Poverty Simulation

On May 12, 2011, a Poverty Simulation Workshop was held in Nashville. The event was sponsored by Catholic Charities of Tennessee, the Jewish Federation of Nashville Tennessee and Metropolitan Social Services, for Nashville's Poverty Reduction Initiative. The Poverty Simulation was designed to sensitize us to the day to day realities of life faced by low-income people, and to motivate us to become involved in activities to help reduce poverty in our community and beyond.

During a simulation, it is the responsibility of participants who are in "families" to provide food, shelter and other basic necessities, while interacting with various community resources staffed by volunteers.

The participants experience one month (represented by four 15-minute weeks) in the "State of Poverty."

During the simulation, they pay bills and transportation; buy food, medicine, child care; go to work or school. As they would experience in real life, they have limited time and resources to try to get what their family needs.

Quotes from Participants

"The Poverty Simulation helped me see that people trapped in poverty are generally there because of a combination of forces. Thus, it will take a combination of efforts to help break the cycle – the primary of which seems to be improved public education." *(Carter R. Todd, Metro Council District #34)*

"Taking part in the Poverty Simulation helped me recognize that we are all affected by poverty and we are all responsible for helping to fix the problem." *(Don Leyrer, Consultant/ Social Entrepreneur)*

Before the simulation began, volunteers received training on how to play the roles of people who often interact with persons who live in poverty.

These volunteers represented: quick cash, interfaith agency, child care agency, school, jail, social service office, employers, utility company, mortgage company, bank, community action agency and pawn shop.

On behalf of Nashville's Poverty Reduction Implementation Initiative, Chairman Howard Gentry welcomed the participants to the recent Poverty Simulation.

"Families" tried to determine how they could get what they need without having adequate resources.

Sometimes they received "luck of the draw" cards to simulate unexpected events.

Participants become “families.” Each family was assigned specific resources, possessions and income. Participants were also assigned gender, age and roles.

Participant “families” reviewed the time and resource limitations imposed on them in their role as low-income people who needed services in the simulation.

The “families” used their limited resources trying to keep their homes secure, feed their families, keep utilities on, make loan payments and pay for miscellaneous expenses.

As “families” used their resources, some began to realize that their limited resources would not meet their basic needs.

Some had other barriers, including lack of transportation, unaffordable child care, lack of documentation, exorbitant fees and charges.

As their 15-minute weeks end, many began the next week even further behind than they were in the previous week.

Poverty Simulation

Some “family” members played the roles of students. Sometimes the students are in class, but other times they may be truant or on vacation from school. For parents who were working or seeking employment, they needed child care.

Families had to consider that a child who has not eaten all day would cry and complain, and that healthy teenagers would not like to sit quietly at home.

After the completion of four 15-minute “weeks,” participants and volunteers had a debriefing session to discuss their experiences and their feelings.

Participants described their experiences in various ways, including having feelings of anger, depravation, resentment, inadequacy and disappointment.

Volunteer agency representatives were often seen by participants as uncooperative, unreasonable and inflexible. In a few situations, the participants noted cooperation and compassion from the agency representatives.

Considering that these strong reactions were described after only one hour of role playing, it underscores the circumstances of those who experience it day after day and year after year.

A brief video of the Poverty Simulation Workshop is at this link:

http://www.nashville.gov/sservices/videos/poverty_simul.asp

Poverty Simulation

Although the simulation uses "play" money and fictional scenarios, it is not a game.

It is a tool that enables participants to view poverty from multiple per-spectives.

It helps participants and volunteers to have a better understanding of what is faced by their neighbors who live in poverty.

The Poverty Simulation does not represent the worst or best circumstances, but are average situations based on real scenarios.

As the 15-minute "weeks" continue, some of the volunteers who play "agency representatives" experience interactions with "family" members who have become resentful or impatient.

"Family" members encounter "agency representative" volunteers who are sometimes uncooperative, absent or rude.

Special thanks to Catholic Charities of Tennessee and the Jewish Federation of Nashville and Middle Tennessee for working with Metropolitan Social Services to host the May 12, 2011 Poverty Simulation.

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