

Opinion

PERSPECTIVE

Unemployment and poverty are hard work

Survival leaves little time for anything else

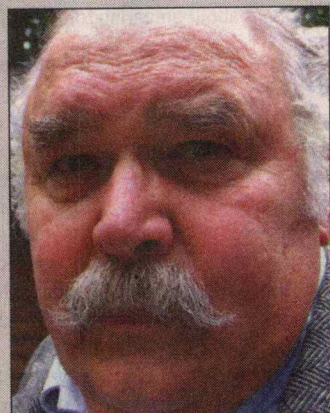
Unless you've lived it, it's hard to wrap your head around the physical toll living in poverty can take on an individual.

Adding to the fear and anxiety brought on by poverty, the poor also have to navigate the rigors of everyday stress, most of which are made far worse by lack of income. The emotional demands placed on a person with limited resources are immense, affecting their ability to do well in school, to succeed at work and even to pay bills on time. Imagine going about your everyday life while also having daily pressures such as these.

A single mom with several children was being threatened with the shutoff of her electricity for a \$1,200 bill. She had obtained a no contact order on her estranged partner and father of her children. The mom then had accounts put in her name and kept them current, fully expecting her partner to be responsible for the bills in his name. Instead, she was made responsible for his old bills too. Her income at the time was a \$700 monthly survivor benefit plus food stamps. So needless to say, she couldn't pay the additional \$1,000 when presented with the prior PUD bills of her former partner.

Our volunteer contributed our maximum amount while seeking further funding from our partners in the faith community and working out a payment plan with the PUD. The mom was able to obtain a new job while her oldest daughter began babysitting. They have worked hard and are staying current with the utility bills and were so grateful that we were there to offer both financial and emotional support during this emergency. Months later the mom was preparing to sleep in her car while one daughter had major surgery at an out of area hospital. Our volunteers worked with the hospital to secure two nights stay. We provided money for gas, ferry tickets and meals at the hospital during the postoperative period.

Hundreds of times our friends experience temporary setbacks due to emergencies, such as repair bills, excess winter heating costs, medical and dental bills. One appalling example is where a landlord doubled the rent for dozens of folks. While the renters were awaiting the results of new considerations and negotiations, we supplemented their incomes by providing vouchers for



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groceries, gas and other fundamental necessities.

Except for a few people "flying signs" on street corners you can live and work here and not see the poverty that is all around. Average household income in Jefferson County is \$52,000, \$5,500 lower than the national average and \$16,000 lower than the Washington average.

To find the people you need only offer your help to those who are helping now; food bank, your own faith community, Dove House, shelters, youth reading programs, and mentor programs.

Non-governmental, all-volunteer organizations can act more quickly and be more flexible when emergencies arise. If our committed faith community didn't exist, OlyCAP would be overrun and many, many people would be literally out in the cold without utilities, housing, food, medical assistance, transportation and other basic necessities we take for granted. St Vincent de Paul EJC has been meeting emergency requests for the basic needs of East Jefferson County residents since 2005.

Over the last five years our twenty volunteers answer an average 1,000 requests for aid and help 2,000 people per year. Our clients as well as the other social service agencies in the county rely on us for assistance when there is nowhere else to turn. Knowing that there is someone who cares can make all the difference. Everything helps.

(J.E. Cantlon wrote this with research by Laurie Meyer. Cantlon is President of the Society of St. Vincent dePaul East Jefferson County and one of the founders of Bayside Housing & Services, a 501(c)(3) housing non-profit. Meyer is Secretary of the Society of St. Vincent dePaul.)