

# Group Hopes to Eliminate Child Poverty by 2020

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JANESVILLE — The numbers are stark.

In 2006, 15 percent of Rock County children—more than one in seven—were living below the federal poverty line. One-third of Rock County children were eligible for free or reduced lunch.

But Vision 2020 doesn't want to focus on the negative. Instead, it's looking to the future with a bold goal: nothing less than the elimination of childhood poverty in Wisconsin by the year 2020.

Social workers, school district employees and others involved with poverty in Rock County met with representatives from across the state Friday to learn about the initiative from the Wisconsin Council on Children and Family, Wisconsin Head Start and the Wisconsin Community Action Program.

“We're tired of just talking about it,” said Vicky Selkove with the Wisconsin Council on Children and Families. “We know poverty is a problem in our communities, we know it's a problem statewide, and we've got ideas about what to do about it.”

Selkove identified four things families need to eliminate child poverty:

- Safe and affordable housing.
- Quality and affordable health care.
- Quality early care and education.
- Good jobs that support families.

The goal is to take action, not just discuss problems, speakers said. The meeting focused on programs that work in communities around Wisconsin, such as a four-month initiative in the Fox Cities that turned into permanent coalition to support anti-poverty efforts.

A focused effort can produce results, Selkove said. During the President Lyndon Johnson's War on Poverty in the 1960s, poverty nationwide dropped 42 percent in nine years, she said.

“If we could reduce poverty almost in half in nine years all across our country, what could we do in 13 years in our own state?” she asked.

Local officials hope to form their own version of the Vision 2020 project in Rock County, said Marc Perry, Community Action director of planning and development. Many organizations address child poverty now, but they don’t always work together, and the community often doesn’t know about their efforts, he said.

“We do a lot of things on our own, but it treats the symptoms, it doesn’t treat the disease.”

Service organizations will hold their second annual coalition summit in October, and Perry hopes they turn their focus on child poverty, he said.

“We will continue the dialogue, and more importantly, continue the work,” he said.

### **FOX CITIES PROJECT SHOWED PEOPLE LIFE IN POVERTY**

During Friday’s meeting, participants learned about Project Promise, a coalition in the Fox Cities started in January 2007 to raise awareness about poverty and start to reduce it.

The effort grew out of a one-day meeting that turned into a four-month initiative, said Nicole Harrison, director of human development with Community Action in Appleton.

The initiative included:

-- A community book read. The local library encouraged the community to read “Nickled and Dimed: On (Not) Getting By in America” by Barbara Ehrenreich. More than 3,000 people checked out the book, and many participated in book discussions, Harrison said.

At the end, Ehrenreich spoke before 500 people at the library.

-- Poverty simulations. More than 600 people have participated in 10 simulations showing residents what everyday life is like for families in poverty.

-- Study circles. The initiative held several small groups to study a curriculum dealing with diversity and poverty issues, similar to the study circles held in Rock County by the Diversity Action Team.

-- Money management classes.

-- A kickoff breakfast to involve the local business community.

### **FILLING THE GAPS**

Participants in Friday's Vision 2020 meeting broke into small groups to discuss what Rock County offers, what it's missing and how they can improve the situation. Here are some of their ideas:

Gaps in services:

- Transportation.
- Childcare, especially for people who are looking for jobs.
- Funding.
- Health care, especially dental.
- Affordable housing.
- Bilingual services.
- Life skills education.

Ideas:

- Establish better lines of communication between agencies.
- Involve the business and academic communities.
- Coordinate services among agencies.
- Talk to policy makers.
- Increase awareness.

## **TO LEARN MORE**

For more information about Vision 2020, visit [www.2020wi.org](http://www.2020wi.org).

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