

Anti-poverty Target Job Loss, Homelessness

Written by Administrator

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By P.J. Dickerscheid Associated Press August 10, 2009

SISSONVILLE, W.Va. -- John Hough sacrifices time with his family to work 12 hour days, seven days a week as a cab driver in Philadelphia. After paying for his cab, radio and taxi medallion, he earns slightly more than \$4 an hour.

Luis Larin was willing to do anything - cleaning, trash collection, demolition work - to earn enough money to support himself and send money home to his mother and sister in Guatemala. After paying for his transportation to and from work sites, the former day laborer said through an interpreter that he was lucky to earn \$20 a day, just enough for him to afford a one-meal-a-day diet of Ramen noodles.

Renee Wolf Koubiadis said it took her years to overcome the feelings of shame and isolation she felt growing up in New Jersey, the daughter of a single mom on welfare. As unemployment and poverty rates rise, health care becomes less accessible and more Americans become homeless and hungry,

Hough, Larin, Koubiadis and about 150 others from across the globe are in West Virginia this week to discuss ways to re-ignite the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.'s war on poverty.

Representatives of more than 40 organizations from across the globe, including Justicia Global in the Dominican Republic, the Shack Dwellers Movement in South Africa and the Church of Scotland's Priority Areas Project in Glasgow, are attending the Poverty Scholars Program Leadership School at Camp Virgil Tate outside Charleston.

On Monday, the group heard some sobering statistics:

_ Roughly 6.5 million jobs disappeared between January 2008 and June 2009.

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_ Home foreclosures in the United States average 10,000 a day.

_ The number of Americans living in poverty jumped by 5.7 million between 2000 and 2007 to 37.3 million.

_ 47 million Americans don't have health care coverage, including 8.7 million children. The fastest growing group of people without health insurance earn between \$50,000 and \$75,000 a year.

_ The number of Americans who relied on soup kitchens for meals has increase 9 percent since 2001 to 25 million; 36 percent of them were from households where at least one person worked.

_ Of the estimated 3.5 million people who are likely to experience homelessness this year, the fastest growing segments include families with children and veterans.

_ On average, CEOs of Fortune 500 companies make as much in one day as the average worker earns in a year.

That's a difficult pill for many to swallow, including Hough who says he's forced to choose between time with his family and earning enough money to support his family. He is a member of the United Taxi Workers Alliance in Pennsylvania. "It not only affects my pocket, but it affects my family," he said.

Larin said it wasn't uncommon for him to wait two to three hours for transportation to and from work sites, a service for which he was charged \$5 for every three miles traveled. The low wages, combined with being forced to eat lunch in a dirty bathroom and paying to live in company housing finally led him to join United Workers in Baltimore, where he met his wife and now works.

Koubiadis said she became a social worker and joined Poor Voices United after watching her

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mother struggle to support her and her brother after a divorce. "She got so beaten down by the system," Koubiadis said of her mother. "It took me a long time to realize I wasn't a bad person just because I was poor."

While Monday's sessions focused on poverty and the economic crisis, Tuesday's sessions will include tours of Matewan, the site of a violent coal miners' strike in 1920 in southern West Virginia, and Kayford Mountain 35 miles east of Charleston, where miners have been blasting the mountaintop for more than 20 years to reveal multiple coal seams. The sessions, which continue through Saturday, will eventually focus on solutions.