



USA – Poverty Simulation – Raising Awareness

In this innovative project, a month in the life of a person living in poverty in the United States is experienced through an interactive activity.

Part of working with individuals living in poverty and participating in restorative justice or homeless programs is developing a sensitivity and empathy for their plight. The AIC-USA volunteers have started to collaborate in the “Bridges Out of Poverty” endeavor in several cities. This collaboration has enabled the association to develop a 2 hour poverty simulation workshop for its local groups and volunteers and those with whom they collaborate. The simulation reflects living for one month under the conditions that exist for the marginalized.

Context

An analysis of the background of many of AIC-USA volunteers showed that they mostly came from a middle class environment or better. Although they interacted with those in poverty through their projects, the depth of their understanding was often lacking. They had never experienced the difficult choices and frustrations that are part of the system serving the disadvantaged and elderly.



Project Theme and Activities

The poverty simulation project began in St. Vincent’s Hospital in Indianapolis. Participants were able to experience one month living in poverty, each week was represented in a 15 minute segment. AIC-USA turned the simulation material into a kit which could be sent to local AIC groups.

In the simulation, participants are given typical scenarios of disadvantaged families, ranging from single elderly, elderly couples to single mothers with children and couples with children. Each “family” of participants is supplied with the proper documents, such as social security cards, welfare cards, welfare checks, food stamps and other items they would need in real life. They must pay for housing, food and medicines; obtain childcare (if needed); ensure that their children were educated, and obtain health services for the pregnant women, the disabled, ill and mentally ill. They have to do this using the USA’s existing social agencies, which are represented as vendors along the perimeter of the room.

Much of the power of the workshop comes in the feedback. After each 15 minute session the simulation leader asks a few questions for discussion and then at the end there is approximately 15-30 minutes for discussion. Reflections come from both the participants in the exercise and the volunteers who serve as the vendors.

For many it is the first time they have truly felt the frustration confronting marginalized individuals.

Key Figures

- Volunteers needed to run the simulation: a leader and approximately 13 “vendors”
- Approximately 180 women participated at the AIC-USA National Assembly; in one of the local groups approximately 60 people participated
- The kit is available for use by any association or local group willing to pay postage
- The simulation is scheduled to be the focus of a training day at a local high school in the inner-city



Partnerships

- Sisters of Charity of Leavenworth
- St. Vincent de Paul Society