

Features

Isolation and independence compound rural poor's problems

By Lee Strong

In his inaugural address, President George Bush praised "the thousand points of light ... all the community organizations that are spread like stars throughout the nation, doing good."

Representatives of several dozen "points of light" from the five-county Finger Lakes region met Tuesday, Jan. 24, in Geneva to participate in the "Poverty in the Finger Lakes: Working for Change" regional conference sponsored by the Finger Lakes Office of Social Ministry.

Conference organizer Peggy Novelli, legislative coordinator and advocate with the social ministry office, said the ultimate goal of the conference was to encourage participating groups to work together for legislative change.

Approximately 130 participants from state and local agencies took part in the conference. During the morning session, they attended one of six workshops: child care; welfare rights; hunger/nutrition; housing/homelessness; church, faith and action; and the voice of the Hispanic community. Following lunch, they heard reports from each of the workshops and met in county groupings.

According to Novelli, the region faces many of the same poverty issues present in urban areas, but for the rural poor these problems are compounded by isolation, lack of public transportation, and lack of awareness — resulting in under-use — of programs created to help the homeless and hungry. Among conclusions participants reached were that adequate housing is just as much a right as are food and clothing, that these needs have grown markedly in the last eight years, and that the private sector can no longer handle the burden alone.

"The private sector is wearing out; they can't keep up with the demand," said Tricia McEnroe, director of the Nutrition Consortium in Albany. "I heard people say they really need help from the government."

According to Heidi Siegfried, associate director of the Albany-based Hunger Action Network of New York State, the private sector has had to pick up the slack because the federal government has failed to keep up with demands. "In 1975, public assistance came to 125 percent of the poverty level," she said. "Over the years, it's just eroded. Even with recent increases in public-assistance benefits, it's now only 77 percent of the federal poverty level."



Just outside of Penn Yan lies the old Hamm Farm, where a number of onetime tenant houses stand in various states of decay.

Meanwhile, Siegfried said, the number of working people seeking help has grown because the minimum wage has not increased since 1981. "Twenty percent of people going to food pantries are working people," she observed.

As a result, each month an estimated 2.5 to 3 million people in the state experience hunger, Siegfried said. Food kitchens across the state serve an average of 700,000 meals a month, while food pantries provide food for 270,000 individuals and families during the same period.

Figures for food providers in the Finger Lakes parallel those of the state, Novelli said, pointing out that in Canandaigua — with a population of approximately 10,000 — the Salvation Army feeds an average of 524 families a month. During the same period, the Gleaners Soup Kitchen typically serves 588 adults, 391 elderly people and 52 children.

In addition to hunger, the rural poor frequently lack adequate, affordable housing. Dana Warner, director of the Keuka Housing Council, noted that Yates County is currently experiencing a severe housing shortage. As a result of the crunch, landlords have little incentive to repair properties because they know people will rent them regardless of their condi-



Linda Dow Hayes — Courier-Journal

This house on Benham Street in Penn Yan stands empty because of fire damage. Although it is structurally sound, the owner has not attempted to make the building habitable.

tion. Consequently, he said, many of the poor in the county are living in substandard housing.

And unless more money is allocated to build new housing units and repair existing units, the situation could grow much worse in the coming years, Warner warned. "The best is that we will hold our own," he said. "But good and improvable housing stock will be lost if we don't invest the money. It'll be more expensive to pick up the needs if we have to start from scratch at some point in the future."

Siegfried pointed out that the conference was very much concerned with the future, observing that unless the cycle of poverty is broken, it is self-perpetuating. Children who do not receive adequate food are prone to illness, frequently causing them to miss school. Even when they are healthy enough to attend school, they often go without breakfast, a practice shown to reduce students' learning ability.

Meanwhile, Siegfried continued, companies have begun to recognize the lack of education and health problems resulting from poor nutrition as key factors in deciding to locate new plants. "That's why we see the industries (looking for sites) not just looking at the tax base," she observed. "They're looking at poverty, health care, literacy, school drop-out rates." As a result, new jobs are not being created in rural areas even during times of economic growth and relative prosperity, she said.

Conference participants acknowledged that help is available for the rural poor, but that people in rural areas are not taking advantage of it. For example, only approximately 50 percent of the people eligible for food stamps use them. Only 48 percent of those eligible for the Women, Infant and Children program (WIC) take advantage of its benefits.

"My experience is that there is a reluctance on the part of people in rural areas to use the programs," McEnroe said. "They have a lot of pride."

In addition, McEnroe said, the rural poor are often unaware of the programs and services available to them. In part, this stems from the federal government's reduction in funding to advertise its programs. State programs and services, meanwhile, are hampered by the sparse population of rural areas, she noted. "It's not always practical to set up a satellite office to serve 10 people," she said, "but the people are often too poor to afford a car to get into towns and cities."

Even when people do get to the services — especially local departments of social services — they experience a high level of frustration due to inadequate staff sizes, stiff requirements,

excessive paper work and long waits. "We find there's a lot of reception-room denials," Siegfried said. "People are not being seen and are not getting the services they're entitled to. People are more likely to go to a food pantry because they would be treated in a compassionate manner."

Novelli noted that if the hoped-for legislative network is successful, state and federal agencies might be pressured to be more compassionate in the way that the rural poor are treated. In addition, legislators will be more inclined to vote funding for programs to address the needs of the rural poor. As a follow-up to the conference, Novelli will help to organize county-wide coalitions in the five-county region to encourage

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Father Murphy said that he will eventually return to Rochester, but for now, his mission is serving the broader church. "A priest should be concerned with the whole church, not just his diocese," he said, adding, "that's too parochial an attitude."

Meanwhile, at the Center for Human Development in Washington, D.C., Father James Schwartz is trying "to identify what is on the cutting edge of spiritual renewal for people in ministry."

Father Schwartz, former director of the diocesan ministry to priests program, sees his work in Washington and his studies at the Jung Institute in Switzerland as means to gain wider knowledge and experience of spiritual renewal. Eventually, he will bring that knowledge and experience back to Rochester. "I think there's a need for spiritual renewal in Rochester," he commented. "I think the gifts I'll bring back will make me a whole person myself and better able to work for spiritual renewal in Rochester."

Even as he works in Washington, Father Schwartz maintains his contacts with the Rochester diocese. From Feb. 28 through March 2, for example, he will return to the diocese to conduct a spiritual-renewal program for deacons and their wives. And he plans to return here to work once his stint at the center is over. "I see the church of Rochester as my home, as my community, as the family I belong to and to which I have a commitment," he said. "I certainly enjoy the opportunity to be here, but I see it as a certain time commitment and I intend to come home."

Father Mulligan said that in making decisions about whether a priest should be allowed to

serve outside the diocese, diocesan officials must weigh the good of the individual and diocese and the good of the wider church. Sometimes the decision to allow a priest to serve elsewhere can be difficult, he said, but one concern remains paramount: How can the local church and its priests best minister in the name of Jesus Christ?

"If we believe the Spirit calls people, we can't control that," noted Father Mulligan, whose brother, Father Charles Mulligan, is currently working outside the diocese as a missionary in Santiago, Chile. "I think Bishop Clark is a firm believer in trying to respect what the individual is trying to do, what the individual feels called to do."

The diocesan official recounted a conversation his brother had had about working in the missions. One night while sitting with a group of priests, one priest asked the missionary how he could be certain that he was making the best use of his time and talent in building up the Kingdom of God. Father Charles Mulligan responded, "How can you be sure?"

"We put our gifts at the service of God, and as St. Paul says, it's God that gives the growth," the moderator concluded.

Bishop Kearney parents plan 'Super-Fine '89' fund raiser

The Parents Association at Bishop Kearney High School is sponsoring a "Super-Fine '89 Parents Dance," beginning at 8 p.m. Saturday, Jan. 28. The informal affair will take place in the school auditorium, 125 Kings Hwy. S., Rochester.

Those who plan on attending the dance should bring their own beverage. Music will be provided by "Goldrush." The donation is \$10 per person. Tickets will be sold at the door. Call 716/467-6595 for information.

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