

Poverty in Wayne County

After the keynote presentations by Wade Norwood and Jay Roscup, summit attendees broke out into smaller groups for serious conversations about poverty. Groups thought about issues surrounding scarcity, equity, empathy, and opportunities.

The following is a summary of those conversations:

Interconnected Issues

Poverty, in general, is a complex topic that presents unique challenges in each community. Rural Wayne County is no exception. Poverty causes – or can be caused by – a lack of specific resources (scarcity). Depending on the needs of community members, those missing resources can be material, or a gap in the delivery of services. Inequities of every description exist between wealthier communities and poorer communities, but also between wealthier and poorer families and individuals within the same community (equity). And, of course, blatant, and subtle inequities exist between members of specific ethnic groups. Misunderstandings about the nature of poverty often get in the way of frank and open discussions (empathy). This makes finding solutions impossible. The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated many of the difficulties facing families. All is not lost, however. As presenter Wade Norwood said, “Never let a crisis go to waste.” This pandemic has given rise to new awareness, new technologies, and new ways of thinking that – if we are thoughtful and strategic – can be used to address some of the struggles faced by our families in poverty (opportunity).

EMPATHY

Misunderstanding People in Poverty

America is a nation that prides itself on its mythology. We tell ourselves that this is a land of plenty. This is a nation of early-rising self-starters who have lifted themselves up by their bootstraps. We all seek after the “American Dream,” and – if we just work hard enough – that dream can be realized for every one of us. The realities presented by poverty fly in the face of how we perceive ourselves, of how we perceive our nation. And when stark reality flies in the face of the beliefs we have grown up with, rather than adjust our beliefs, we reinterpret the facts to better align with our closely held beliefs.

We assume that anyone in poverty in America is there because of poor choices, character flaws, or moral failings. These assumptions are simply not true. Wade Norwood said, “Sometimes poverty is caused by the choices people make. Sometimes poverty is caused by the choices people have available.” Poverty is often generational – passing from adult to child – rather than situational. Maybe poverty is the result of poor choices, but those poor choices were made by the person’s grandparent.

Inaccurate Portrayals of Poverty in Media

Many Americans’ perception of poverty is based on inaccurate portrayals in the media. Too often, poverty is shown to be an urban issue. Cities are portrayed as places where violence, addiction, and despair afflict people of color. The suburbs are shown to be places of wealth, where happy, well-adjusted white people live lives of ease and contentment. The country is populated by hard-working, no-nonsense people of virtue and resolve. We know that these representations are oversimplifications, and yet we are exposed to them every day. This reinforces our misunderstanding of people in poverty and makes empathizing with their situation that much more difficult.

Poverty Has Been Politicized

Like everything else these days, poverty has become part of the Culture War. The political Right tells us that poverty is caused by an individual’s poor choices, moral failings, or unwillingness to work. The political Left pushes simple, one-size-fits-all approaches, like raising the minimum wage, increasing SNAP benefits, or other programs intended to alleviate the symptoms of poverty without addressing its root causes. Poverty is complex. It requires thoughtful conversations and complex solutions. Reducing it to memes and soundbites helps no one.

Poverty Is Stigmatizing

As previously mentioned, poverty is viewed as a personal failing in America. People living in poverty are often reluctant to talk about it, and are embarrassed to admit that they need assistance.

A Little Empathy Goes a Long Way

Everything discussed so far makes empathizing with those in poverty difficult. And without empathy, it is hard to discuss and understand the root causes of poverty, to explore the surrounding issues of scarcity, or to propose viable actions to mitigate hardships caused by – and contributing to – poverty.

How to Build Empathy

Changing hearts and minds is difficult . . . but not impossible. In Wayne County there is a growing acceptance that poverty impacts people across demographics and that the issues faced by people in poverty affect us all. The seeds of empathy have been sown.

Near-Term: A coordinated and consistent communication plan surrounding poverty in Wayne County could move the needle. The Partnership for Strengthening Families will take the lead on these efforts.

Mid-Term: Once the groundwork is properly laid, a credible poverty simulation could be a powerful tool for building empathy among our population.

Long-Term: Once understanding develops and conversations around poverty are common occurrences, we can explain the issue honestly and respectfully with our youth. The next generation can be raised to empathize with the plight of the poor.

SCARCITY

Misunderstanding People in Poverty

Poverty is, by definition, a scarcity of resources. Understanding poverty as a scarcity of financial resources alone, however, is a failure to grasp the true depth of the burden borne by the impoverished. A lack of money to pay bills, to buy nice things, or to take extravagant trips is easily imagined – and just as easily dismissed.

Where understanding and empathy are lacking, it becomes tempting to assume that the person in question doesn't work hard enough, or is able, but unwilling, to find a job. It is easy to blame the person in poverty for their situation and ignore the problem entirely.

The true scarcity of resources goes far beyond the monetary. True poverty sets off a cascade of scarcity that sets insurmountable obstacles in the way of the impoverished; with each obstacle further limiting the opportunities available. Crippling scarcity exists in food, transportation, employment, utilities, education, childcare, healthcare, and eldercare.

Food Scarcity

Like cash, food scarcity is easy to envision. Families without enough to eat presents a clear-cut problem with a seemingly simple solution. Food pantries exist throughout the county. Scouts and other service organizations, as well as school districts and churches

raise donations of non-perishable food items throughout the year. Food Link serves 300 families every week and those slots are always full. The need is very real in Wayne County. Resources are available, but more is needed. Perishable items are hard to come by. Fruits and vegetables are sometimes distributed, and occasionally dairy and frozen processed meats become available, but most of the food is high in sodium or carbohydrates. Even when the community pulls together to provide our neighbors with food, it remains difficult for families to eat healthy.

Transportation Scarcity

Perhaps the greatest obstacle of all is the lack of transportation. Distances in our rural county are great, and our communities are designed to serve people with automobiles. A family without an automobile, or a single automobile will find it difficult to thrive in Wayne County. The high cost of purchasing, maintaining, operating, and insuring a vehicle is a barrier to automobile ownership for many. Those who can't afford a vehicle must rely on walking or bicycling to meet their transportation needs. This limits where people can live. Perhaps enough shops and services can be found in the Villages of Palmyra and Newark, or in the former Villages of Lyons and Macedon, but even then, buying groceries becomes problematic, as the grocery stores are located on the outskirts of these communities, often on busy highways.

Most school buildings are also located on the edges of villages and hamlets, quite frequently on major highways. This makes it difficult for students to participate in activities that fall outside of the normal school day. Caregivers need to make special arrangements to attend meetings at their student's school. This is a barrier to students and families feeling connected to their schools.

A lack of reliable transportation makes it nearly impossible for a person in Wayne County to hold steady employment. Public transportation is extremely limited, consisting of ten bus routes that run no more than three times per day.

Illustration:

Colleen lives near the Clyde Apartments. She learns of a job opening at the Newark Wal-Mart. She checks the bus schedule for available transportation. She can get on a bus at 10:40 AM Monday through Friday. The ride to Wal-Mart takes 30 minutes, so she can be there at 11:10. The last bus to Clyde of the day departs Wal-Mart at 3:10 PM, arriving near the park in Clyde at 3:37. This limits Colleen's availability to less than 4 hours a day, five days per week.

Without reliable transportation, barriers to employment become insurmountable, but the challenges don't end there. Without a use of a reliable vehicle, it is difficult to schedule medical appointments, shop for household items, obtain healthy food choices, access

quality childcare, or maintain social connections. A reliable vehicle is very much a necessity in Wayne County.

Housing Scarcity

The housing inventory in Wayne County consists of older homes. Many of the structures require extensive repairs or upgrades. Although property values are relatively low, especially in the eastern portions of the county, rental rates are tied to the City of Rochester. This means that the monthly rental for a two-bedroom apartment is more than a mortgage payment and property taxes combined, guaranteeing that a family that lacks the down payment for a home will never be able to save enough for that purchase. Additionally, low property values and high rents make houses in Wayne County attractive investments for people from outside our communities to buy houses and – with minimal investments and upkeep – make a quick profit. The condition of these properties continues to decline, money leaves our county, and dreams of home ownership are never realized. Quality housing – especially quality rental units – are in short supply.

Childcare Scarcity

Quality childcare is essential if a parent is going to work. It is essential for early childhood development. And it is essential for a family's wellbeing. Quality childcare is also expensive, and very few employers provide childcare options for their workers. There are qualified daycare providers and early education opportunities, but not everyone who needs childcare works the right schedule or can afford the available programs.

Healthcare Scarcity

There is one hospital and three urgent care centers in Wayne County. Three of these facilities are located in Newark. Primary Care Physicians are available throughout the county, but many practices have a hard time attracting and retaining physicians. Lead time for non-emergency appointments often run two-to-three months out.

Internet Scarcity

Broadband Internet service is practically a necessity in 2021. New York State has made providing high-speed Internet to all New Yorkers a priority. The State web site claims that 98% of New Yorkers have access to high-speed Internet. That statistic makes it sound much nicer than it truly is, however. Great swaths of Eastern Wayne County have

no access to high-speed Internet. The Red Creek Central School District is hit particularly hard, with very few families having access to high-speed Internet. Cost remains a barrier, too. With only a single provider in our region, fees run between \$60 and \$80/month.

Opportunity Scarcity

There are few employers in Wayne County that offer high-paying career options. Those that do are either highly competitive (education), or are relatively unknown throughout the community (Advanced Atomization). Many people do not see remaining in Wayne County as a viable long-term option.

EQUITY

Racial Equity

It should come as no surprise that there is a disparity in wealth, opportunity, and treatment by institutions between people of different racial backgrounds. And yet – unless someone is impacted by systemic racism or takes a critical look at the world – people are often stunned when they learn of the depth of the inequality around them. When asked which service sector most needed to address issues of inequity for the good of all, the overwhelming response was “Law Enforcement.” Education and Healthcare were also discussed.

Wealth Equity

Acknowledging that poverty afflicts people of color in greater proportions, conversations were held around the differences in opportunities available to people living in poverty as opposed to those who are not. Lack of opportunities lead to inequity in education, career choices, and generational wealth.

When asked what steps needed to be taken now to address inequity, the first response was “make sure that the children are okay.” That group concluded with

We then talked about how to reach individuals (outside of the data) & how to reach the community? How can each entity here (schools, county agencies, libraries, non-profits, etc.) make better connections with people and approach specific issues better? Maybe capturing a few marginalized voices and using them as a basis of needs if it's too difficult to reach large numbers [especially

during COVID]? One person said that providing knowledge and tools could be vastly more powerful than providing direct aid.

OPPORTUNITY

The effects of poverty are many: it negatively impacts mental health, limits opportunities, and shortens lives. But all is not lost. There are several strategies we can employ in Wayne County to counteract poverty's negative effects. In fact, we are already doing some of the more difficult work now.

The Partnership a very unusual collaboration. It brings schools, county agencies, and non-profits together to discuss the well being of our communities. By the simple acts of communication and knowledge sharing, we are improving outcomes for the people we serve.

We know what works to improve people's lives. Maybe we can join our voices to see if our government – County, State, and Federal – can provide funding to implement some needed solutions. If that doesn't work, we can join our voices at the ballot box.

The first step to solving a problem is acknowledging that the problem exists. Nearly 100 people today took a hard look at poverty in Wayne County and had serious, meaningful conversations. We raised awareness among ourselves today. Tomorrow, we can spread that knowledge throughout our communities. With knowledge and awareness comes empathy. And that is another step down the path....

We have also identified a few areas that can provide some relief.

Local employers have expressed concern that they have a hard time attracting and retaining employees. We have identified scarcities of transportation and quality childcare as two barriers to employment. If employers want to reach a broader workforce, perhaps they could:

- offer on-site daycare
- offer transportation to and from work
- partner with RTS to introduce more and better bus routes
- partner with ride-share companies to recruit more drivers, with guaranteed minimums
- recruit a local entrepreneur to launch a ride-share service dedicated to transportation deserts in the county

The pandemic has made virtual meetings commonplace. How can we leverage virtual meetings to get in front of more people?