

Hillsdale raises awareness for homelessness and hunger

By Sarah Leitner Published: Wednesday, November 16, 2011

This week is National Hunger and Homeless Awareness week, when communities across the country hold events to raise awareness of local hunger and homelessness the week before Thanksgiving.

As part of the week's events, Hillsdale County featured a "Box City" project on Saturday and will hold a poverty simulation tomorrow.

Box City

They sat shivering on the corner. A cluster of boxes was nearby — their homes for the afternoon.

Twenty-five high schoolers from the Hillsdale County Community Foundation took part in a Box City event on Saturday from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. to raise awareness of homelessness in the community. "They all had to bring a box to live in for the day," said Amber Yoder, HCCF's communications officer. Casey Farmer, Youth Opportunities Unlimited Through Hillsdale president, a junior at North-Adams Jerome High School, said the event made her think. "The seriousness kind of set in as it got colder and windier and our boxes started to fall apart," Farmer said. Yoder said the wind was the hardest element of the weather to overcome, and if the students had not brought extra blankets or warm clothes, they were out of luck.

"Some of the boxes kept blowing away," she said. "[The students] were having to re-engineer throughout the day." The group, made up of 9th to 12th graders from local schools, came up with the idea during their retreat in July. The last time YOUTH did a similar project was in 2003, and they decided it was time to bring it back. "[They were interested in] the whole poverty topic in general and what they could do to highlight that," Yoder said. While some students tried to get comfortable in their makeshift homes, others stood on the street corner holding posters with statistics. Some people honked, Farmer said. Others donated money, which will go to a local agency that provides housing to the homeless.

"They originally set it up to be awareness for the public, but the kids got a lot more out of it than they were expecting," Yoder said. Farmer said she got a better understanding of what it is like to be homeless.

"It's kind of heartbreaking to think there are kids out there without good homes and without good situations," she said.

Poverty Simulation

Tomorrow, the Community Action Agency will hold a poverty simulation that anyone in the community can participate in. Sixty-three people are signed up for the simulation from 8:30 a.m. to noon. "That's really, really good for Hillsdale," CAA Director Maxine Vanlerberg said. "I'm really excited. I've been wanting to bring it to Hillsdale for a while." Each person will receive a packet and a role to play in the morning. They will then be put in a family and given a situation to act out, in segments of a week at a time. "Each 15 minutes is designed to be reflective of a week in the month," Vanlerberg said. Vanlerberg said that, in a previous simulation she participated in, she was a grade-school student living with her parents and grandmother. Her "father" was working and her "grandmother" had some social security. "We made a mistake on the very first day, and my dad lost his job," Vanlerberg said. "Things went downhill really fast."

The family then had to collect food stamps regularly. "I ended up having to go to the youth home because my parents didn't get their food stamps," she said. In the end, her family was evicted.

"There's a panic situation that goes on with people trying to address all their needs," she said. "It was shocking to me when we got down to that last week and we were trying to do what we could to get things from our neighbors, sell things." CAA Housing Specialist Tracy Peter also recently took part in a simulation in Jackson, Mich. He played the role of a father with a wife, child, and mother-in-law. He did have a job, though he said this did not always help their situation. "By having that job, I almost felt useless as far as trying to help out the family," he said. "It was very stressful living day-to-day." During the course of their month, the simulation family got robbed, and the mother-in-law resorted to selling prescription drugs at a local high school to pay the family's bills.

"I came home from work one day and they said, 'We paid the bill,' and I said, 'Well, how'd you do that?'" Peter said. "People come to desperate measures and do things they wouldn't normally do to make ends meet." Both Peter and Vanlerberg said the simulation helped them understand better what families in poverty situations were going through. "You walk away with more empathy for people in that situation and a little better understanding of what they're going through," Peter said.