Rochester fight against poverty needs help

David Riley, Staff writer  
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Do you want to be part of what state and local leaders are billing as an unprecedented effort to fight poverty in Rochester?

Now is your chance.

Leaders of the Rochester-Monroe County Anti-Poverty Initiative (/story/news/2015/01/19/request-state-funds-led-anti-poverty-task-force/22022943/) are forming seven work groups to learn all they can about different aspects of local poverty and recommend strategies for attacking each area of the problem. Volunteers are needed to serve on the work groups.

Learn more about the initiative and find out how to get involved at United Way of Greater Rochester's website, uwrochester.org. (http://uwrochester.org/Rochester/Anti-PovertyInitiative.aspx)

This news came at the end of a 3½-hour listening session Thursday at the Rochester Educational Opportunity Center, where speakers described the complexity and depth of Rochester poverty (/story/news/2015/01/08/rochester-poverty-act-community-foundation-report/21452093) from different angles — education, jobs, housing, health and public safety.

The work groups will tackle the same five areas, plus two more — public policy and the design of systems meant to help people in poverty.

Listening on Thursday were Lt. Gov. Kathy Hochul and about 20 members of Gov. Andrew Cuomo's administration who are assigned to a task force to combat poverty in Rochester. (/story/news/2015/01/18/task-force-address-rochester-poverty/21981175/) Also on hand were leaders of the local initiative, including Assembly Majority Leader Joseph Morelle and United Way president and CEO Peter Carpino, as well as Mayor Lovely Warren and Monroe County Executive Maggie Brooks.

It was the first time all the players sat down in the same room to begin planning their efforts. At the end of the session, Carpino said a steering committee would be announced in the next two weeks to name work group members and act as a liaison with the state task force.

The litany of problems that the speakers detailed Thursday were familiar to anyone who has had a hand in examining or trying to end poverty in Rochester, but several speakers described the level of coordination on display as something new.

"Despite the fact that so many have affirmed that this conversation feels like, 'Here we go again,' the governor's commitment and your presence make this moment different," Wade Norwood, chief program officer for the Finger Lakes Health Systems Agency, told the state task force.

Another key to making this effort different from so many others is to actively involve "the customer" — the very people living in poverty whom the initiative is supposed to help, said John Urban, president and CEO of the Greater Rochester Health Foundation.

"We must learn to do with," he said, "not to."

While Thursday's session was open to the public, regular citizens had little say in the proceedings. Carpino and Morelle said that's coming soon.

Each work group will be expected to hold forums to get ideas from both local agencies and people who live in poverty, Carpino said. Those forums should be held at churches, recreation centers and other places where people already gather, he said.

"We intend for this initiative … to be as inclusive as possible," Carpino said.

The work groups also will be expected to detail what assets are available to tackle the problem and what roadblocks stand in the way. Thursday's discussion made clear the obstacles are many. Brooks, the county executive, said some of the services set up to help people don't — or worse, do more harm than good.

"It's an industry of poverty," Brooks said.
One common theme was the challenges that single parents face in escaping poverty, and the impact those struggles have on their children. Tyrone Reaves, president of TruForm Manufacturing, described a young mother who worked for him and lost a subsidy to help pay for child care after she received a small raise, leading her to miss work.

Monroe Community College President Anne Kress said something as simple as a flat tire or lost bus pass can derail low-income students trying to juggle child care and other stresses at home.

“They are students for whom every single mole hill is a mountain,” she said.

But a handful of personal success stories offered signs of hope. Devren Purdie, a former student in the Hillside Work-Scholarship Connection, credited his mentor from the program, Nina, with exposing him to college and helping him find a vision for his future. He is now attending the Rochester Institute of Technology.

“My mom didn’t go to college,” Purdie said. “Nina was able to take me there.”

Hochul described the state task force as “the cavalry” for Rochester’s efforts.

“We’re not here to make decisions for the Rochester community. Not at all,” she said. “We’re here as an incubator of ideas.”

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For information about how to get involved in the Rochester-Monroe County Anti-Poverty Initiative, go to www.uwrochester.org/RochesterAnti-PovertyInitiative.aspx (http://www.uwrochester.org/RochesterAnti-PovertyInitiative.aspx)

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