

## A Conversation on Poverty

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Yes, it takes a village to raise a child, but it also takes pre-natal care, full-day kindergarten and maybe even a Valley Community College with job-specific training.

Those were some of the ideas suggested during a “Community Conversation on Children and Poverty in the Valley,” at John J. Sullivan’s on Wakelee Avenue Monday night.

About 100 educators, administrators, social workers, non-profit agency workers and others attended the event, hosted by TEAM, Inc. and the Valley Council for Human Services.

The goal was two-fold. First, raise awareness about local kids living in poverty. Second, brainstorm solutions to make it better.

Richard Knoll, TEAM’s president and CEO, reviewed data on poverty and the local economy.

Census data from 2000 showed 13 percent of children under 18 in Ansonia living in poverty, 10 percent in Beacon Falls and Derby, 3 percent in Oxford, 6 percent in Seymour and 3 percent in Shelton.

The poverty line, federally, is set at \$22,050 for a family of four.

Unemployment figures show more people out of work locally compared to three years ago.

- In Ansonia, the unemployment rate jumped from 5.3 percent in 2006 to 9.4 percent in August.
- In Derby, it jumped from 5 percent to 8.9 percent.
- In Oxford, 3.3 percent to 6.6 percent.
- In Seymour, 4.4 percent to 7.8 percent.
- Finally, in Shelton, 3.7 percent to 7.1 percent.

2008 data shows more children in the Valley qualifying for free or reduced price school lunches than four years prior.

- In Ansonia, 47.9 percent of students qualified, up from 44.4 percent in 2004.
- Derby, 40.7 percent qualified, compared to 33.3 percent in 2004.
- Oxford, 6.5 percent, compared to 5.9 percent in 2004.
- Seymour, 14.3 percent, compared to 10.9 in 2004.
- Shelton, 11.3 percent, compared to 9.8 percent in 2004.

Children who grow up in poverty are nine times more likely to drop out of school, two times more likely to go to jail and 2.5 times more likely to become a teen parent, Knoll said. Addressing childhood poverty, he said, not only helps society — but improves the overall economy.

Despite the grim numbers, Elaine Zimmerman, executive director of the Connecticut Commission on Children, reminded the audience that state lawmakers passed a bill in 2004 with a lofty goal — reduce childhood poverty in the state by 50 percent by 2014.

Zimmerman said the Valley is set to receive \$500,000 a year to deal directly with the poverty problem.

Next, the audience broke into small groups to brainstorm short-term and long-term solutions. TEAM and the Valley Council will likely use some of the ideas to form an action plan.

Among the ideas to battle childhood poverty:

- Connect quickly with families new to the area, let them know about services in the Valley
- “FAMILY RESOURCE BUS:” A bus that would travel the Valley with information about social service programs available to families
- Nutrition — whether it means giving kids breakfast in schools or making sure expecting moms are getting enough to eat, nutrition was a common theme
- A Valley Community College, which would provide job training for jobs needed in the Valley
- Affordable child care
- Use school buildings year round, such as a community center during the summer months
- Give more time for families who have to move more time to withdraw their kids from school
- Better transportation

The next step, according to Knoll, is to review the suggestions and, perhaps, meet with the group again.

“You guys are the pioneers,” he told the audience. “It’ll be interesting to see where this ends.”