



# Using Poverty Simulations to Build Support for Poverty Reduction Initiatives

*A Municipal Action Guide*

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by Caterina Bummara

## THE CHALLENGE

**I**f you want to build support for city-led poverty reduction initiatives, this *Municipal Action Guide* may help.

Imagine supporting yourself and three other family members on \$21,200/year or \$1,766/month. According to the 2008 Federal Poverty Guidelines, this is the income for a family of four struggling in poverty.

Increasing the understanding among constituents and key stakeholders of what it is like to live in poverty is one

method of building support for city-led poverty reduction strategies.

One of the challenges in building support for poverty reduction initiatives is getting stakeholders, such as citizens, elected officials, city staff, community partners, and the business community, on the same page as to the realities of poverty.

Poverty simulations are a tool to help shed light on the obstacles that low-income families need to overcome in order to survive.

## STRATEGIES

Holding poverty simulations is one way to build support for city-led poverty reduction initiatives. The use of poverty simulations is one method of both creating understanding and supporting advocacy for poverty reduction initiatives within a community. Ideally, this approach should be used in conjunction with other strategies to build support for poverty reduction initiatives.

A poverty simulation is a tool that enables participants to view poverty from different angles in an experiential setting. Within a 2-3 hour timeframe, poverty simulations allow participants to experience what it is like to live in a low-income family trying to survive from month to month. The simulations provide an opportunity for the public, including problem solvers in the business and civic communities, to learn why poverty is an issue that impacts everyone.

Conducting a poverty simulation gives local officials an opportunity to launch community-wide discussions about poverty and forge a deeper understanding of the issue in order to take anti-poverty efforts to the next level.

Savannah, Georgia is a city that successfully uses poverty simulations to educate the community about poverty and to build support for anti-poverty initiatives. Savannah's poverty reduction initiative, "Step Up Savannah," was featured in NLC's 2006 publication *Tapping the Power of City Hall to Build Equitable Communities: 17 Promising Practices*.

Former task force member Letty Shearer, director of economic and community development at Armstrong-Atlantic State University in Savannah, said that participating in poverty simulations gave business leaders a shared frame of reference. "These are people who are accustomed to solving problems," said Shearer. "They wanted to find the fix" for problems faced by people living in poverty. The simulations, she said, were an invitation to get informed and involved.

Since the publication of *Tapping the Power of City Hall to Build Equitable Communities: 17 Promising Practices*, other communities have expressed interest in holding poverty simulations of their own.

Poverty simulations are also interactive – participants spend time "living" in poverty – going through a poverty simulation becomes a personal experience. Jeff Brown, Director of Kalamazoo County Poverty Reduction Initiative, says that this format makes poverty simulations one of the most impactful ways of gaining understanding of life in poverty.

According to Brown, poverty simulations reach an audience beyond those participating in a poverty simulation. Some of the most effective poverty simulations impact an individual who can impact other people or is involved in other groups that may benefit from poverty simulations.

### ACTION STEPS

*Here are some action steps to get the buy-in, planning, and follow-up needed to effectively hold, and make use of, a poverty simulation.*

#### Pre-Simulation

**Determine the target audience.** Keep in mind that the target audience may be larger than the group that is actually participating in the poverty simulation. For instance, the participating group may have direct or indirect influence over others. A well-respected journalist could write an article reaching constituents across a region. A business leader may bring back insights to his/her employees, which could even affect customers. Also consider the possibility of inviting the press to observe a poverty simulation to draw attention to the issue of poverty within the community.

**Consider the value of partnering with an organization.** Co-hosting a poverty simulation with another organization may increase the diversity of a poverty simulation's audience while also being able to share resources to host one.

**Determine poverty simulation's desired outcomes.** Is the poverty simulation for a certain group of people, such as business leaders, college students, or community activists, or is it open to the community at large? Determining the outcomes for the target audience will help you better tailor the post-simulation discussions.

#### Simulation

**Obtain a poverty simulation kit.** A Community Action Poverty Simulation (CAPS) Kit may be bought and licensed directly from MACA for \$1,350 plus shipping and handling. CAPS is a copyrighted tool made available by the Missouri Association for Community Action to organizations that want to promote a greater understanding of poverty.

If buying a kit is not an option, contact MACA to see if a kit has already been licensed in your area by another municipality or organization. This municipality or organization may allow you to use their CAPS Kit or you may partner with them in running a simulation.

#### Post-Simulation

**Conduct a post-simulation discussion.** Immediately after the simulation, have trained facilitators lead participants and staff in a discussion where participants can reflect on their own abilities to cope in poverty.

**Provide resources for individuals that want to become involved in poverty reduction efforts.** The post-simulation discussion is a good time to disseminate information on poverty, service organizations, and volunteer opportunities in the area for individuals that want to become involved in poverty reduction efforts.

**Revisit the desired outcomes identified in the pre-simulation steps.** Reviewing the target outcomes can help better tailor the post-simulation discussion to make sure the desired goals are reached.

**Draw public attention and discussion around issues of poverty.** Remember that your target audience may be bigger than those participating in a simulation. Drawing public attention beyond the direct participants involved is a way to ensure that the broader target audience is reached.

For example, after a poverty simulation held by the Erie Community Foundation and the Greater Erie Community Action Association, one of the participants, the economic development director for the city of Erie, wrote an op-ed to the local newspaper describing the effect the simulation had on her and her own perception of poverty.

### EXAMPLES OF PROGRAMS

**Bryan, Texas** (pop. 72,015): To hold poverty simulations, the City of Bryan partners with Project Unity, an organization aimed to help families help themselves. One of the Poverty Simulations held in August 2008 was held for employees of the Bryan Independent School District to help raise awareness among teachers and staff of what people in poverty experience in their everyday lives. Contact Project Unity via email at [info@project-unity.org](mailto:info@project-unity.org) or (979)

595-2900 or visit their website at <http://www.projectunitytx.org/>.

**Erie County, Pennsylvania** (pop. 279,092): With nearly 40,000 Erie County residents living in poverty, the Erie Community Foundation and Greater Erie Community Action Committee joined together to sponsor a series of poverty simulations. Erie County uses poverty simulations

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not only as a way to inform citizens about the realities of poverty, but also as a way of outreach in gaining support for poverty reduction initiatives. Erie County follows-up poverty simulations with recommended reading guides, explanations of economic and social costs of poverty, and next steps of what individuals can do, such as joining Erie Community Foundation's poverty work group. At the end of a poverty simulation, participants can also sign a pledge of commitment to become engaged in the fight against poverty. Contact the Erie Community Foundation at (814) 454-0843 or visit their poverty simulation webpage at: <http://www.eriecommunityfoundation.org/grant-seekers-st/poverty/>.

**Kalamazoo County, Michigan** (pop. 245,333): Poverty simulations are run through the Kalamazoo County Poverty Reduction Initiative (PRI). PRI is a broad and inclusive partnership engaging all sectors of the community for the purpose of poverty reduction. As part of the Kalamazoo County Chamber of Commerce, PRI schedules poverty simulations for prearranged groups, such as businesses and interested individuals. For 2009, PRI has 33 poverty simulations scheduled and is piloting a poverty simulation program for local high schools. PRI charges a flat rate of \$300 for groups of 50-75 people or \$25 per person for groups of less than 50. Contact Jeff Brown, Director of the Kalamazoo County Poverty Reduction Initiative at (269) 387-2678 or visit the PRI website at <http://haltpoverty.org/>.

**San Antonio, Texas** (pop. 1,328,984): Poverty Simulations in San Antonio are run through the city's Department of Community Initiatives (DCI). DCI provides programs and services that assist families and individuals alleviate poverty from their lives. San Antonio has partnered with community organizations to host poverty simulations. One poverty simulation was hosted with the local food bank while another was hosted with the school district for school teachers and district staff. Contact San Antonio's Department of Community Initiatives at (210) 207-8198 or visit their website at: <http://www.sanantonio.gov/commit/>.

**Savannah, Georgia** (pop. 130,331): "Step Up Savannah," Savannah's poverty reduction initiative collaboration of Chatham County organizations representing business, government, education, and non-profit agencies. Leaders, experts, and neighborhood residents have come together to address the toughest problem hindering Savannah's economic development and prosperity: persistent poverty. Believing that simulations are an effective way to engage the community and invite individuals to participate in Step Up Savannah, volunteers have agreed to conduct quarterly simulations and to respond to special requests for simulations whenever possible. Participation in poverty simulations is open to anyone who wants to learn more about the poverty problem in Savannah. Contact Step Up Savannah at (912) 644-6420 or visit their website at: <http://stepupsavannah.org/>.

## RESOURCES

### **Missouri Association for Community Action (MACA)**

The Missouri Association for Community Action (MACA) is a statewide, not-for-profit organization formed in 1975 to support Community Action Agencies in their fight against poverty. MACA sells and licenses the Community Action Poverty Simulation (CAPS) Kit for \$1,350 plus shipping and handling. Contact: Brenda Stegeman, Project and Events Manager, at (573) 634-2969 or [bstegeman@communityaction.org](mailto:bstegeman@communityaction.org). Visit the MACA website at: <http://www.communityaction.org/>.

### **Tapping the Power of City Hall: 10 City Profiles**

Released in March 2007, Tapping the Power of City Hall to Build Equitable Communities: 10 City Profiles provides an in-depth look at the broad range of municipal capacities and powers used in 10 very different American cities to promote racial, economic, political, and social equity. Website: <http://www.nlc.org>.

### **Tapping the Power of City Hall: 17 Promising Practices**

The Promising Practices are intended to provide city officials with examples of programs and initiatives that support and carry out local strategies for increasing equity and improving the quality of life and economic opportunities for low-income residents. This report is a companion piece to Tapping the Power of City Hall to Create Equitable Communities: 10 City Profiles. Website: <http://www.nlc.org>.

### **U.S. Census Bureau's Poverty Home Page**

Current poverty demographics, publications, data sources, and thresholds  
Website: <http://www.census.gov/hhes/www/poverty/poverty.html>.

### RESOURCES CONT.

#### **U.S. Department of Health & Human Services – Federal Poverty Guidelines**

Current poverty guidelines, research, and measurement tools Website: <http://aspe.hhs.gov/poverty/index.shtml>.

### ***The Logistics of Poverty Simulations***

#### **Using a Community Action Poverty Simulation (CAPS) Kit**

Poverty simulations take approximately 3 hours to run. This includes the orientation, the four 15-minute weeks, and a debriefing period at the end of a simulation.

Groups of 40 to 72 participants assume the roles of up to 26 different families facing poverty. Each family is different: one may include a single unemployed mother, another an unemployed “bread-winner”, another senior citizens living off of social security, or another, grandparents raising grandchildren.

A simulation will also need 15-20 resource volunteers to be at resource tables, representing a wide array of community resources, from banks, grocery stores, community action centers, employers, utilities, and other services.

In the simulation, each family must interact with the community resources to provide food, shelter, and basic necessities for their family.

#### **EXPERIENCING A MONTH IN POVERTY:**

- **Week 1**  
The month has just begun and participants have to figure out what to do first.
- **Week 2**  
Participants realize that it is frustrating to wait in line and not have enough money to pay bills.
- **Week 3**  
The school had a pipe burst and the kids are being sent home, who will stay with them? Participants that have not paid their mortgages will receive eviction notices.
- **Week 4**  
Participants will have to get all of their bills paid and the family fed by the end of the week.

#### **WHAT COMES IN REUSABLE CAPS KITS:**

- **Director’s Manual:** Instructions on how to run a simulation, sample invitation letter and news release, facts about poverty, suggestions about what people can do to impact policy
- **Resource Packets:** Instructions and accessories for each community resource, including welfare office, pawn shop, school, bank, police station, and grocery store. Accessories include calculators, clipboards, money boxes, play money, homework, Social Security cards, name badges, and forms
- **Family Packets:** There are 30 family packets, each with a family scenario and accessories, including play money, appliance cards, and transportation passes
- **Compact Disc:** Contains PDF files of all materials so lost items can be reprinted

