

Poverty Simulation: Standing in Their Shoes



“You never really know a man until you stand in his shoes and walk around in them.” – Harper Lee, *To Kill a Mockingbird*

In the United States today, over 40 million people are living in poverty. Even more exist just above the poverty level guidelines but struggle every day with meeting basic needs.

The Missouri Community Action Poverty Simulation (CAPS) is a learning tool created to help people understand the realities of poverty. During the simulation exercise, participants role-play the lives of low-income families. Some are TANF recipients, some are disabled, and some are senior citizens on Social Security. They are assigned to family units and have the stressful task of providing for basic necessities and shelter on a limited budget during the course of four 15-minute “weeks.” They interact with human service agencies, grocers, pawnbrokers, bill collectors, job interviewers, police officers and other community members. Each family tries to provide food, shelter and other basic necessities, including health care needs, for themselves and their loved ones.

The simulation enables participants to look at poverty from a variety of angles and then to discuss the potential for change within their local communities. It was designed to sensitize those who frequently deal with low-income families, as well as to create a broader awareness of the realities of poverty among policymakers, community leaders, and others. The most important part of the simulation is the debrief session in which we discuss poverty, the stress of living in poverty and the systemic barriers that keep people and families in the cycle of poverty.

The simulation is conducted over a 2-3 hour time period which involves the actual simulation as well as a debriefing session. Group sizes range from 25 to 80 participants. While smaller groups can be accommodated, they do not seem to be as impactful. The maximum capacity is 80 individuals.

To learn more about the poverty simulation, contact Southwest PA Area Health Education Center’s (AHEC) Dr. Lynne Williams at llwilliams@southwestahec.org or 412-408-3485. To cover staff time and logistics, AHEC typically asks for \$400.

To host a simulation:

- Coordinate a date and time with Dr. Williams.
- Secure a large conference room (approximately 2000 sq ft)
 - Work with facilities management of the building to arrange the room with tables and chairs according to a provided lay-out prior to the start of the simulation
- Recruit volunteers to staff the simulation. Dr. Williams and AHEC typically bring about 2-4 staff as volunteers, but a total of 12-16 are needed to run the simulation (if there are 60-80 participants, it is helpful to have 17-20 volunteers).
- Arrange for parking for the volunteers if needed.
- Recruit or organize the participants for the simulation. If the names of the participants are known prior to the simulation, Dr. Williams can arrange them into “family” roles prior to the simulation.

