

Poverty simulation offers glimpse into lives of Lake County's low-income families Social service providers aim to gain insight about people they help every day

By Jami Kunzer May 05, 2022 at 1:33 pm CDT



Candace H. Johnson-for Shaw Media Alicia Rios, of Zion, portrays a banker with Trust National Bank, hands out cash to a participant who cashed their check during the Poverty Simulation at St. Joseph Catholic Church in Libertyville. The event was sponsored by The Alliance for Human Services. (4/30/22) (Candace H.Johnson)

LIBERTYVILLE – To better understand poverty, community leaders and volunteers throughout Lake County recently spent a day experiencing it.

They chose between buying groceries to feed their families or paying the mortgage. They struggled to find jobs, pay for gas and afford child care.

They felt the anxiety and fear that often comes with living in poverty.



Candace H. Johnson-for Shaw Media Vanessa Ocampo, of Highwood and Claress Pettengill, of Gurnee portray teachers at Realville Public School during the Poverty Simulation at St. Joseph Catholic Church in Libertyville. The event was sponsored by The Alliance for Human Services. (4/30/22) (Candace H.Johnson)

Poverty simulation offers glimpse into lives of Lake County's low-income families Social service providers aim to gain insight about people they help every day

By Jami Kunzer May 05, 2022 at 1:33 pm CDT



Candace H. Johnson-for Shaw Media Morgan Malkowski, of Lindenhurst portrays a banker with Trust National Bank, as she sorts paychecks for the bank to cash during the Poverty Simulation at St. Joseph Catholic Church in Libertyville. The event was sponsored by The Alliance for Human Services. (4/30/22) (Candace H. Johnson)

“You think it’s all straightforward when you’re on the outside looking in, but I found out it’s not,” said Patricia Toyra of Gurnee, one of about 80 participants in an April 30 poverty simulation at St. Joseph Catholic Church in Libertyville.

As part of the simulation – organized by The Alliance for Human Services, along with CASA of Lake County, PADS of Lake County, Catholic Charities and Love INC (In the Name of Christ) of Lake County – participants took on the identities of others. All identities were based on the stories of real-life clients.

A volunteer for about 10 years with St. Vincent de Paul Society through Saint Paul the Apostle Church in Gurnee, Toyra took on the role of an unemployed 34-year-old woman with a

14-year-old daughter and a 17-year-old son who had dropped out of high school. Her son’s girlfriend was pregnant. Her husband had left and she had about \$10 to her name.

All participants spent a “month” in the shoes of someone in poverty. Areas set up during the simulation served as social service agencies and places for participants to seek help, buy food and pay bills, such as the mortgage and utilities.

Poverty simulation offers glimpse into lives of Lake County's low-income families Social service providers aim to gain insight about people they help every day *By Jami Kunzer May 05, 2022 at 1:33 pm CDT*



Candace H. Johnson-for Shaw Media Sue Banks, of Libertyville and Christine Peschier, of Highland Park work together to come up with a plan to manage the budget of Iris Isaacson and Isaiah Isma, a couple who have many challenges they are portraying during the Poverty Simulation at St. Joseph Catholic Church in Libertyville. The cards represent items they could pawn for money if needed during the event. (4/30/22) (Candace H.Johnson)

Toyra tried to find a job and was sent to employment services. A caseworker wasn't available, so she was told to come back another day. She didn't have transportation to get there.

"Because I was trying to figure out what to do, I forgot to feed my family," Toyra said.

She ended up getting evicted in the last week of her monthlong simulation because she could only come up with enough money to pay half her rent.

It's an experience she'll never forget, but one she's seen play out as a volunteer trying to provide assistance to low-income families in Lake County.

"People want to get back on their feet, but they don't know where to start," she said. "It was nice having to put the shoe on the other foot and seeing what they go through and the aggravation, the tension, the frightfulness."

The simulation comes at a time when many are struggling in Lake County, said Gayle Nelson, executive director of The Alliance for Human Services, a network of more than 90 government and nonprofit leaders in Lake County that works to strengthen human services.

Poverty simulation offers glimpse into lives of Lake County's low-income families Social service providers aim to gain insight about people they help every day *By Jami Kunzer May 05, 2022 at 1:33 pm CDT*



Candace H. Johnson-for Shaw Media Bobbie Hinden, of Highland Park, and Lisamarie Keskar, of Lake Bluff portray customer service representatives with the Food-A-Rama Super Center, as they help low income customers portrayed by Michael Knight, of Libertyville, Rich Bothmann and Dania Barrientos, both of Round Lake during the Poverty Simulation at St. Joseph Catholic Church in Libertyville. The event was sponsored by The Alliance for Human Services. (4/30/22) (Candace H.Johnson)

Nelson started planning the simulation before the pandemic, but the event was delayed until this year. It's needed now more than ever, Nelson said, with COVID-19 increasing the divide and leading to a demand for services. Higher food and gas prices also are having an impact, she said, with services such as the Northern Illinois Food Bank struggling to keep up.

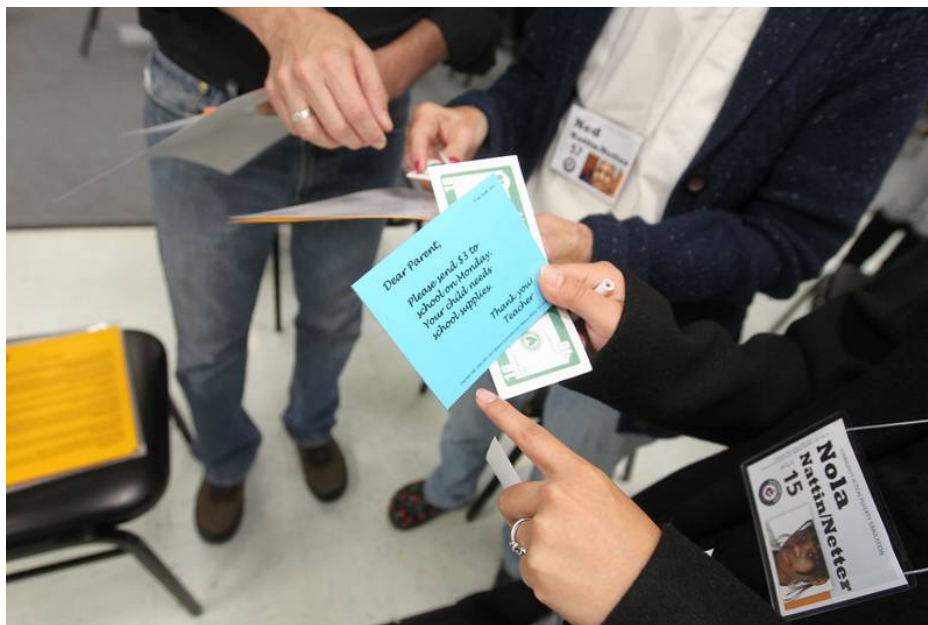
"I know that the high food prices affect all of us, but they are really having a hardship on those experiencing poverty," she said.

Based on the positive turnout and "energy in the room" at the simulation, she said she intends to host another one in the future.

"The economy we live in right now is very much a have and a have-not. The number of have-nots is growing tremendously," she said.

"Even if wages are going up, they're not going up fast enough to afford continual increases in the cost of food and utilities and gas. The number of people experiencing trauma and needing services is increasing and, unfortunately, we don't see it going down."

Poverty simulation offers glimpse into lives of Lake County's low-income families Social service providers aim to gain insight about people they help every day *By Jami Kunzer May 05, 2022 at 1:33 pm CDT*



Candace H. Johnson-for Shaw Media Gabriela Cervantes, of Vernon Hills, portrays Nola, 15, from the Nattin/Netter family as she holds up a Dear Parent card from the school, asking for \$3.00 for school supplies during the Poverty Simulation at St. Joseph Catholic Church in Libertyville. The event was sponsored by The Alliance for Human Services. (4/30/22) (Candace H. Johnson)

Among the challenges is the limited resources available to low-income families, and some social service agencies face burnout from employees and volunteers, along with dwindling finances, she said.

The simulation helped participants see the big picture of what those in poverty face while trying to navigate through life, Nelson said.

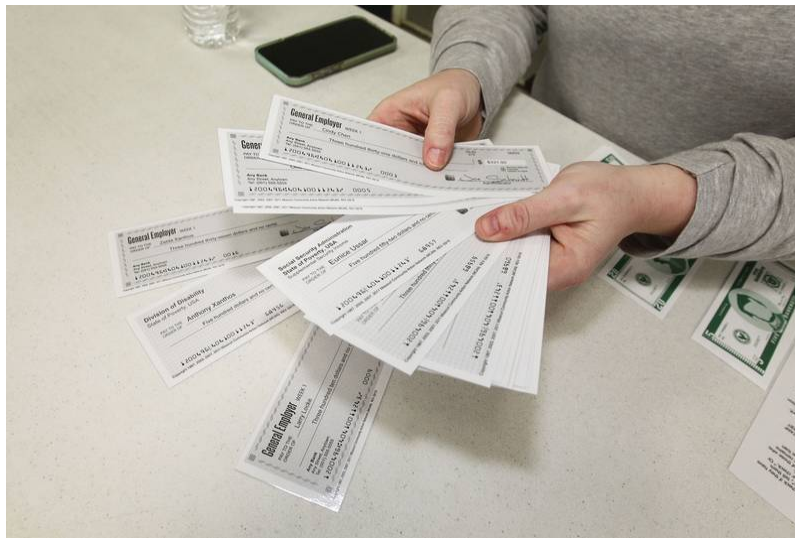
“Our goal is to really strengthen the social security sector. We do that by connecting people and organizations together,” she said. “People experiencing trauma or poverty need many services. The goal is not to give them a voicemail or a phone number we thought was right, but to give them a real human being, to make that warm handoff.”

For participants such as Julee MacGibbon of Libertyville, the simulation offered a reminder of advantages perhaps taken for granted. A member of St. Joseph’s parish, MacGibbon began volunteering with Love INC of Lake County when she retired.

A network of about 60 churches, Love INC enables churches to pool their resources and services for those in need.

Poverty simulation offers glimpse into lives of Lake County's low-income families Social service providers aim to gain insight about people they help every day

By Jami Kunzer May 05, 2022 at 1:33 pm CDT



Candace H. Johnson-for Shaw Media Morgan Malkowski, of Lindenhurst portrays a banker with Trust National Bank, shows paychecks and Social Security checks the bank cashed for participants during the Poverty Simulation at St. Joseph Catholic Church in Libertyville. The event was sponsored by The Alliance for Human Services. (4/30/22) (Candace H.Johnson)

“When I look at my monthly budget, I just don’t have the same concerns when people are trying to decide whether to buy lunch or gas,” MacGibbon said. “I think it’s good to be concerned and know there are things we can do to help.”

Along with accepting donations of gently used items, including furniture, Love INC tries to connect resources and cover needs not being met by single agencies, said Laurie Mueller Comilla, office and communications coordinator for Love INC. The organization also hosts life skills classes at area churches.

“We want to be able to serve people in ways they need to be served and not the way I personally might think they need it,” Mueller Comilla said.

“In order to do that well, I need to understand other backgrounds and where people are coming from. I don’t have a personal lived experience in poverty. This is my chance to get a close glimpse at what people in Lake County are living with every day,” she said of the simulation.

“Less judgment allows me to love my neighbors.”

Poverty simulation offers glimpse into lives of Lake County's low-income families Social service providers aim to gain insight about people they help every day

By Jami Kunzer May 05, 2022 at 1:33 pm CDT



Candace H. Johnson-for Shaw Media Rich Bothmann, of Round Lake portrays Ted Tiskit, 85, during the Poverty Simulation at St. Joseph Catholic Church in Libertyville. The event was sponsored by The Alliance for Human Services. (4/30/22) (Candace H.Johnson)



Candace H. Johnson-for Shaw Media Scott Anderson, of Grayslake portrays Miles, 36, from the Morris/Moore family as he walks away from the General Employer table having just learned he got fired during the Poverty Simulation at St. Joseph Catholic Church in Libertyville. Meghan Powell-Filler and Lori Petersen, of Crystal Lake portray the employers. (4/30/22) (Candace H.Johnson)



Candace H. Johnson-for Shaw Media Julie Kovacs, of Lake Villa portrays a person who works for the Inter-Faith Services homeless shelter as she helps a participant during the Poverty Simulation at St. Joseph Catholic Church in Libertyville. The event was sponsored by The Alliance for Human Services. (4/30/22) (Candace H.Johnson)