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home, help with GED and drivers license courses and fees, and instruction on resume writing and interview preparation. Torres said it even pays graduation costs for housing-insecure students who, despite all odds, make it successfully through their senior year. "They deserve to not be stressed about their cap and gown," she said.

Torres and Green both said they worry that life after high school will be a "harsh wake-up call" for many of the teenagers they assist. They said a lot of their students simply don't have the soft or technical skills needed to be competitive in the workforce.

"If kids really want it, they can graduate," said Torres. "But if they drop out, we always ask, 'When will you come back?' We're here for them if they come back. If not, then they have higher needs than getting their education."

Acquiring empathy

While staff at the Coos Bay School District's ARK Program and homeless liaison's office see the effects of poverty on students every day, it's less obvious to many of the district's teachers who work in more typical classroom settings.

"I felt like more people within our district, who have contact with kids, need to understand that this is not their fault," said Torres. "How can we build more empathy and understanding of these children who are homeless, in foster care, almost homeless?"

With most of the families she serves, Torres said drugs and alcohol aren't the issue - it's typically a major life event, such as a job loss, that pushes people out of their home.

After going through the poverty simulation at the casino, DeSalvio asked Torres to incorporate the program into their district's McKinney-Vento grant, a federal assistance program established in 1987.

As of April, 100 teachers in the district had gone through a poverty simulation that Roe traveled from Grants Pass to facilitate.



Barbara Green, education assistant at the Coos Bay School District's ARK Program, poses in the ARK Program's closet, which supplies clothing for housing insecure families with kids enrolled in the Coos Bay School District.

PHOTO BY EMILY GREEN

The remainder of the district's teachers will go through a simulation within the next two years.

Poverty simulations typically take place in a large space, like a high school gymnasium. Roe said the kit he purchased contains more than 20,000 pieces, which are used to give participants identities, resources and situations to work through.

About 25 people surround the perimeter of the room acting as service providers, such as a food bank, hospital, grocery store, jail and pawn shop. Torres said in future simulations, she'll likely bring in actual providers to fulfill those roles and answer questions.

Across the interior of the room, about 80 other people are assigned into families or defined as individuals, all experiencing different stages of poverty. A participant might be the parent of a pregnant teenager, an elderly person struggling to pay for both food and medication, or a person in a homeless shelter who's trying to find a job.

Then the simulation begins, with each 15-minute segment representing a week of making tough choices about how to allocate money and transportation passes while navigating among work, accessing services and solving situational problems that arise along the way.

Meanwhile, participants playing the role of service providers have to figure out how to divvy out the limited resources they have available. In all, four segments representing a month in poverty are played out. The only goal is survival.

At the end of the simulation, Torres said teachers wanted to know more about the different resources they could point families toward. They also reported feeling as though they'd acquired a better understanding of the day-to-day struggles of their students living in poverty.

When Roe first went through the simulation, he said what surprised him most was the sheer amount of "humanity wasted" while waiting in line, only to get pushed

Conduct your own poverty simulation

If you're interested in having Steve Roe facilitate a poverty simulation for your organization, you can email him at sroe@roemotors.com. You must have close to 100 participants for the simulation to work effectively.

The Missouri Association for Community Action conducts two facilitator-training sessions per year. The state agency purchased the copyright for the poverty simulation program from its inventors at Reform Organization of Welfare when the group disbanded in 2005.

To learn more about poverty simulations and training, visit povertysimulation.net.

along to the next service provider.

"In the meantime, you have to work, you have child care," said Roe. "It's just the spiraling nature of what poverty brings about - and the time that's wasted in poverty."

During the exercise, some participants achieve their goals while most end-up worse off than they were in the beginning. They might lose their housing, health care or vehicle. Roe said the experience can bring out intense emotions - he's seen people become overwhelmed, angry and take actions they wouldn't normally consider.

"Somebody might leave some money laying on a chair," said Roe, "and people will run over and grab the money off the chair, and they say, 'I never thought I would steal, because I know I'm not that kind of person, but my child was sick and I needed to get medicine.'"

emily@streetroots.org
@greenwrites



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