

Do Good Roseville hosts poverty simulation, taking experiential approach to empathy

By: [Bridget Kranz](#)

Responding to an increasingly visible homeless community and talk of an affordable housing crisis, the nonprofit Do Good Roseville hosted its first poverty simulation for residents and elected officials.

Attendees assumed the identity of under-resourced families, attempting to make decisions that would keep them sheltered and fed for a simulated month, represented by four 15-minute weeks.

Participants arrived at Roseville Area High School the morning of March 30 to find clusters of folding chairs in the center of the school's cafeteria. They were given a role and asked to take their assigned seat at one of the groupings, which represented households of one to five people.

Lining the perimeter of the simulation were tables that acted as different locations within the community: an employer, a school, a supermarket and a pawnshop, as well as a social services agency and a community health clinic.

"Each one of their family situations is based upon a real life family," explained Deb Brandt, event facilitator and community services director at United Community Action Partnership, or UCAP.

Kathy Ramundt, co-founder of Do Good Roseville, raised money through individual donations to bring in the simulation kit and facilitators from the Minnesota Community Action Partnership (MinnCAP), of which UCAP is a member.

For the most part, poverty rates in Minnesota have been steadily increasing for the past decade. In Roseville, as of 2018, one in every 10 residents live below the poverty line, according to the U.S. Census.

"Wages are staying stagnant or decreasing. The gap between the wealthiest and the poorest is getting wider and wider," said volunteer Nyia Harris, explaining the motivation for the event.



Bridget Kranz photos During the March 30 poverty simulation hosted by Do Good Roseville at Roseville Area High School, participants learned about living with limited resources. Here, volunteer from Do Good Roseville staffed the pawnshop, where participants could sell possessions, represented by cards marked with different pieces of furniture or appliances.

A week at a time

Before opening registration to the general public, Ramundt sent invitations to every city council member, mayor, school board member and county commissioner in the Roseville area, and some were on hand that Saturday.

After everyone settled in, Brandt gave minimal instructions: participants had to feed and shelter their family for the entire month and needed to present a transportation pass when arriving at any of the tables, unless they were a student going to school.

If an attendee was employed, they needed to arrive at their job within the first three minutes of each week and stay there for seven minutes.

While the simulation had a carefully planned framework, after the bell rang, much of what happened was spontaneous.

One woman, believing she had been unfairly terminated for being late two weeks in a row, complained that she was given no warning after her first misstep. The employers acknowledged the complaint and agreed to let her stay.

Throughout the month, facilitators came around and handed out “Monopoly”-style “Chance” cards. Sometimes, the card meant an unexpected bonus at work. Sometimes it meant an unexpected expense.

“You were just starting to get a handle on it and then something happened,” said Ramundt, who participated in the event. “So much was beyond people’s control.”

Before the fourth week in the simulation, Brandt received a list from the Mortgage and Realty Office of all those who were late on payments — almost half of the families ended up being evicted.

What’s affordable?

In general, housing is considered affordable if a household is spending less than 30% of their income on housing expenses, a number that grew out of the United States National Housing Act, which created the federally subsidized public housing program.

In Roseville, the median rent as of 2017 was \$958, with approximately 40% of the population renting. This means that full-time minimum wage workers in Roseville could be spending upwards of 75% of their income on rent.

While MinnCAP uses a standard simulation model owned and developed by the Missouri Community Action Network, they’ve made some state-specific adjustments. During the third week, Brandt went around targeting unsupervised children, offering them a job opportunity that turned out to be a sex trafficking operation.

Sex trafficking-related convictions skyrocketed from five statewide in 2007, to 45 in 2016. The number of convictions for soliciting a child doubled in the same period, according to data from the State Court Administrator’s Office.

Often, adults playing children in the simulation were expected to help pay the bills. While many praised the responsibility these children were learning, Roseville Area School Board member Mike Boguszewski argued that it was a large price to pay for youth potentially missing out on their childhoods.

Additionally, he brought up the statistic that in Roseville Area Schools, 50.1 percent of students receive free or reduced lunch, meaning that for a family of four, these students’ families are making less than \$46,435 a year.



During the poverty simulation members of the Morris family strategized for the week, going over their bills and assembling important documents, such as Social Security and EBT cards.

Where did the time go?

Apart from the employer, the school, the bank and the supermarket, most stations were empty the majority of the time. In the third and fourth weeks, some families began to slowly discover the social services agency and other non-profits, where they could get temporary assistance.

Not knowing exactly what these stations could do, it was always a little risky using a transportation pass to get there. By the end of the simulation, only five participants had visited the community health clinic, while 20 had known chronic illnesses.

“I was struck by the chaos of trying to navigate and trying to make these decisions of how you should be spending your time,” said participant Rick Schuster.

Limited hours made decisions significantly tougher. The food shelf was only open for a few sporadic hours each week, mimicking real life.

During the debriefing, one participant brought up the fact that many necessary transactions can take place online through mobile deposit and online banking, eliminating the need to go the bank or post office.

Brandt agreed, but pointed out that the lack of broadband in rural areas, as well as a lack of easy access to computers, can make this difficult for many. Broadband access isn't just a rural issue, either: as of 2017, one-fifth of Roseville households didn't have a broadband internet subscription, according to the U.S. Census.

After the debriefing, Ramsey County Commissioner Mary Jo McGuire talked at length with Ramundt about strategies for getting services out into the community, trying to mitigate the transportation barrier that participants found so frustrating. Her colleague on the county board, Commissioner Trista MatasCastillo, was also wondering what could be changed.

“This makes me think of going back to our social services departments and saying: How do we extend hours? How do we change our hours and our service delivery so people can access them?” said MatasCastillo.

–Bridget Kranz can be reached at roseville@lillienews.com.