

OACAA Briefing

March 2014



Agency Happenings

NOCAC Hosts Unique Advocacy Dinner for Community

On Tuesday, March 18, the Northwestern Ohio Community Action Commission (NOCAC) hosted a Hunger Banquet. The goal of this unique advocacy event was to challenge stereotypes and bring reality to the surface, explained Angie Franklin, director of Community Services with NOCAC.

The educational dining experience was designed to expand the understanding of people in the community regarding issues related to hunger, food insecurity and poverty in Northwest Ohio. As the 327 guests entered the event, they were randomly assigned a socio-economic level. The levels included a wealthy/elite level, three middle class levels (upper middle class, middle class, and lower middle class representing people on the edge of poverty who make too much money to qualify for assistance programs, but not quite enough to get by), and poverty. The guests were then treated accordingly, receiving both stereotypical and real-life treatment.



Amanda, a volunteer and Northwest College student describes her experience portraying a disabled homeless person to event MC Cory Dobbelaere

The wealthy participants were treated to a five course gourmet meal with more food than they could eat. Their tables were elegantly dressed with linens and hors' devours were served. The middle class levels had progressively lesser meals, down to a sack lunch. And the poverty level was first told to stand in the corner and wait until someone could deal with them. They then had to stand in line, soup kitchen style, for their meager meal. There were not enough seats for them, and scattered on the ground were leaves and crumpled newspapers.

The event also included role players, such as a man playing the guitar for tips outside that later came in and told his story and how people ignoring him made him feel. Another role player was a man who owned a local grocery store that closed down because of the competition from big box stores, whose friends did not know how much he was struggling until he got up and told his story, moving from an upper class level to a lower class level.

The event was emceed by Cory Dobbelaere. Fifteen years ago, Cory's own struggle with mental illness resulted in him becoming homeless

and seeking out services at NOCAC. Cory now shares his personal experience and his passion as an advocate for mental health and juvenile justice in order to make sure that others don't have to feel the way he did. Throughout the evening Dobbelaere interviewed attendees to learn about their perspectives from the event, how they were treated, and how they saw others being treated.

Some quotes from attendees included:

- "Nothing raises the level of understanding and compassion quite like spending some time in another's shoes."
- "The evening opened our minds to what it means



Defiance College Student Marissa portrays a stereotypical homeless person



PATH Center Volunteer Aaron (right) portrayed a single male in a low-paying job on the verge of homelessness. After receiving job training assistance he was able to move from poverty to the middle class section of the event.

Agency Happenings

not only to be homeless, but to be down on your luck, not knowing where to turn for help. Due to this banquet, people now know how to get help and where to tell one to look for help. Thank you NOCAC."

- "It was an amazing night. It gave me a new perspective of the homeless and how a person's social class can change in a short period of time. We do need to show compassion to those who are struggling."
- "After hearing the stories that were shared, I quickly realized that could easily be me standing in that same line at the soup kitchen."

"The event was very interactive and the audience was engaged and enthusiastic," said Franklin. "NOCAC's Hunger Banquet was an amazing experience. The group of volunteers, Community Action staff, PATH Center Clients and Community Members – together -- sharing their individual experiences and thoughts about hunger and homelessness was absolutely inspiring. I am forever in awe of the courage and the goodness of the people that are most ignored," she continued.

"This was a great event that really demonstrated the effects of poverty and what moderate and low income people experience," said OACAA Executive Director Phil Cole who attended the banquet. "I encourage all Community Action Agencies to hold similar events in their area."



Volunteer Tabby (left) tells event MC Cory (right) about her role playing a homeless vet who stood outside holding a sign asking for a ride as attendees entered the banquet. Only one person stopped to talk to her and most avoided eye contact.



The Hurtt family volunteered to play a family living out of their truck parked outside the event. When interviewed, wife Peggy told attendees her husband hurt his back and couldn't work. "Homelessness is embarrassing... We keep it a secret," she said.



Volunteer Tanya went from table to table in all of the social classes showing people her poorly written resume, trying to get someone to give her a job. Many people seemed annoyed by her odd behavior and disheveled appearance. When interviewed she told the crowd that she only wanted someone to give her a chance. If someone would just give her a chance it wouldn't have to be this way and she wouldn't have to be so angry.