **poverty** line, those resources go away," Garcia said. "Without them, people fall back below the **poverty** line. They are in and out. That's important for the community to realize."

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