

“If You’re Judging, You Can’t Help”

Report on Poverty Workshop conducted by Karen Manfrin on August 25, 2009

Think for a moment about a statement made by Dr. Donna Beagle: *“White people living in poverty are the only people in our society that we are allowed to call ‘trash’.”* This is the attitude that prevails in America; those who have less are somehow beneath those who have more. They’re ‘trashy’, ‘dirty’, ‘worthless’, or ‘lazy’.

If you’re judging, you can’t help.

This workshop was about empowering the individual to change their circumstances, encouraging and mentoring parents we work with, and bridging the gap between parents and service providers (particularly caseworkers).

Don’t operate on the assumption that parents will ask questions when they don’t understand, or ask for help when they need it. Be proactive and try to think of resources that may help them improve their circumstances. Then kindly and compassionately share these resources with them. Suspend judgment and assume that people are making good decisions within the context of their own realities, which sometimes means living in a state of crisis 24 hours a day. Would you be able to make stellar decisions while in a prolonged state of emergency?

Take a few minutes and review the list below. In the box provided, check off each of the skills you feel you have mastered, or could master in an emergency. Then fill the space provided with your feedback.

- Could you get by with no money for three weeks while waiting for your first paycheck?
- Do you know how to access food stamps or welfare assistance?
- Can you cash a check without any identification? Do you know how much will it cost?
- Can you get a loan on your car title? Do you know how much will it cost?
- Do you know where to get returnable cans and bottles without being caught?
- Do you know how to get newspaper and cardboard to sell at recycling centers? Do you know where to sell these items or how much you will get?
- Could you move out of your house with only seventy-two hours’ notice? With no money?
- Could you survive without garbage service, utilities, or a telephone? Winter without heat?
- Where would you go for help if your utilities were being shut off?
- Could you go for several days without food?
- Which stores will let you get food and pay for it later?
- How could you get your car fixed without any money for parts or a mechanic to help?

- Do you know how to get prescription-drug samples at the ER if you are sick?
- How would you deal with waiting for hours for health or social services in a room filled with people who are hungry, homeless, sick, and desperate?
- Which churches and agencies give free clothes and shoes?
- Describe how you can wash clothes without money, laundry soap, or a machine.
- Describe how to smoothly change the subject to avoid answering humiliating questions.
- Explain how you would feel if every day there were a crisis; e.g., you, a family member, or someone else you love had been arrested, evicted, had the heat shut off, were sick, had been kicked out of school, were out of food or had your car towed.

Feedback:

Some helpful CASA-specific suggestions:

- Talk to parents about school conferences and ask if you can help them prepare or answer any questions. Many parents did not experience success in school and may have a negative view of the school system and components like parent/teacher conferences. Explain the benefits and talk through it with them.
- Figure out what after-school activities might be available in their community and let them know how to access them. Find out what the kids are interested in and see if there are any programs available.
- Encourage parents to pursue educational opportunities while they are working with DHS and have some additional supports in place.
- Work with teachers to help them understand the environment in which the child is living. Discuss whether or not the expectations they have for the child are realistic and how to modify them without sacrificing education. An example used: Johnny has to complete a homework assignment and use his spelling words to form several complex sentences. His home is very chaotic so it's difficult for Johnny to concentrate. You could ask the teacher if it would be appropriate to have Johnny recite a sentence or two orally instead.