

# Groups hope to end child poverty by 2020

**Beloit Daily News**

**Saturday, June 28, 2008 4:12 AM CDT**

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As the Wisconsin Head Start Association's executive director drove to the Rock County Job Center Friday for a meeting about reducing childhood poverty in the county, she stopped for gasoline and watched as a woman nearby struggled to find \$4 cash to pay for her gas.

"The face of poverty is clearly among us," Shelley Cousin said. "It's clearly standing next to us every single day."

But it doesn't have to.

That's the message of the Wisconsin Council on Children and Families, the Wisconsin Community Action Program Association and the Wisconsin Head Start Association.

Together, they are promoting the Vision 2020 Campaign. It aims to end child poverty in the state by the year 2020 by building a statewide network of advocates who can help put poverty issues and policy solutions at the top of lawmakers' agendas.

"We can no longer sit by and hope decision makers see the importance of these things on their own," Vicky Selkove, of the Wisconsin Council on Children and Families, said to a few dozen people representing Stateline Area service providers and governmental bodies.

Advocates in Rock County can be anyone and will include groups and coalitions already working on poverty issues, said Marc Perry, Community Action's director of planning and development for Rock and Walworth counties. As one, they will identify and work to reduce the root causes of poverty.

"A lot are tired of treating the symptoms," Perry said.

To fight against poverty, the Vision 2020 campaign will target areas directly linked to healthy economic futures -- quality early childhood education, health care, family-supporting wages and safe and affordable housing.

According to data compiled by Vision 2020, 15 percent of the 39,861 children residing in Rock County in 2006 lived in poverty -- a 6.4 percent increase from 2000. About 18 percent of Walworth County's 23,091 kids also lived in poverty that year.

Doubtful poverty can be eliminated?

The people of Vision 2020 aren't. They referenced President Lyndon Johnson's war on poverty -- which, they said, reduced poverty in the United States by 42 percent in nine years -- as evidence it can happen through coordinated and focused efforts.

Inspired by those numbers, Selkove said the members of Vision 2020 asked, "What could we do in 13 years in one state?"

One Wisconsin community already has learned what can happen in two years, and a representative from those efforts spoke at Friday's event.

Service providers in the Fox Cities organized a one-day event in May 2006 to expose community leaders to the rising poverty-stricken population -- a group often overlooked because the area is considered affluent. After the day, organizers felt more needed to be done to reach out to the community and initiate true change, Nicole Harrison, one of the organizers, said.

For six months, organizers planned Project Promise, an intensive four-month period that would give residents a chance to learn about the situation and create steps to tackle the problem.

After 16 weeks of activities -- such as a book read, poverty simulations and money management classes -- the community didn't want Project Promise to stop. So, Harrison said, a year after Project Promise launched, a permanent poverty coalition debuted.

For more information about Vision 2020, go to [www.2020wi.org](http://www.2020wi.org) or contact Perry at (608)755-2279 about how to get involved.