

HILLSDALE

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# Poverty simulation to sensitize participants

By NANCY HASTINGS  
nancy.hastings@hillsdale.net

An interactive workshop — designed to raise awareness of the challenges faced by low-income people and better understand the issues and emotions behind the statistics of poverty — is coming to Hillsdale.

The event has been made possible by a grant to the Hillsdale County Human Services Network from the Hillsdale County Community Foundation and McKinney-Ventro funds that come to counties through non-profits for service to homeless students.

The event, from 8:30 a.m. to noon on Nov. 18, will take place at the Hillsdale United Brethren Church, 240 S. Howell St.

Those registering in advance are asked to call the Community Action Agency at 517-437-3346 by Nov. 11. The cost of attending is a donation of a non-perishable food item for Hillsdale County food pantries.

Georgia Mason, a member of the Human Services Network, said community members are invited to participate in the poverty simulation in which people will be given a role of someone dealing with economic hardship.

"Folks will come in and be given a card that defines a life situation," Mason said.

An example given was of a 50-year-old factory worker who was just laid off and can't pay his electricity bill.

"What many don't realize is that more are coming into poverty than are middle class and they don't understand how to manage the system," Mason said. "There's a misconception that people in poverty could remove themselves of their situation if they tried harder."

Realizing it can happen to anyone is important, especially when

## News to note

### Who should attend?

Staff and volunteers of congregations; food pantry workers; community leaders; students, teachers, counselors

### Businesses

Social service staff; anyone who desires a greater understanding of situations faced by low-income people

### Why attend?

To be educated on the realities that low-income persons face; to combat myths about people living in poverty; and to increase awareness and empathy

many who lose jobs are one paycheck away from poverty, she said.

"What we want to do is reduce stereotypes associated with poverty because people there are no different than you and I," she said.

The 2011 Community Assessment, published by the Community Action Agency, gives further insight to the local scene, she added. The statistics come from clients who share their experiences with the local economy and how they are handling its impact on their lives.

Trends in child well-being state that in 2008, 22.5 percent of those from ages 0-17 in Hillsdale were in poverty — up from 20.7 percent in 2005.

"It's alarming to know that students receiving free and reduced-price school lunches were 55 percent in 2008," Mason said.

In work profiles, more Hillsdale County clients report they voluntarily are not in the work force, being either disabled and not looking for work (20.1 percent) or retired and not looking for work, (16.4 percent) than is reported for either work situation by Jackson or Lenawee clients. However, Hillsdale has the lowest percentage, by county, of clients reporting they are out of the work force because they are a full-time caregiver.

Another statistic pointed out in the report states that in Michigan, one of the basic financial status indicators is whether the household has a car that runs. Overall, 76.3 percent of CAA clients do have a car that runs. By county, the percentage is highest in Hillsdale, at 80.3 percent.

Mason points out that since the area is mostly rural, a working car is important in Hillsdale County "because there is not public transportation.

"This adds to monthly expenses or repairs, insurance and gas," she said.

It's pointed out that Hillsdale County responses have higher percentages because these clients identified more budget cutting on average in each household.

Further assessments show the percentage of males surveyed by CAA nearly doubled when compared to last year — from 15.7 percent to 29 percent of all clients. The biggest change was in clients served by community services, where the percentage of male respondents went from 17.8 percent last year to 32.5 percent this year.

Mason and others on the network hope to attract at least 100 participants to the workshop.

Maxine Vanlerburg, CAA director, said she advocated for the workshop to come to Hillsdale and was excited to receive the grant to make it possible. She said the experience is designed to help participants begin to understand what it might be like to live in a typical low-income family trying to survive in a panic situation.

"When I did the simulation during a conference, I learned it's not easy to navigate the system," she said. "You have to know where to go. I understood the panic people get in when doing what they have to do to survive."