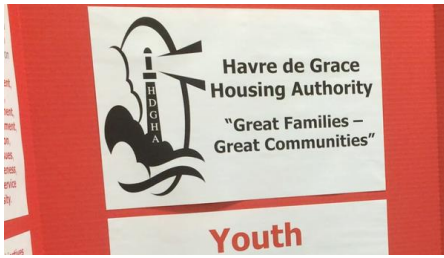


Havre de Grace Poverty Walk helps people 'walk in someone else's shoes'



Organizer Jackie Shaffstall, operations manager at the Housing Authority and deputy director of the Success program, discusses a poverty simulation exercise.

(Bryna Zumer and Dan Griffin, Baltimore Sun Media Group)

Bryna Zumer - Contact Reporter

A Poverty Walk organized by Havre de Grace Housing Authority helps people 'walk in someone else's shoes'

"If you're the Miller family, you just found out that your hours have been cut to 30 per week. You will lose your medical insurance and were counting on this paycheck for your rent. You need to find \$1,200 cash by the end of the week or your landlord just told you he's going to file for an eviction," Jackie Shaffstall announced to a roomful of people at the Havre de Grace Housing Authority.

"If you are the Jones family, your grandson Lester was just arrested again and needs you to put up \$2,000 to get him out," Shaffstall continued, getting a bit of laughter from the room. "He called you, crying, saying he wants to turn his life around. What are you going to do now?"

The dozen or so people, who signed up for Tuesday morning's first session of the Housing Authority's Poverty Walk, had taken on the identities of random low-income families. They were given packets with the family's profile, background and demographics, as well as their picture ID, Social Security cards, birth certificates, BGE bills, pay stubs and everything needed to apply for services in Harford County.

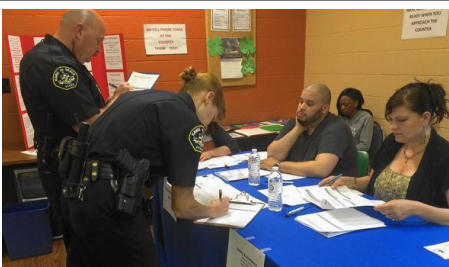
"The goal is to get as many services as you can within 30 minutes, which represents 30 days of services," Shaffstall, operations manager at the Housing Authority, explained in an interview.

The Poverty Walk, which ran in 45-minute sessions from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. at the facility on Stansbury Court, in Havre de Grace's Somerset Manor community, was the first such event in Harford County, Shaffstall said.

She recently also became deputy director of the agency's SUCCESS (Supporting the Upward Climb to Continued Economic Self-Sufficiency) Project, which connects low-income residents with services teaching life skills and encouraging economic independence.

"I've heard of poverty simulations before, but we wanted to do a smaller scale because most of the ones I've heard of were very involved and big," she said.

"The whole purpose behind it is just for people to walk in someone else's shoes, so that's why we have our residents and the Getting Ahead [Network] graduates representing the 'agencies,' and that's why we wanted our community partners and community leaders to feel what it's like to live in low-income situations," Shaffstall said.



Havre de Grace Police Capt. Wayne Young, left, and Chief Teresa Walter simulate being a low-income family applying for resources from volunteers Angel Ayala and Gina Carlotta, right, during the Poverty Walk. (BRYNA ZUMER | AEGIS STAFF / Baltimore Sun)

The Getting Ahead Network is an international group helping "people in poverty stabilize their situations and build resources," according to its website, based on author Ruby Payne's book "A Framework for Understanding Poverty."

"Just for 30 minutes can make a huge difference if you can look at things through someone else's eyes," Shaffstall said.

The focus of the "walk" is "the experience, rather than the service," she said. While participants were racing to get services, Shaffstall blew a bullhorn in the middle of the session to throw a wrench into their lives, creating a new scenario.

"We all know that we get used to the resources in the community and then, all of a sudden, something happens and your situation changes," Shaffstall told them, giving an example such as "Juan" getting a DUI and having to pay a fine and court costs of \$2,500 by the end of the month or risk going to jail.

The event was open to the public and Shaffstall said she hopes to repeat it, or even branch out.

"It's for anyone. We have a lady here who brought her kids. We opened it up to the home school community because we thought that would be a good way for them to get some schooling and education about poverty as well," she said.

After the walk, participants take part in "discovery time," where they are asked to describe their experience and think about how it made them feel.

"We're hoping that people will have an 'a-ha' moment about either side, about what it's like to be an agency worker, or what it really feels like to be in a low-income situation where you're going along and what just happened [when] that glitch gets thrown at you and now what are you going to do?" Shaffstall said.

The ultimate question for everyone, she said, is: "What can we do differently as a community to help both work together to end poverty?"