

DHS News

Newsletter of the Allegheny County
Department of Human Services



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Exploring Poverty

On September 21, more than 55 DHS staff members and representatives from community organizations gathered at the Human Services Building for a poverty simulation designed to sensitize participants to the realities faced by low-income families. Tammy Thompson, executive director of Circles of Greater Pittsburgh, facilitated the simulation.

Simulation attendees were divided into two groups: One group roleplayed as members of families facing poverty and tried to provide for basic necessities and shelter during the course of four, 10-minute “weeks.” The other group roleplayed as representatives of community resources that families interact with to meet their basic needs.

After the simulation, participants shared their thoughts and experiences in a debrief session. Many participants expressed an increased level of empathy for those in crisis, especially children who may feel internal or external pressure to prioritize work over school – or even participate in illegal activities – to help support their families. Universally, the group agreed that it is important for social service agencies to make sure that the work they are doing meets the needs of families. Some suggestions offered by participants included agencies working “off” hours to accommodate working caregivers and agencies going directly into neighborhoods to inform community members of available resources.

“Bringing the poverty simulation to DHS was intended to increase our awareness and understanding of poverty and the many challenges individuals and families often face trying to make ends meet,” said John Litz, planner at DHS and coordinator of the simulation. “It’s my hope that the simulation experience will encourage staff to find resources and create opportunities that enable families to improve their stability and economic security.”

In the future, DHS plans to continue the conversation around poverty by offering the poverty simulation experience to staff who were not able to attend this session, hosting additional educational events around poverty, and continuing to plan for and implement services and strategies that are targeted towards reducing poverty and improving individual and family self-sufficiency.