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Finding Hope Amid the Chains of Poverty

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As the current recession continues to strain financial and mental well-being, other residents are realizing for the first time the harsh realities of living in poverty.

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CHARLESTON -- Some residents of southern West Virginia have lived in poverty for decades -- the result of environment, lack of opportunity, unemployment and a sense of hopelessness.

As the current recession continues to strain financial and mental well-being, other residents are realizing for the first time the harsh realities of living in poverty.

What used to be simple tasks, such as replacing a water pump in a vehicle to get to work or covering basic medical expenses associated with a broken arm, are quickly becoming catastrophic financial burdens -- especially for a family of four living on less than \$1,000 monthly.

So where do people go when faced with this kind of peril? Who is there to help?

Now more than ever, people are turning to the services of social outreach programs such as Council of the Southern Mountains in Keystone and ABLE Families and Christian Help in Kermit to alleviate their burdens.

"We have about 5,000 people on active file that we help," according to Sister Brendan Conlon, director of Christian Help at ABLE Families. "We see them all periodically when they need assistance, but we continue to see many needing services weekly, sometimes daily."

The Angels of Kermit

ABLE Families and Christian Help provides a multitude of services for those in need.

Conlon and Sister Janet Peterworth have seen many living in poverty during the past 15 years, and each person's story is different from the next, yet similar in many ways.

These days, many stories Conlon said she hears are tied to the uncertain economy, cuts in pay or layoffs.

"What we are seeing is an increase in the need for food orders for families and some individuals," Conlon said. "For



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many, it is their first time needing assistance."

Peterworth said there are reasons for persistent poverty in the region, including a lack of jobs and a general sense that people are better off not working.

Peterworth also said drug abuse has become a factor by forcing people to quit work or shy away from job opportunities because they cannot pass a drug test.

She said many Americans slowly are falling into the classification of the "working poor" – those who work but still struggle to make ends meet. And as that segment expands, so does the demand for services.

"It is hard to fall from nowhere, and that is where most are at this point," Peterworth said.

ABLE Families and Christian Help are trying to pull people up from nowhere to somewhere. Peterworth said 75 percent of the group's funding comes from the state. The rest comes from private donations and grants from groups such as the Logan Healthcare Foundation and STOP West Virginia Prevention.

According to Sister Therese Carew, who is in charge of emergency assistance at Christian Help, the center receives about 675 phone calls for assistance per month. On average, the group receives 800 to 900 total requests for assistance a month, a total that includes walk-ins.

"We receive calls for everything from utility bill assistance to gas to get to work or a doctor's appointment to additional grocery money," Carew said.

ABLE Families offers job placement programs, educational training, resume building and college preparation, according to Peterworth. Currently, ABLE's adult education program has between 15 and 20 students.

"I try to teach people to fish, but for some people they believe it is too hard to learn to fish," Peterworth said. "They have to want to better themselves."

Christian Help provides a food pantry, clothing surplus and toys for children. Conlon said those people in need can come in for clothing items and toys at little or no cost. Christian Help also has furniture and school supplies.

"We try to provide all the things folks cannot generally afford but need," Conlon said.

Christian Help also offers assistance with teeth extraction and denture service through Health Right of West Virginia in Charleston.

Carew said people don't just need the basics.

She said one woman and her two children in the Kermit area received a significant amount of food stamps even

though she had a job at a fast-food restaurant in Gilbert. When flooding hit the town this past spring, the restaurant asked the woman to work more hours to serve food to cleanup crews and cover shifts for workers who couldn't come in. But because the woman worked more and therefore earned more money during that time, the amount of assistance she was eligible for dropped.

Carew said the cleanup efforts since have ended in Mingo County, and the woman's hours and income have returned to the level they were before floods ravaged the area. But the federal assistance she receives remains at the lower level.

To fix that situation, the woman needs to meet with a caseworker at the Williamson office of the Department of Health and Human Resources. But her car recently broke down, and she can't afford to have it repaired, Carew said.

Christian Help learned of the situation only after the woman called them upset because her electricity was about to be shut off. Her pastor provided \$50 to pay part of the bill, but she couldn't afford to pay the rest. Then she told Carew about the car.

"I asked her if she had anyone to take her to Williamson for her food stamp review, and she broke down. When I asked her if she could ask her pastor for a ride, she cried even harder.

"She was better off when she was not working (before the flood) to an extent," Carew said. "We pledged the other \$250 for her electric bill."

Carew said she gave money to a man earlier the same day to repair the water pump on his 1992 Ford Taurus. She said he told her he needed the car to take his four children to Huntington to visit their hospitalized mother.

Carew said Christian Help convinced his wife to enter the hospital to treat her drug addiction. While the mother has been in rehab, Christian Help has been assisting the husband with food and gasoline.

"We see all kinds of different cases of need, and we just try to provide the best way we can depending on the circumstance," Peterworth said.

Peterworth said she and her peers try to understand those unique situations that come up because welfare payments are low and times are difficult.

"When you have to pay \$300 a month in rent, car insurance -- which most do not have because the cops wait for dead stickers -- banks charge too much for checking accounts, it is easy to see how people get lost in the shuffle all because one little problem to one man is a huge issue to another," Peterworth said.

"We believe these people have worth because they are still human beings."

Just to Get by in McDowell

The Council of the Southern Mountains was established in 1965 as a direct initiative of the War on Poverty. The original purpose of the program was to provide McDowell County residents with a catalyst to curtail poverty rates by giving people hope for a brighter future.

The Council has grown to provide a wide range of services to those in need, including a daycare center, food pantry and a credit union that offers credit counseling to help people establish and build credit. The Council provides utility bill support, a food reimbursement program and help for pregnant mothers. The Right From the Start program helps pregnant mothers with prenatal care and continues to cover mothers and children from pregnancy to infancy.

The Council also offers flood relief, home weatherization and a Youth Exposure Series giving kids an opportunity to do activities their families couldn't typically afford, such as bowling or roller-skating. The program had nearly 50 children participating at every event according to Heather Eldridge, director of community services for Council of the Southern Mountains.

"We took them to the Exhibition Mine in Beckley. We went bowling. We went swimming. So it opens up kids to all kinds of things they don't usually see, different places and something to do come summer time," Eldridge said.

Eldridge herself was part of the summer program as a teenager.

"I remember the first time I ever went roller-skating. I was 13 and to see the same reaction I had on some of these kids' faces is just remarkable when they realize a new activity they have never experienced," Eldridge said.

According to Eldridge, the Council provides many unique programs such as Stop the Hurt, which helps battered women and children leave an abusive environment. The Council also offers mentoring programs for children who have a parent in prison and a foster grandparent program that allows seniors to read to children in school or do activities outside the school environment with the children.

"We have retirees who have been doing this for more than 30 years because they enjoy working with the kids in the community," Eldridge said. "It gives them something to look forward to and positively impact a younger person's life in the community."

As a lifelong resident of the county, Eldridge said she has seen programs come and go as frequently as the flow of people leaving the county to find opportunities for a better life.

"The jobs come, but they trickle in, and with all the problems surrounding these folks living in poverty, we are never going to get far. But we try to help," she said.

Eldridge said the Council realizes education is the key to opening opportunity for residents, but it is a battle despite best efforts.

"Parents play a huge role in education. The ones who graduate are pushed by their family to leave because they do not have exposure to the outside world; they do not see the positives of staying in school or even receiving an education at all.

"Many times they get married or pregnant or both before graduation and do not progress," she said.

To combat the problem and promote education, the Council recently started new programs. The Council is targeting eighth-grade students by teaching them the importance of applying for college.

"We schedule campus tours for them if they are interested, get them in touch with college admissions and just give them support so they can pursue a dream of attending a university," she said.

The Council is trying to help those who have dropped out of school through GED programs and offering pharmacy technician courses and certified nursing courses and training for those who want to earn a commercial driver's license. Eldridge said the Council is preparing to offer emergency medical technician courses as well, but even that will not be enough to help everyone in need.

"The classes fill up so fast we are left with waiting lists, and we just cannot have enough classes to get everyone certified that wants to be," Eldridge said.

Eldridge said despite all the programs offered by the Council, residents are still leery to ask for help because of pride. But the doors will always be open to those in need.

"They say they hate to come in, but they need the help because they have no other options. They have pride but no food, but all they need to realize is that we are here, and we want to help."

Compassion Is Hope

One Mingo County man compared living in poverty to standing on an island with a sea of circumstance surrounding him.

But there are lifeboats out there.

People involved with organizations like Council in the Southern Mountains, Christian Help and ABLE Families say they will continue to throw out lifesavers for those in

poverty. And they say they hope there always will be new captains to sail the ship to replace those who have given their time and service to help others.

Both Conlon and Peterworth are retiring after 30 years of combined service. Conlon will hand over her duties to Carew. When asked whether she thought Peterworth and she were leaving their organization in good hands, both women agreed the transition period for Carew has been smooth. But Conlon summed it up best: "As long as she keeps compassion in her heart, which I believe she certainly has, then the Lord will always guide her to do what is right in helping other people."

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