



The Sun

Your light on the Hummelstown, Hershey and Palmyra community

July 3, 2014

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Could You COPE?

Palmyra Challenge
By Aura Hill



Keith and Casey Two with Parole Officer

Keith and Casey Two, parents of 10-year-old Cathy and 2-year-old Christy, are struggling to make ends meet. Having been incarcerated for three years, Keith is unemployed despite having his continued search for a job that will hire him with his prison record. Other than checking in weekly with his parole officer, he helps out at home and provides most of the daycare for his younger daughter.

His wife, Casey, is a full-time secretary earning \$900 a month; she attends night school in hopes of obtaining a better paying job.

They live in a two-bedroom home purchased from family and own a car. With a \$367 allotment in food

stamps, their monthly income is \$1,267. Monthly expenses of house payment, gas, food and clothing are \$1,310 per month.

You do the math.

Keith and Casey, the personas adopted by Matt Wickenheiser and Vicki Deloatch of Lebanon County, are only two of the nearly 40 players in the Cost of Poverty Experience (COPE) simulation that took place Saturday, June 7, at Palmyra's Pine Street Elementary School. The simulation, jointly sponsored by Palmyra Circles of Lebanon County, Caring Cupboard of Palmyra and Jonestown Bank and Trust, allowed participants to experience the day-to-day challenges those living in poverty and near poverty face in any given month.

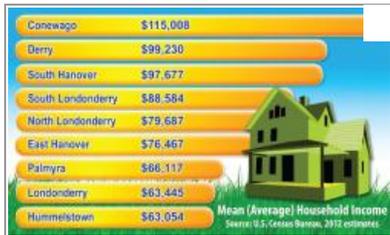
Participants received identities and a profile of employment, health and other features of typical families. In a compressed timeframe, they had face-to-face interactions about public transportation, social services, finances, employment, food and shelter, and in the process, developed a new awareness of what living in poverty or near poverty feels like.

"We were stuck in a situation," Loatch said. "It was upsetting and challenging. I was always having to re-prioritize as things piled up."

The simulation took two hours, with each 15-minute segment representing a week. Weekly and monthly tasks such as paying bills, visiting parole officer, attending school, shopping for necessities, working, and visiting social service agencies all sapped the families' time and money for the week. Unplanned obstacles, like having electricity shut off, further contributed to the stress

Deloatch said she ultimately pawned many of the family's belongings to have money enough to buy food but with all the requirements to meet, the family did not have an opportunity to shop for food for three of the four weeks.

"I was frustrated, felt as if I was not in control and at the mercy of others," Wickenheiser said. "With probation and other agency needs, you have to do things in order, but to do so, you stand in lines, burning up time. You are not able to do what you must to get ahead."



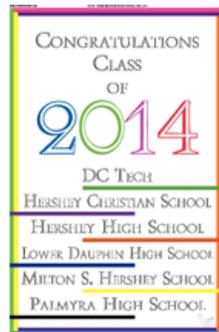
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"I grew up in a middle class family in Palmyra. I had blinders on," Karen Good, a teacher in Palmyra Area School District, said. "I didn't know how much poverty was here and it wasn't just about getting the money. Things kept piling up effecting the family unit," she said. "This helped me to realize the feelings of the family unit."

"Poverty is national but it has a local face," Smedley said. "One in five families in Lebanon County are doing without. One in five families make less than \$25,000."

Doug Knepp, another Palmyra teacher, also took away new insight.

"As teachers, we tend to make generalized judgments about kids and their families. My family in this simulation had real problems – finances, mental health. I tried to deal with it, busting my butt, and at the same time my kids were trickling away, doing marijuana. I realized that in a month, I never talked with my kids."

For more information about COPE and Palmyra Circles, go to www.palmyracircles.org or contact Smedley at lee@palmyracircles.org

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