

Charities work to put face on poverty

BY MARY PERHAM

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CORNING | Poverty in Steuben County has always seemed to be out there – along the back roads and foot hills of an enormous and rural county, in snaking lines at food pantries, crowding store aisles on the day welfare checks come out ...

Some 15 percent – more than 1 in 10 county residents – were listed at, or under, the federal poverty guidelines two years ago, according to 2007 estimates by the U.S. Census.

Since then, as the national economy faltered, Steuben has joined the unenviable ranks of

counties with the highest unemployment in the state, reporting 9.7 percent in July compared to 7.8 percent statewide. New York City's July unemployment rate came in a fraction higher than Steuben at 9.8 percent.

Now, poverty is a neighbor just laid off with no job in sight; it's a young single mom working two jobs who lost her child care assistance this month; it's the elderly couple who saw their invested nest egg vanish last November. People who had enough to get by no longer do.

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"We've wanted to do, needed to do, something to help us meet the needs we're seeing," said Catholic Charities Steuben Executive Director Laura Opelt. "Our objective is to raise awareness."

As a way to raise awareness of what poverty really means in the county, the agency is hosting "Walk A Mile In Their Shoes," a walk-a-thon slated for 9 a.m. Sept. 12 in Corning, Bath and Hornell.

Catholic Charities hopes to enlist individuals and teams in each municipality to raise funds for needs in Steuben, and inform the public of the dire needs of their friends and acquaintances.

"We need to put a new face on what poverty is here," Opelt said. "It's not what people think."

While unemployment benefits have so far prevented a surge of applications at the county Department of Social Services, walk-in appointments have jumped, according to DSS reports. Food pantries are seeing a growing number of customers, Opelt said.

"Two-thirds of those living in poverty have one or more family members employed," Opelt said. "Fifty percent have one family member working full-time. Two thirds of those we serve at Catholic Charities are working, mostly part-time

Event schedule

Three community walk-a-thons are scheduled to take place simultaneously Sept. 12, in Bath, Corning and Hornell. The start/finish locations for the "Walk A Mile In Their Shoes" are: Bath – Pulteney Square; Corning – Community Bank, 150 West Market St.; Hornell – Shawmut Park, Thatcher Street Ext. On-site registration begins at 9 a.m. at all locations. The walk-a-thon gets under way at 10 a.m. All proceeds generated during the one-mile fund-raising event will go directly to fighting poverty within Steuben County.

jobs with no health insurance. These meager wages often render a family ineligible for any cash assistance from the Department of Social Services. In fact only about 1,400 people, less than 1.5% of the population, receive cash assistance from the county."

All proceeds generated during the one-mile fundraising event will go directly to fighting poverty within the county, Opelt said.

"We've got to do something," she said.

For more information or to register for the Catholic Charities' "Walk A Mile In Their Shoes" fundraiser please visit www.CatholicCharitiesSteuben.org, or call 776-8085.