

EARNING THEIR WAY



BRYANT HAWKINS — *The York Dispatch*

Liz Morales of the Community Progress Council sits in “jail” after trying to skip out on her duties during the Poverty Simulation project at York College on Wednesday. The simulation attempts to mimic the week-to-week struggle of a low-income family.

Experiencing poverty

► **LIFE LESSON:** Simulator exercise teaches professionals about the low-income people they serve.

By **JOHN WALK**
The York Dispatch

When low-income families meet with social workers to discuss their needs, it's often difficult for the social workers to understand the needs of the families first hand, said Abby Fisher, social worker for Lutheran Social Services.

But at York College on Thursday, a poverty simulation helped social service pro-

fessionals better understand those needs.

And Fisher was among more than 70 employees from various York County social service agencies who participated in the simulation.

How it works: The employees were separated into simulated low-income families. Each family had to find various solutions to pay for bills, such as rent, utilities, food, transportation and clothing, within a one-month period.

But each family starts without money. To cover finances, each family could sell its valuables to a pawn shop for money. Additionally, a family could make money by receiving unemploy-

ment benefits, food stamps, or by having a working family member who receives a weekly check.

The simulation was broken down into four 15-minute periods, with each period serving as a simulated week.

The situation was different for each simulated family. Fisher was partnered with Hector Ortiz, a social worker with Dauphin County Office of Human Services. Ortiz and Fisher were considered an unmarried couple with a 1-year-old child living in an apartment, and together they had to come up with \$730 to pay their bills in the simulated one-month period.

Throughout the entire exercise, Ortiz looked for work

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while Fisher visited a simulated pawn shop, grocery store, bank and other simulated agencies.

Ortiz and Fisher encountered several problems in the four-week simulation. Ortiz was unable to cash his work check because the bank was closed, for example, and Fisher

spent valuable time applying for benefits. Additionally, the simulation would randomly give a family a situation that might cause financial difficulties, such as Ortiz being notified he needed to pay for a family member's funeral.

Understanding: By the end of the simulation, Ortiz said the experience will help him in his real-life profession.

"Sometimes people who

deal with low-income individuals or low-income families make assumptions, such as unemployed people are just lazy," Ortiz said. "But going through something like this makes you understand them better."

Fisher agreed. "We hear about experiences of low-income individuals and low-income families," she said. "But until you personally go through living in poverty, you just can't know what it's like."

The simulation kit was created by the Missouri Association for Community Action. York College purchased the kit several years ago and has already conducted the simulation with more than 125 York

College students. Wednesday was the first time the simulation was held for professionals, said Mary Ligon, a simulation organizer and assistant professor of gerontology at the school.

"We have done for stu-

dents in the past, but we thought this would be very beneficial to those who work in the social services field," she said.

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