

October 22, 2017 – Catawba County Organizations Take Action Against Poverty

HICKORY — In January 1964, President Lyndon B. Johnson declared a war on poverty that sparked an interest in calculating how many people were impoverished across the nation.

The following year, the Office of Economic Opportunity adopted Mollie Orshansky's poverty thresholds, which were derived from the cost of a minimum food diet multiplied by three to account for other family expenses, according to the United States Census Bureau.

In the mid-1990s, Dr. Diana Pearce, the director of the Women and Poverty Project at Wider Opportunities for Women at the time, created the Self-Sufficiency Standard (SSS).

The SSS was a measure that provided realistic and detailed data on what clients individually needed to be self-sufficient, according to the SSS website.

Fast-forward to present day, thousands of nonprofit organizations are using the SSS to provide necessary resources, including United Way of Catawba County.

“If we can better explain (poverty), it helps others understand why people struggle, and why the working population still needs resources to be successful,” Jennie Conner, executive director of United Way of Catawba County, said. “The old way of thinking is that people that are receiving assistance aren’t doing anything — that is not true.

“People who are working, and working hard, long hours to provide for their families, are still having to utilize resources.” Director of Resource Development Pamela Pope said the federal poverty level is outdated, and “nobody’s quite sure what pieces of it have been updated and how it has been updated.”

“According to the Federal Poverty index, people living above that index are still below what it takes to be self-sufficient in our county,” Pope added.

The findings

The SSS is broken down state by state and county by county, which makes the data geographically specific – something the federal poverty measure has not historically provided.

Catawba County's SSS primarily uses a family unit of one adult, one preschool-aged child and one school-aged child because it is the most common family unit among many nonprofit organizations' clientele.

For one adult and two children, the 2017 federal poverty measure is \$2,180 per month — the 2017 SSS states \$4,192 is needed to be considered self-sufficient in Catawba County.

Additionally, the federal poverty measure considers food to be a third of monthly costs, and the remaining amount encompasses all other budget items.

The SSS considers housing, childcare, food, transportation, health care, taxes and tax credits, emergency savings, and a miscellaneous category to better represent a family's monthly budget.

Also, the 2017 SSS states for the same family unit, a salary of \$45,752 is necessary to be self-sufficient, while the federal poverty guideline states \$20,160 is efficient.

A person with a full-time minimum wage job generates \$21,559 annually in Catawba County, and the 2017 SSS states a person must work 120 hours per week to be considered self-sufficient.

Taking action

“Instead of trying to think is this where we are or aren’t, this data lets the general public know what it takes to be self-sufficient in our county based on today’s costs,” Pope said. “The whole point of self-sufficiency is to be at that point financially to where you don’t need any income supports.”

Pope added that with the resources and programs in Catawba County, the ability to start people down an economic pathway is very achievable.

“We really have a responsibility to make sure the employers, the county and cities understand what the differences might be, and (its) important to push these resources along,” Pope said.

The Eastern Catawba Cooperative Christian Ministry (ECCCM) has been helping folks in financial crises for years.

“In 2010 is when I began to notice that client files were getting very thick; some clients were coming in and asking for more money and things like that. That is not what we are here for,” Executive Director Robert Silber said.

Silber added he felt many organizations were looking to ECCCM for a solution to address the outstanding financial crises in clients.

“The problem of people’s crisis situations are bigger than what one organization can do, but that got me started thinking about where my responsibility was, and passing along these dollars to people who need help versus people who want it,” Silber said.

In 2010, Silber did not find a model to help him write a program to aid his clients so he created a program all on his own.

“We developed the program, and we put people in the classroom to teach them the basics of financial education,” Silber said. “We had some interesting responses to the program where people were shocked that someone was really trying to help them.”

Silber and his staff at ECCCM saw the progress clients were making and decided to continue the program, which has fostered many success stories over the years.

“In early 2016-17, Jennie Conner brought me the Self-Sufficiency Standard book and that began a whole new conversation within the community of how can we help a family regain self-sufficiency, if they even ever had it to begin with,” Silber said.

Since his introduction to the SSS, Silber has been using bits and pieces of the findings and the Economic Security Pathways booklet within his program.

“It all starts with education; it’s what set you apart from others,” Silber said. “When I took over in 2010 here, most of my staff only had High School Diplomas.

“Today all of my staff has a college degree — the quality of the employee is so much different, and the education matters.”

One of the first things Silber does with clients who have no high school diploma is starting them on the track to receiving their General Education Development (GED).

Other than receiving a GED, Silber says many of his clients pursue Work Force Ready certificates, seek various technical training certificates, participate in the Work First program and pursue higher education opportunities.

“You can really tell a difference between the people who want to be helped,” Silber said.

Silber said ECCCM also tends to see the one parent, one preschool-aged and one school-aged child family unit often.

“It seems that there is a failure in the family when the dad leaves and mom has the kids,” Silber said. “If you’re a minimum wage earner and have two children, you have to work three jobs in order to make enough money to be self-sufficient — nobody can do that.”

Silber added that when he looked into the 2017 SSS for North Carolina, there was only one profession that would pay enough money for that family unit, which was a registered nurse.

“That requires a lot of education, and some of our clients have pursued that path, and we encourage them along the way,” Silber said.

Another organization that aids families in remaining at work and financially stable is Adult Life Programs.

Adult Life Programs (ALP) centers in Hickory, Conover and Maiden provide day services to adults 18 years of age and older who need the support and care of a day program.

“When you look at the number of sandwich caregivers who are taking care of their children and parents, or adult children caring for parents, those numbers are steadily increasing in our county,” Executive Director Mark Bumgarner said.

Bumgarner added that ALP centers give family members a chance to remain at work, while their loved ones are properly cared for.

“Without us, the folks we serve would have gone into assisted living or long term care nursing,” Bumgarner said. “We actually achieved a cost saving of up to \$9.7 million in Medicaid long-term care costs.”

Bumgarner said one of the significant things about saving costs is the money consists of local tax dollars so keeping costs low also keeps the taxpayer cost down.

“The right thing happens to also be the smart thing in this case, and we are very proud of that,” Bumgarner said. “When we talk about self-sufficiency, I think people get the idea that it’s the whole pull yourself up by the bootstraps — it’s really not.

“It’s looking at how do we as a collective really work and support everyone so that we are all doing well.”

With their willingness to work collaboratively, organizations like United Way of Catawba County, ECCCM, ALP and many others are tackling poverty as best they know how.

“That’s what we are all about here at United Way, along with all the nonprofits — we get these resources to folks who need them and make sure that we provide the appropriate resources,” Conner said. “This is not one organization or one nonprofit — this is everyone working together to make it happen.”