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### Failing miserably at being poor for two days

By Jay Tokasz

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County Legislator Maria Whyte couldn't do it. Nor could Common Council Member Michael Lo- Curto, United Way President Arlene F. Kaukus or the Rev. Ronald P. Sajdak of St. Martin de Porres Catholic Church.

Challenged to spend no more than \$9.25 a day, as part of a two-day exercise calling attention to area poverty, they all admitted failing miserably.

"You have to be 100 percent perfect, 100 percent of the time to make that budget," Whyte said.

The "poverty challenge" was put forward by the Homeless Alliance of Western New York, which earlier in the week called on community leaders and lawmakers to join in solidarity with the 30 percent of Buffalo residents who live at or below the federal poverty line of \$866 (or \$1,466 for a family of three) in income per month.

More than two dozen people, including religious leaders, heads of human service agencies and lawmakers, accepted the unusual invitation.

Sajdak, a Catholic priest, figured he would have less difficulty with the assignment than most people. "I did accept the challenge, and I found myself flunking it terribly," he said.

The alliance arrived at the \$9.25 daily allotment by subtracting the cost of fair market rent in Buffalo, including utilities and repairs, as well as clothing costs.

Fair market rent for a one-bedroom apartment in Buffalo is \$513, according to the U. S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. Clothing is \$76 per month, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics.

That leaves \$277 for the month or, divided by 30 days, about \$9.25 per day.

The alliance also assigned other costs, such as driving a car or using a cell phone, based upon national averages.



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Driving, for example, costs about \$6.81 per day; having medical insurance, another \$1.60.

During the challenge, LoCurto gave up cable television and the Internet, saving about \$2.48 against his budget. But he continued to use his cell phone, drove to work and maintained his health insurance.

“That left me with a budget for the day of negative 82 cents, before I started eating,” said LoCurto, who represents the Delaware District. “I don’t function if I don’t have three meals a day, and they weren’t elaborate meals . . . What do you do if you have to buy a \$4 bottle of Tylenol? You don’t have dinner that day?”

Whyte tried to give up driving her car one day, saving \$6.81 of the \$9.25 allotment. It meant getting up an hour earlier to take her son, Liam, to day care on the bus at an average daily cost of \$2.20.

But later in the day, Whyte learned her husband wouldn’t be able to pick up Liam at the appropriate time, and the day care center charges \$15 extra for late-arriving parents.

Whyte had to make a decision: Take the bus again and risk showing up late at the day care center and incurring the real \$15 fee or stick to the challenge and “spend” the \$6.81 to use her car and go into debt.

“I broke the rules. I used my car to pick up my son, Liam,” she said.

The second day, Whyte drove again, and this time with just 84 cents remaining in her budget, she decided not to feed the parking meter.

“I took my chances, and this is the parking ticket I got,” she said, holding up the slip of paper and bright orange envelope that again put her into debt for the day.

But the real victim throughout the challenge, she discovered, was her son, because Whyte was “stressed out” and had less time to spend with him.

After the experience, Kaukus said, she figures that people with poverty-level incomes are more skilled budgeters than those with larger incomes, despite the common perception that poor people simply don’t know how to handle money.

She said if (\$9.25) is someone’s budget, “your entire day would be spent on limiting possibilities and choices for your children,” she said.

The alliance developed the challenge to call more attention to poverty in the second-poorest large city in the country, according to U. S. Census Bureau data.

Executive Director Bill O’Connell urged Mayor Byron W. Brown and County Executive Chris Collins to take more of a leadership role in addressing poverty and to create a task force that will develop policies lifting people out of poverty.

“Poverty needs to be the lens through which we create all of our policies,” O’Connell said.


Putting more money into the hands of people with low incomes was a better strategy to growing the local economy than searching for “silver-bullet” projects for the city’s skyline, he added.

The mayor has a strong commitment to addressing the city’s poverty issues, said Peter Cutler, Brown’s spokesman.

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