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Newsday.com

Poverty experiment eye-opening for leaders in Buffalo

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May 8, 2008

BUFFALO, N.Y.



Maria Whyte's two-day experiment living at the poverty level left her with debt, a parking ticket and probably a few gray hairs.

"I was so stressed out!" the Erie County legislator said Thursday as she joined a call for the city to address its census ranking as the nation's second-poorest big city.

Whyte and other community leaders spent the past few days trying to make ends meet on \$9.25 a day. If they factored in the daily cost of a car, health care, cell phone and cable television, they were in the hole before breakfast.

It was an exercise in solidarity, organizers said, for the 29.9 percent of Buffalo residents the U.S. Census Bureau says are living in poverty _ well over the 13.3 percent national rate. The federal poverty guideline is an annual income of \$17,600 for a family of three and \$10,400 for a single individual.

Only Detroit has a higher poverty rate among cities with populations of more than 250,000.

"We are a compassionate city. We can do better than this," said Whyte, who rushed her son onto a public bus to get him to day care, fed him toast and peanut butter along the way and then had less time to spend with him at the end of the day.

When she did use her car, rather than put 75 cents of the 84 cents left in her budget into a parking meter, she got a \$30 ticket.

The census shows 43 percent of Buffalo children live in poverty.

"Your entire day would be spent on limiting possibility and choices for your children," said Arlene Kaukus, president of the United Way of Buffalo and another challenge participant.

Those in other large cities upstate aren't faring any better: In Rochester, 30.1 percent of individuals live in poverty, while the percentage is 29.6 percent in Syracuse and 27.1 percent in Albany.

"The food you choose, the trips in the car or where you can go, the recreational choices you can enjoy _ everything you need to do on behalf of your child has to be an intentional choice," Kaukus said, "and it's all about limiting. ...Children in western New York do not deserve to grow up in households where there is no possibility."

Since learning of the census numbers in August, "We haven't had the community-wide discussion about poverty that we need to have," said William O'Connell, executive director of the Homeless Alliance of Western New York.

He called on Mayor Byron Brown and Erie County Executive Chris Collins to establish a task force to recommend poverty-reversing policies.

"Poverty needs to be the lens through which we create all of our policies," O'Connell said.

Brown in January appointed a deputy mayor, Donna Brown, and immediately charged her with developing an anti-poverty strategy for his administration.

"It certainly concerns everyone here and it's yet another reason why we're aggressively pursuing a variety of initiatives," Brown spokesman Peter Cutler said, "especially from an economic development standpoint, neighborhood based, as well as larger commercial developments."

O'Connell said neighborhood development and the growth of small businesses with jobs that pay a livable wage will be key.

"Across our country, world-class cities like New York, San Francisco, Seattle and Austin have made reducing poverty a priority in their policy making," he said. "Why should Buffalo and Erie County do less?"

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