

## Series explores barriers to self-sufficiency

June 20, 2019

### **Oshkosh women and children in poverty**

Over the next nine weeks, this series will explore the complex issue of poverty in Oshkosh, how it specifically affects women here, available resources and how the rest of the community can help. With support/underwriting from the Women's Fund of the Oshkosh Area Community Foundation .....

Each week will look at a different aspect of the issue:

- What constitutes poverty, how it varies by state, Oshkosh's ranking.
- The benefits cliff and how it relates to poverty in Oshkosh, and differences between women and men in poverty.
- Resources to help and how we rank with the rest of the region.
- Poverty and the single mom — the correlation and how it affects children.
- Getting get out of poverty — dealing with it and the possibilities for escaping it.
- Poverty and employment, and correlations with education.
- Community awareness, education and engagement; policy changes.

The writer of this series, Samantha Strong is originally from Madison and a graduate of UW-Oshkosh with a degree in journalism. She was a full-time reporter for The Reporter in Fond du Lac and later pursued digital marketing where she now specializes in writing, social media strategy and account management.

## Part 1: Women in poverty walk the line

June 20, 2019

### Oshkosh agencies measure the impact

By Samantha Strong, Herald Contributor

The existence of poverty is a reality in most cities, regardless of whether its residents choose to acknowledge it. Oshkosh is no exception. While it's easier to ignore here than in other places across the country due to factors that will be considered in this series, the issue of poverty in Oshkosh is real.

There are two terms used when referring to poverty: the federal poverty level (FPL) and the Asset Limited, Income Constrained, Employed (ALICE) threshold.

ALICE is used to describe households that earn more than the FPL but less than the basic cost of living for the country. The ALICE survival budget associated with each household type — single adult, single adult and one infant, etc. — is the income each type of household needs to survive each year.

This amount is determined by the United Way through a series of studies over the course of several years. It is higher than the FPL because it considers modern-day necessities, is adjusted for inflation and accounts for changes in the way Americans live. This amount does not include savings for emergencies or future goals such as college.

“The ALICE report has opened a lot of eyes that we have population of people who fall between the cracks,” former Oshkosh Area United Way president Sue Panek said. “(The ALICE report) focuses on what it takes to achieve self-sufficiency, not the federal poverty line, which was established more than 50 years ago and hasn't been adjusted properly.”

According to data from the United Way's 2018 ALICE report, nearly 19 percent of Oshkosh residents are living below the federal poverty level and 28 percent are below the ALICE threshold. Statewide, nearly 38 percent of Wisconsin residents are part of an ALICE household.

“Forty-six percent of the members in our community don't have their basic needs met, and that's just unacceptable,” Mary Ann Dilling, Oshkosh Area United Way president and chief executive, said.

The FPL is an income the federal government deems appropriate to be eligible for aid, does not vary from state to state and does not take into consideration inflation, lagging wages or rising health care costs. It is re-evaluated annually by the Census Bureau. The FPL for a single adult differs by nearly \$7,000, at \$12,140. It is determined by the federal government and is used to verify eligibility for government programs such as FoodShare, the WIC federal assistance program and BadgerCare.

The FPL for a single person in 2019 has increased by only \$1,000 annually since 2013.

## **The ‘benefits cliff’**

Although there are resources for those in need, many face what is called the benefits cliff, which is the point at which someone is bringing in an income the government deems “livable” and no longer qualifies for most federal programs. That does not mean that person realistically has enough money to live.

These are typically ALICE households — working individuals and families who typically do not have a savings account, who usually have enough to cover the essentials but can’t afford any type of financial setback.

When someone receives an increase in wages, it can trigger a reduction or loss in benefits. This can be disruptive for families because even though they are now bringing in more income, they do not have enough funds to be self-sufficient or to live without government programming. For example, if a person receives a \$20 weekly raise they might lose their child care benefit, which amounts to \$600 a month.

“You have an economic system that is working against you,” ADVOCAP Executive Director Mike Bonertz said.

Many families face the tough decision of whether to turn down a potential promotion and pay raise or keep their current salary so they can still receive benefits. This becomes more complex if the person is a single childless adult, as many of the federal aid programs require a dependent to qualify.

“I see a lot of our individuals who stay at the shelter having to weigh their options because if they lose their benefits, they don’t think they’ll be able to manage their funds to cover what they’re losing,” Amanda Hammond, operations manager of the Day By Day Warming Shelter, said.

## **Oshkosh vs. other cities**

Compared with other municipalities in Winnebago County, Oshkosh ranks highest for households living below the ALICE survival budget, which is \$19,848 annually for a single adult, \$28,584 for a married couple and \$48,012 for a household with two adults and two school-age children. Additionally, 41 percent of Oshkosh Area School District students live below the FPL, and of those 41 percent — 210 — are homeless, according to an Oshkosh United Way study.

Northeast Wisconsin women living in poverty fare worse than men, according to a 2017 study funded in part by the Women’s Fund of Oshkosh. The Women’s Fund is a subset of the Oshkosh Area Community Foundation dedicated to improving the lives of women, girls and all community members of Winnebago County through philanthropy, grant making and education. This is the second such study the group has conducted over the past 20 years.

The study found poverty rates are higher for women than men across all age groups, and that older women are twice as likely as older men to be in poverty. Regionally, the wage gap ranges between 72 and 78 cents on the dollar. As income is compounded over time and wages remain stagnant, women see the effects of this gap.

“The difficult thing is, as you study poverty, you’ll come to learn that there are so many things around you that can go wrong and affect your life,” Women’s Fund Executive Director Karlene Grabner said. “It’s not just a job; it’s not just a house; it’s not just getting your dental work or mental health in order. And when one peg gets shifted, everything else is affected, which is why it’s such a hard issue to attack at any one angle because there are so many angles. That’s why the Women’s Fund has invested so much in this because we need to take a focused lens on how we can make change in this community.”

Next week: Women versus men in poverty –the differences and why

## Part 2: Women vs. men in poverty – the differences and why

June 25, 2019

By Samantha Strong

Herald contributor



While poverty affects all who experience it, the impact is oftentimes harder on women.

There are many reasons for this outcome, according to a 2017 study from the Women’s Fund of the Oshkosh Area Community Foundation, including the fact that women typically earn less than men. That wage gap compounded over time adds up to a significant amount by the end of a career. Pair that with women often being responsible with the costs of raising children, and even custodial mothers are twice as likely to be poor as custodial fathers.

With women being the more likely victims of domestic and sexual violence, it can push them into a cycle of poverty through related job loss, poor health and homelessness. Women in Oshkosh are equally exposed to these circumstances, especially as government-funded programs geared toward women’s health care continue to see a reduction or halt in funding.

According to the Women’s Fund report, female-headed households in northeast Wisconsin make up the majority of those living below the poverty line – with or without children. Female-headed households account for 28 percent of those in the region, but 59 percent of them fall below that line.

This is largely unchanged from 2009 data. The annual federal poverty line (FPL) for a family size of three – one woman and two children – is \$21,330, or \$1,777.50 a month.

According to the Basic Economic Security Test (BEST), the income required for security in a three-person household in Winnebago County that has one worker (employed with benefits), one preschooler and a school-age child is \$57,800 annually, or an hourly wage of \$27. Most full-time jobs in northeast Wisconsin held by women, according to the Women’s Fund report, are considered office and administrative support with a median annual wage of \$33,000.

The ALICE (Asset-Limited Income-Constrained Employed) report does not list a survival budget for the same family size but puts a survival budget for a home with two adults, one preschooler and an infant at \$64,092 annually, or \$32 hourly, between the two adults.

The latest ALICE report states that in 2016 there were 26,294 households in Oshkosh, of which 46 percent are below either the ALICE threshold or FPL.

“It’s easy to say pull yourself up by your bootstraps if you have bootstraps,” Sue Panek, former United Way chief executive, said. “If you don’t know the situation, it’s easy for you to judge, but you don’t know what someone’s going through. We need to educate the community on the dynamics of poverty so they understand how hard people living in poverty actually work.”

### **City poverty profile**

Before the issue of eliminating poverty for Oshkosh women can be dealt with, it’s critical to understand what poverty looks like in the community. Oshkosh is unique in that the city’s geography isn’t large but isn’t too small as a metro area. It’s close enough to bigger cities such as Green Bay or Milwaukee that relocation is manageable, but far enough away that the population is smaller and in turn are fewer people competing for limited resources and benefits.

Even though more than half of the population is considered self-sufficient — enough money to meet basic needs without assistance — there are more people here struggling than in many surrounding communities.

The rise in population is part of the reason Oshkosh has been seeing an uptick in the need for program funding. The city is expanding at a rapid rate while legislative support for governmental programs such as FoodShare, affordable housing assistance and Women, Infants and Children (WIC) remains stagnant.

“Poverty is like a wound, and when it bleeds, it opens you up to predators and it keeps getting worse and worse,” said Teri Horner, financial counselor with FISC, the Financial Information and Service Center. FISC is a program of Goodwill Industries of North Central Wisconsin and offers personal financial counseling.

Horner said that already between January and April there were 168 women and 98 men seeking help from FISC. Over the entirety of 2018, the agency saw 249 women and 107 men.

A majority of the women Horner assists are newly divorced or apart from their significant other due to domestic violence situations.

“A lot of them are struggling to work jobs that are paying minimum wage or just above that, and the cost of day care is killing them,” she said, touching on one of the biggest barriers that many Oshkosh women face: the lack of affordable, reliable child care.

Panek echoed Horner’s concern for the lack of affordable child care but also noted many jobs available don’t have the flexibility needed by women with caregiving responsibilities.

“There are plenty of jobs out there, but again, you have to show up for work and work a full shift,” Panek said. “What happens if that shift goes a little longer or you’re working outside of the hours the bus runs and you need to pick up the kids from day care? There are also plenty of second- and third-shift jobs, but what are you going to do with the kids if you have them?”

Another group of women struggling are those ages 75 and older. They are twice as likely as men in the same age group to be in poverty, according to the Women’s Fund. Although elderly women often qualify for Social Security benefits that keep them above the FPL, they are still at risk.

Forty-six percent of all elderly unmarried females receiving benefits relied on Social Security for 90 percent or more of their income in 2014, and elderly women are less likely than men to have significant family income from pensions. This can often relate to the inequality of wages these women have experienced over their lifetimes.

“When you try to exit poverty, it isn’t just like showing your passport and getting into a different country,” Horner said. “It takes a lot of time to get out of poverty, which is something a lot of people don’t understand. This didn’t happen overnight and it’s not going to get solved overnight.”

### **Housing challenges**

Affordable housing is one of the top three barriers Oshkosh women in poverty face. Not having a safe place to stay affects every other aspect of life, according to Matt Johnson, director of the Day By Day Warming Shelter. The overall lack of affordable housing paired with low wages has led to an increased demand for alternate options – including staying in a shelter.

Typically, 20 percent of Day By Day’s guests are women and the rest are men, but Johnson said this year that number is up to 30 percent. Because the shelter does not discriminate against those with substance abuse or mental health issues, children younger than 18 are not allowed, making women with children ineligible to stay there.

The other shelter in Oshkosh — Father Carr’s on North Koeller Street — accepts children but is about 3 miles from the city center, requiring more transportation challenges. If a woman and her children are trying to get there after the city bus stops running, alternatives are taxi or ridesharing such as Uber or Lyft, which require a smartphone and debit/credit card. Women with children can also stay at the Christine Ann Center near downtown, but only if they are fleeing a domestic violence situation.

Day By Day shelter has seen a significant increase in guests. Typically there are 130-140 unique guests each season but in 2018-2019 there were 162, Johnson said. There has also been an increase in transgender clients.

“We’re seeing a lot of new homeless in our system this year,” said Amanda Hammond, Day By Day Shelter operations manager. “They might be coming from somewhere that doesn’t utilize our homeless management system, but I’ve had to add a lot of clients this year — people who have never been homeless before.”

Johnson added, “This also led to an increase in the number of people we had to turn away.”

Hammond and Johnson agree that women are more likely than men to be taken in by family or friends, especially if there are children involved, which influences the number and demographics of clients. Women are also more likely to sustain domestic abuse in order to keep their current housing situation.

Some circumstances special to homeless women include feminine hygiene needs and proper undergarments. While the shelter provides those hygiene products, undergarments such as bras can be more difficult to provide, Hammond noted, due to the variety of sizing and fits.

Day By Day is only seasonal due to its operating agreement with the city and has 25 beds. Once full, guests are given a sleeping bag and a gift card to Hardee’s across the street where they can buy something to remain a customer until the restaurant closes at 10 p.m. The shelter had to turn away 140 guests in its seventh season (2017-2018). Johnson said guests average 31 nights there before finding alternate housing.

While an increase in space would help, Johnson said they would still run into the same problems.

“What happens if we were able to increase our max to 50 and reach it? 75?” Johnson said. “What I see as the real issue here is the quantity of low-income units available.”

Next week: Community resources for the most vulnerable



## Part 3: Community Resources for the most vulnerable

July 2, 2019

By Samantha Strong, Herald contributor



*Beth Oswald, Christine Ann Domestic Abuse Services Executive*

*Director*

There is a large population in Oshkosh of people — especially women — living in poverty. More often than not, they look like any other woman you would see in a day, meaning it's hard to tell someone's story by looking at them.

A stereotype is defined as a simplified and standardized conception or image invested with special meaning and held in common by members of a group. Some of the common stereotypes associated with women in poverty are lazy, dumb, promiscuous, don't know how to manage their time. In reality these stereotypes are just that— simplified, standardized conceptions that many area nonprofit organizations say are incredibly inaccurate.

"The reality is, it's hard to make good decisions when you're in a bad spot," Matt Johnson, Day By Day Warming Shelter executive director, said. Sometimes the benefits-cliff decision comes into play and an employed individual may need to decide to stay at a lower-paying job because the alternative salary won't cover the loss of benefits. This decision can lead an outside observer to further believe the "poor people are lazy" stereotype. That individual may be trying to do everything they can to keep food on the table, their children safe and a roof over their heads, ADVOCAP community services specialist Jackie Dioszegi explained.

"The vast majority of people are employed – they're working two to three jobs," ADVOCAP executive director Mike Bonertz said. "They're working very hard just to stay alive. That is one of the grossest misconceptions around, that poor people are doing nothing."

Al Rolph has been working with those in need in Oshkosh for the past four years as a social worker at the Salvation Army. He works daily to help those in poverty meet immediate needs, as well as teaching them to be self-sufficient through HUB coaching, a participant-driven strategy that empowers them to set their own goals. This type of coaching has been especially effective, according to Rolph, because it allows the person to gain the power and resources to solve their own problems.

“Our philosophy is, if someone comes in here asking for help they have a legitimate need, otherwise they wouldn’t be here,” Rolph said.

In addition to personal coaching, the Salvation Army provides Oshkosh community members with a light breakfast and free hot lunch six days a week (except holidays), is home to a food pantry that also stocks personal hygiene products and diapers, organizes a birthday club with free toys, ice cream and cake, and laundry service for families with minor children that do not have access to a free washer and dryer.

According to self-recorded data, the majority using Salvation Army’s pantry are women. Nonperishable food items are the current greatest need, specifically canned meats and peanut butter, as well as body wash, shampoo and size 5 and 6 diapers.

The Salvation Army warmly welcomes donations of these items year-round at its High Avenue location next to Hardee’s.

“We’ve all been in a place when we’ve needed help, and that’s why we’re here,” Rolph said.

Another agency that works to help individuals in poverty on multiple levels is ADVOCAP. The multipurpose organization creates opportunities for people and communities to reduce poverty and increase self-sufficiency. Some of ADVOCAP’s services include temporary emergency assistance through Bridges, a Weatherization Assistance Program, zero percent auto loans, vehicle repair, job search and career exploration, the Homeowner Development Program, and the Emergency Food Assistance Program.

“It takes a lot of courage to walk through our doors – asking for help is hard,” Dioszegi said. “When they do come here, we make it clear that the choice about what they do next is up to them. Autonomy is the most important part.”

Some of the women in poverty who can be overlooked are survivors of domestic violence. These women are fighting for their lives and sometimes the lives of their children. When they are finally able to escape, they are typically faced with myriad barriers — reduced income, homelessness, nothing to eat, only the possessions they’ve been able to bring with them.

Oshkosh has one shelter that’s specifically for domestic abuse victims, men and women. Beth Oswald, Christine Ann Domestic Abuse Services executive director, said the center typically sees more women but the number of men is increasing, as well as transgendered people.

The center has 37 beds and typically operates at 80 percent capacity. The shelter provides immediate resources such as clothing, personal hygiene products and meals. There is no length-of-stay policy as

long as there's a safety concern. But there is little transitional housing – one of the top barriers those in poverty face – for abuse survivors once their immediate safety concerns are eliminated and are discharged from the center. After they leave is typically when the effects of poverty set in. "People who are here run the gambit, but usually when they're here they're considered homeless because they left their home," Oswald said. "If their purpose is to not return back to their partner, then they really are homeless."

She said the shelter can help get guests on lists for affordable housing but isn't usually a quick solution. There is typically a wait for low-income housing and while there is a lot of housing near the University of Wisconsin-Oshkosh campus that's more affordable, those homes aren't always the best environment for survivors of domestic violence, especially those with children. A large percentage of the women who stay at Christine Ann are women with children, which adds another barrier women in poverty commonly deal with: long-term, regular childcare.

"If someone comes in and they weren't working but now they have an interview, they either have to bring their kids or not go to the interview, which automatically gives a not-so-great first impression," Oswald said. "This is happening more and more, that women are needing to bring their children to a job interview because they have nowhere else to go."

The interview is just the beginning of the childcare conundrum. Most daycares in Oshkosh are at capacity with a waiting list; a job-seeking mother needs immediate care if she gets an offer or risk losing it if she can't start when an employer needs the position filled. Oswald suggests more employers in the area struggling to find and retain employees should think about either offering child care subsidies or a more flexible schedule.

"Typically it's the moms who deal with childcare, Oswald said. "There are tons of great second-shift jobs out there that are paying \$15-\$20 an hour but single moms have kids who need care and there aren't any second-shift daycares. If we had an unlimited budget we'd open a day care onsite that at least goes past second shift."

Oswald believes the Oshkosh community needs to recognize and back funding for programming such as affordable housing, affordable child care and transportation – the three main barriers to self-sufficiency – to solve the real root of the problems women in poverty face.

"Just getting people off the street isn't going to fix (the issue of poverty)," Oswald said. "So when leaders are having those conversations, bring in the ADVOCAPs and the Christine Anns to help understand what's the real root cause here."

Next week: The special challenges faced by single mothers in poverty.

## Part 4: Single moms face unrelenting challenges

July 11, 2019

By Samantha Strong, Herald contributor

Single mothers are the most likely group of women out of all types of households in northeast Wisconsin to have earnings below the federal poverty line (FPL) at 38 percent – more than 7,000 households – according to the 2017 Report on the Status of Women in Northeast Wisconsin by the Women’s Fund.

This group is only second to female-headed households without children as the largest poverty demographic statewide.

It may seem obvious why a single mom may fall below the poverty line, but its effects are serious and more likely to carry on through generations. Women in general are paid less; and considering the costs of raising children with one income — if she is able to work — it’s easy to see how quickly costs can exceed income.

The rising costs of diapers, food and clothes are commonly referenced when discussing costs associated with raising children, but transportation, housing and childcare costs create additional barriers specifically for Oshkosh mothers in poverty.

One of the places where the effects of not supporting single moms in poverty are seen is in the schools, according to Julie Dumke, Oshkosh Area School District education foundation director. She said the lack of school funding combined with the rate of poverty among Oshkosh students is disastrous.

“As a district, we don’t have the same funds as other districts,” Dumke said. “Oshkosh is the fastest growing city of extreme poverty in the state of Wisconsin, but we’re still being funded from numbers from 15 years ago. We need to empower these moms and their kids to help break the cycle of poverty.”

### How Oshkosh ranks

School district social worker Hannah Dumke said the city’s north side –Merrill Middle and Elementary schools, Oaklawn Elementary and North High – has the highest rate of students in poverty, referencing the district’s data of how many are receiving free or reduced lunch. Dumke said this is standard to determine a school’s rate of poverty because to qualify for the program, parents’ income must be at or below 130 percent of the FPL, which equates to \$33,480.20 for a family of four in 2019. The 2019 FPL for a family of four is \$25,750.

Julie Dumke said that in most other districts about one-third of eligible students qualify for free meals and two-thirds for reduced meals; in this district she said schools see the opposite.

There are 41.4 percent of OASD students who come from economically disadvantaged homes, compared with 41.9 percent in Fond du Lac, 18 percent in Winneconne, 26.8 percent in Omro, 25.7 percent in Neenah, 56.5 percent in Menasha, 12.7 percent in Kimberly and 35.8 percent for Appleton.

“We’re doing a lot of preventative work building resources to help new single mothers because it’s easier to make change before patterns have been formed,” Hannah Dumke said. “A lot of single moms don’t have a support system or family in the area, so they’re truly alone.”

She said a needs assessment of where there are gaps in the community could help support parents.

“We have so many hard-working moms who are just trying to do what’s best for their children,” she said.

### **Transit, care, housing**

Almost every nonprofit organization contacted for this series agreed that the top three barriers Oshkosh women face revolve around transportation, housing, and childcare. These obstacles are even higher for a single mother.

Without a reliable vehicle, a mother can take a bus to work. But with childcare she has to stay within the bus schedule of between 6:15 a.m. and 6:45 p.m. If she has a car but needs to be to work before school starts, the children either take the bus or walk if no one else is available to take them.

A monthly pass for the GO Transit system is \$35 or \$3 for a single ride. There is no discount for students or multiple riders – each must have their own pass.

Hannah Dumke said some students walk up to two miles to school, which can lead to high truancy rates, especially in cold months.

“It’s especially hard for single working moms because if they’re at work early, they’re relying on their kids to get up, get ready and walk themselves to school or get on the bus,” Dumke said. “It’s impacting attendance rates – especially in the winter because two miles is a long walk.”

Childcare takes another big hit out of a budget with daycare rates ranging from \$230 to \$275 a week. Annually, that’s about \$12,000 to \$14,300. If a working mother chooses to go this route rather than finding a home-based option – typically less expensive – she will often make a decision on whether to work, as the majority of her salary will go toward child care if she doesn’t qualify for assistance.

The Wisconsin Shares child care subsidy program offers some relief, just over \$7,500 a year, or \$625 a month. To be eligible, a family’s combined income must be equal to or less than 185 percent of the FPL, which means a mother with two children cannot make more than \$39,460.50 annually. Additionally, the care center needs to meet certain requirements.

Not having a stable, safe place to sleep is the most consequential effect for a child of a woman in poverty, Hannah and Julie Dumke agree. Julie said there were 170 children in the district this last year who were homeless; they could be living in a motel, staying with a friend or a parent's friend with multiple people in a room. Both mentioned the potentially traumatic effects of not having a consistent place to call home — anxiety, depression and even suicidal ideation as early as elementary school.

“Poverty can be a traumatizing experience,” Hannah Dumke said. “We need to work to end the cycle of poverty with single moms and give them more support.”

Next week: Understanding the distinct culture of poverty.

## Part 5: Understanding harsh culture of poverty

July 16, 2019

By Samantha Strong, Herald contributor

There is no single solution to solving poverty in Oshkosh, with many factors contributing to the problems faced by those dealing with it.

But the community can take a step forward, the Rev. Connie Weiss of Christ Lutheran Church explained, by being more compassionate and trying to meet people where they're at rather than where we think they should be.

The pastor said churches are sometimes the first to see people in need because they are generally considered a safe space where people genuinely want to help.

"They come to the church with needs but what I found out was I was ill-equipped to deal with it and not knowing if I was really helping," Weiss said. "And you can give money, but was this the help they were needing?"

Weiss said the tips she has received from Oshkosh Salvation Army social worker Al Rolph have been instrumental in the church's efforts to be more mission-based and help the community work against poverty and the stigma surrounding those experiencing it.

Rolph leads a free class called The Culture of Poverty, which uses the work of Dr. Ruby Payne to explain the differences among societal classes through different lenses — time, language and driving forces — and how those factors lend themselves to perpetuate stereotypes.

Payne is an educator and author of "A Framework for Understanding Poverty," and her Aha! Process company works with schools, companies and other organizations about poverty.

"They look at the world differently," Rolph said of people in poverty. "Just like wealthy people look at the world differently, and so do middle-class people."

### **Culture of poverty**

The first step to meeting people where they're at is to be compassionate and understanding by looking at the issue through a cultural lens, not a financial one.

Rolph said people in generational poverty, defined as two or more generations, have different driving forces behind their decisions, which can lead to confusion and frustration among those in the middle or upper class of society trying to make sense of their actions.

Relationships, entertainment and survival are the driving forces behind every decision made by people in poverty. Once survival needs are met, relationships and entertainment take priority over work and achievement, which normally drives the middle class.

“Middle class runs the institutions in our society — the schools, agencies, businesses,” Rolph said. “So because I was brought up in the middle class I’m familiar with the concept that you get to work on time and you work hard because achievement is important. If you’re out on the streets in January, you’re not going to be thinking about achievement, you’re going to be thinking about how you’ll survive.”

Relationships become important among communities in poverty because there is a lot more bartering going on.

“If your brakes are grinding in your car, you’re going to pay money to get them fixed,” Rolph said.

“People in poverty have relationships with others, because that’s a driving factor for them, so they can barter. They might say, ‘If you can fix my brakes I’ll fix your leaky roof,’ so if they have a relationship with someone with different skills, they can barter and there’s no money exchanged.”

Another example Rolph gave tied into the stereotype of poor people being lazy. He said if someone in poverty has a sick child and asks their sister to watch the child, typically that sister will call into work because relationships are their driving force. He said this can perpetuate the stereotype that people in poverty are either lazy or can’t keep a job.

“None of those things are true; they’re simply making decisions based on different driving forces than the middle class,” he said.

Another difference between middle-class people and those in generational poverty is the perception of time.

“You’d never hear someone in poverty or the upper class call ahead to tell someone they’re going to be late — that’s a very middle-class thing,” Rolph said. He explained that time for those in generational poverty is measured by what’s going on at that moment and what they need to survive.

“Someone’s kid gets sick — they have to call in to work and lose wages,” Rolph said, setting up a common scenario many parents face. “Well, the rent’s due and the electric bill is due and with those lost wages, you have to decide which to pay. They know the heat won’t be turned off right away so they decide to pay the rent first.”

When a utility bill is due is when someone might come to the Salvation Army for help.

“Someone might ask them, ‘Didn’t you know last week that the utility bill was due today?’ Rolph said. “The answer is yes, but that wasn’t their crisis of the day. It looks like, if you look at it through the middle-class lens, that they’re making poor choices but it’s just a difference in perception and priorities.”



## **Exit from poverty?**

Getting out of poverty requires a monumental shift in many things, according to Rolph. Someone must learn to mimic the behaviors of middle-class people and change their way of thinking to make work and achievement the driving forces of their decisions.

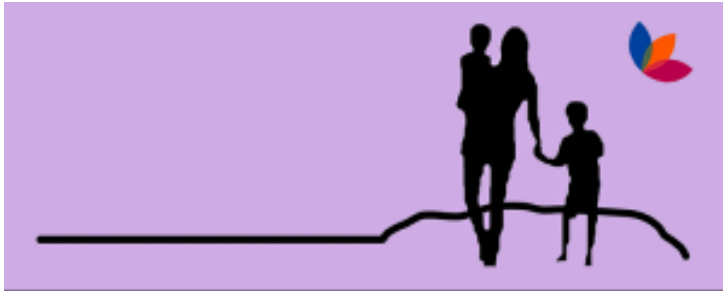
Matt Johnson, Day By Day Warming Shelter executive director, said a change in poverty and homelessness cannot be made without community support and a continuum of care. He gave the example of going from an emergency shelter to a temporary shelter where a little more independence and responsibility can be gained. From there someone would go to short-term housing with limited income, where they would learn to budget and care for a house, then eventually to independent housing. But not before they've been supported and educated.

"People think it's a choice, that people decide to do this," Johnson said. "People don't make bad decisions when they're not in bad circumstances. In reality you or I probably wouldn't do things much differently – it's just the circumstances they're in and people don't act effectively when you're trying to meet your most basic, primal needs."

Next week: A personal look inside a woman's daily challenges

## Part 6: Families strive towards self-reliance July 26, 2019

By Samantha Strong, Herald contributor



*Pilot program looks for working strategy*

It becomes much more difficult to ignore a problem when talking about a real person rather than an abstract idea.

Poverty in Oshkosh does not have a simple solution, with many contributing factors to someone's financial status. This makes it an even more important topic to work on as a community.

The Women's Fund, part of the Oshkosh Area Community Foundation, partnered with Christine Ann Domestic Abuse Services and Evergreen Retirement Community to pilot a program called RISE 2.0. The transitional living program works with single mothers and their families to provide services and programming to help achieve self-sufficiency.

RISE 2.0 coordinated affordable, safe housing for two women and their families with the understanding they were required to pay rent, contribute to program fees and basic utilities — depending on income — and attend weekly educational training such as managing money and parenting. The women are also required to be in consistent communication with an advocate from Christine Ann. The hope is that by eliminating the instability of affordable housing, the mothers can spend more time and energy on education, employment and their families.

"This program allows us to take finding safe and affordable housing out of the equation for these women — because that's often a huge barrier — and see what it actually costs to live and raise a family in Oshkosh," Karlene Grabner, executive director of the Women's Fund, said. "That way we can provide a more realistic look at what it costs to not only survive but thrive in this community. This in turn has the potential to drive the change in the community that we need."

## **Real cost of poverty**

To better understand what a single Oshkosh mother living in poverty faces, the two participating women agreed to discuss their day-to-day finances and decisions. Neither pays more than 30 percent of their income in rent, which is the recommended percentage anyone should pay for housing regardless of income or financial status.

In order to make ends meet and take care of their families, both women are enrolled in FoodShare, use the food pantry from time to time and one is in WIC, a supplemental program helping women, infants and children with health care and nutrition. Each has more than one child, the youngest being under age 2.

Both women hold jobs that pay an hourly wage, but each noted that after meeting their children's needs they have little money left. This is an all-too-common experience for many single moms here.

One of the program participants (she is identified as Lea to protect her privacy) said she pushes her school-age children to be involved in sports with the hope that planned extracurricular activities will keep them from making poor decisions. However, these activities are not cheap. Her children are involved in football, volleyball, cross country and other sports, with each requiring specific clothing and equipment. As the children grow they need new clothing and equipment.

Lea does not qualify for any other program besides FoodShare and receives \$124 a month for groceries.

"You always hear people say, 'Oh, it must be nice to get that handout,'" she said. "No one wants to be on food stamps. \$124 is a couple of meals at my house. I'm not sitting around waiting for things to be given to me. I'm busting my ass working and working and working to take care of my kids and I just can't get ahead for the life of me."

From age 15 Lea has been a caretaker, watching over her younger siblings due to her mother's health issues. She eventually dropped out of school but is now working to get her GED diploma. To accomplish this, Young needs to pass four tests on a variety of topics. She said each test costs \$40-\$50.

She has a job in the health care system but works 12-hour shifts, often 6 p.m. to 6 a.m., leaving her children to take care of themselves and each other.

Lea typically leaves the house by 2:45 p.m. to get to work by 5:45 p.m. because she doesn't have a car. She makes dinner for her children before she leaves, and after work starts her three-hour trek back home using the city's transit system.

She sleeps for a few hours around 12:30 p.m. and then gets up to do it again.

She said it's incredibly difficult to keep up with this schedule but does it for them.

“When they tell me they need something new I don’t say anything, but in my head I’m thinking, ‘How am I going to do this?’” Lea said. “I’m tired from working and I’m going to go work more hours, but I do it because you hear about a lot of kids getting in trouble when they don’t have other activities. I figure if I keep my kids active, they’re not going to take the wrong path, so I just work more and more and more.”

Julia, the other RISE 2.0 participant, said she considers herself underemployed as an hourly worker, which has a significant effect on her ability to support her family. She said the full process to secure this position lasted four weeks and included two interviews. She said the job comes with no additional benefits, which is the case for many hourly positions.

“It’s important to consider the idea of social capital and it isn’t always how hard you work, it’s who you know,” Julia said. “Anyone can get a job, but a career is a privilege based on your social capital. If you don’t have hands to help you up, you’re stuck with an hourly wage job and I challenge anyone to tell me otherwise.”

She has a vehicle, which helps alleviate some of the pressure of child care dropoff and pickup, and receives child care assistance through government programs. She has shared custody but noted those situations can get more complicated than being the sole parent because if her children’s father doesn’t pay his half of the child care bill they are at risk of being kicked out of the program.

When the three-year RISE 2.0 program ends, Grabner is confident the women will have self-sufficiency.

“They will reach self-sufficiency or we will stick with them until they do,” she said. “For these women my wish is that they are able to demonstrate for their kids the power of perseverance. With this drive and example, my long-range goal is that these kids have broken their generational poverty cycle.”

### **Money and mental health**

Both women confirm having anxiety over money even though they qualify for at least one government program because they can be difficult to navigate and aren’t always easy to apply for.

Julia said when she does her budget it’s much more complex than someone not using government programs because there are certain things she can buy from certain stores and others she can’t. For example, she can get coffee at Pick n’ Save but not from Festival Foods.

“There are certain types of cereal and yogurt you can get so you have to do a lot of work to try and figure it out,” Pickett said. “The person who is using three different forms of payment — it probably took them twice as long to figure out how to use those efficiently than what you’re seeing.”

Brittany Stewart, another Oshkosh-area mother working an hourly-wage job, also has a lot of anxiety surrounding money and doesn’t feel she could cover the cost of a large unexpected emergency.

“Simply put, I would be ‘robbing Peter to pay Paul,’” Stewart said. “I can’t even meet the budget expenses I have now. Most months it’s setting up payment plans and deciding what is better to go

without. What's more important — vehicle insurance or making sure I have electricity, running water and a safe place for my daughter and I to come home to? The question answers itself.”

Stewart graduated from high school and was on her way to UW-Stevens Point to major in speech pathology but had a family issues that brought her home to work full time. She later attended Fox Valley Technical College for a few semesters but was unable to finish because she needed to continue her full-time work. She said her average annual income is below \$20,000 and her biggest expense by far is child care with utilities a close second. Daily and weekly expenses that prove to be problematic are gas and laundry. She does not have a washer or dryer in her apartment.

### **Oshkosh vs. other cities**

Julia feels there is a difference between Oshkosh and other places she has lived when it comes to community engagement and support. She has found that even programs that aim to support Oshkosh mothers aren't welcoming she often feels alone and isolated.

“There's a difference between how people are using those small organizations here than in other communities,” she said. “You can use small organizations to help others or you can use small organizations to say, ‘Here we are; you can't get in’ and most of the time it's, ‘Here we are; you're not a part of this.’” She acknowledged there are organizations trying to change this perception but thinks they are few and far between.

Julia also believes programs could be run more efficiently in Oshkosh by having a health clinic and food pantry in the same building to reduce the time it takes to get from one place to another to secure essential needs.

“It's a full-time job to be poor,” she said. “It just feels like, on top of everything else going on, all of the higher institutions are telling you your time has no value. All I see when I look at the people waiting for their food is the potential and valuable skills just kind of stagnant and told that's what they're worth.”

The women in RISE 2.0 both sought emergency shelter at Christine Ann after fleeing abuse, which is how they became involved in the program. Stewart is a participant in Pathways of Hope through the Salvation Army, which provides individualized services to families working to break the cycle of crisis and vulnerability that can repeat for generations. The program goes after the root causes of poverty by helping families overcome unemployment, unstable housing and lack of education.

“I cried every single night when we were in the shelter after my kids when to sleep,” Lea said. “It was so hard and I ended up having to quit my job because there was a lot of mandatory overtime I couldn't take because of my kids.”

She did find another job but said it wasn't easy and still struggles to get as many hours as she needs to keep up with expenses.

All three women acknowledged feeling shame and embarrassment simply trying to move through the community as a single mother in poverty. Lea said there are few people in her life or her children's who know they lived in temporary shelter. Julia struggles to combat the guilt others put on her for buying things she and her family need, such as a cellphone or vehicle. Stewart referenced the benefits cliff that has her considering whether to take a better-paying job but losing benefits.

"Some days I feel like I'm only treading water, others I feel I will never get above water," Stewart said.

### **A little compassion helps**

"A little bit of respect or compassion goes a long way," Julia said. "Even if people could just be a little more courteous to the person who has multiple forms of payment at the grocery store checkout — they're just trying to feed themselves or their kids."

Lea also finds compassion important and does what she can to help others while living paycheck to paycheck.

"When I see people on the street asking for money, I don't have a lot of money but I still give them a dollar or two if I can because I am that mom that needs help sometimes too," she said. "I don't know their story. Nobody knew my story but they still helped me and that's why I do what I do."

Stewart said she thinks some in the Oshkosh community are naive in believing that people living below the poverty line are doing so by choice.

"A lot of people seem to think homelessness is a choice, that addiction and alcoholism are choices, and being a single parent often has a negative connotation surrounding it," Stewart said. "Though circumstances may seem to support these opinions, it couldn't be further from the truth. Poor people don't make bad decisions; people make bad decisions because they are poor."

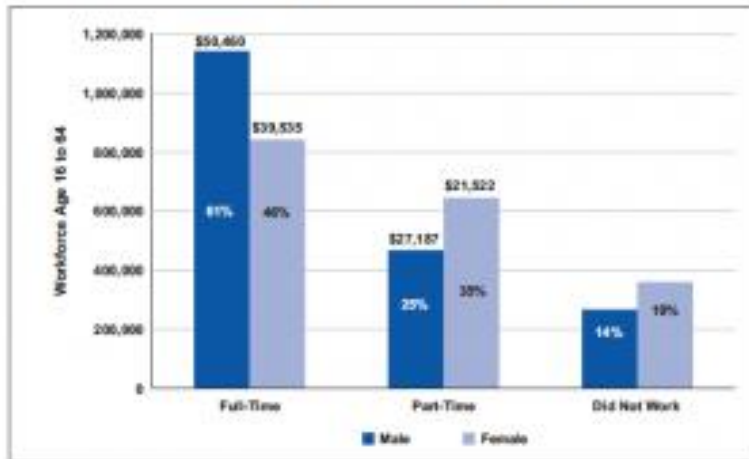
Next week: Juggling education and employment goals

## Part 7: Finding, maintaining employment is key

August 5, 2019

By Samantha Strong, Herald contributor

Figure 17.  
Full- and Part-Time Employment and Wages for Men and Women, Wisconsin, 2016



Source: American Community Survey, 2016

Figure 15.  
Top 20 Occupations by Employment and Wage, Wisconsin, 2016

OCCUPATION	2016		Percent Change 2010-2016	
	NUMBER OF JOBS	MEDIAN HOURLY WAGE	NUMBER OF JOBS	MEDIAN HOURLY WAGE
Retail Salespersons	85,108	\$10.13	12%	7%
Office Clerks	84,358	\$15.21	34%	17%
Food Prep, Including Fast Food	71,230	\$9.04	12%	-5%
Cashiers	61,290	\$9.18	-15%	6%
Customer Service Representatives	60,600	\$16.84	31%	11%
Personal Care Aides	59,998	\$10.78	95%	11%
Registered Nurses	55,418	\$21.94	5%	6%
Laborers and Movers	52,590	\$14.43	23%	10%
Heavy and Tractor-Trailer Truck Drivers	49,148	\$19.58	13%	8%
Waiters and Waitresses	45,190	\$9.00	-7%	6%
Janitors and Cleaners	42,700	\$11.37	-7%	3%
Team Assemblers	41,460	\$14.30	20%	4%
Sales Representatives	39,600	\$28.00	10%	5%
Stock Clerks and Order Fillers	35,100	\$10.45	7%	7%
Bookkeeping and Accounting Clerks	32,880	\$17.12	2%	10%
Nursing Assistants	32,380	\$13.22	-14%	10%
General and Operations Managers	32,300	\$45.66	20%	3%
Maintenance and Repair Workers	30,430	\$18.43	20%	3%
Elementary School Teachers	29,100	\$18.43	4%	-20%
Barberbers	28,120	\$9.10	13%	5%

Source: Bureau of Labor Statistics, Occupational Employment Statistics (OES) Wage Survey - All Industries Combined, 2010 and 2016

The median annual wage for a woman living in Winnebago County is \$35,600, according to the Women's Fund Report on the Status of Women in Northeast Wisconsin. The median annual wage for a man living in the county is \$47,300 according to the same report.

Compounded over 50 years that difference amounts to \$585,000. While the gender wage gap has narrowed slightly in most of northeast Wisconsin counties, it's still a disparity of 25 percent in Winnebago.

"One thing that we see as a factor of poverty is employment – specifically what is a living wage versus what is minimum wage, and being able to further education," Allison Knautz, outreach specialist at FoodShare Employment and Training (FSET), said. "We're shifting our case management style to treat poverty as an environmental factor – something that is treatable – so we're aiming to come alongside individuals in need and get them connected with resources that address those needs much sooner than they are now, as well as provide a continuum of care."

FSET is a program through Forward Service Corp. (FSC) that helps those who qualify for the FoodShare program find and retain a job, job training and education, career planning, referrals to other services, work experience to learn skills and even help with transportation and child care.

Women's needs vary in Oshkosh, but Knautz agreed with other area nonprofit organizations combating poverty that the main barriers to getting and keeping a job are transportation, child care and housing, as these factors all influence a woman's job search, education and work opportunities.

A working woman without reliable transportation will be in trouble if her vehicle has trouble or child care falls through – especially if short on cash or without a support system nearby. The same applies to women pursuing some sort of continuing education.

If she does have car trouble or a child care scheduling hiccup, it could mean calling into work with the hope of having some flexibility or paid time off. Without those options it could cost her a day's wages or at worse the job itself, which starts the job-seeking cycle over again.

Since a large number of women in Oshkosh are already living paycheck to paycheck, according to the United Way's 2018 ALICE report, not having an income means having to dip into whatever savings are available to cover immediate needs. The Asset Limited, Income Constrained, Employed (ALICE) threshold describes households that earn more than the federal poverty level but less than the basic cost of living for the country.

"Loss of employment, when that happens and it's unexpected, can certainly put somebody in a precarious position where they might need to use money or savings to pay for bills and cover things they weren't intending," Knautz said. "(Poverty and employment) is a very big topic but we can't lose the individuals who are being affected by this and living this as their everyday situation."



## **It's about location**

The third major barrier Oshkosh women in poverty face is affordable housing. This translates to getting a job because it's difficult to turn in an application without an address. Women with a permanent place to live can also find themselves in a pickle if they don't live within a close distance to their jobs and need transportation to get their.

The majority of affordable or low-income housing units are in the 54901 ZIP code, according to the Oshkosh/Winnebago County Housing Authority. Mayor Lori Palmeri said as the city continues to expand and attract large employers that present opportunities and potentially higher-paying jobs, planners need to look at the current transportation system and make sure there is affordable housing near the new opportunities.

Currently there are 1,884 applicants on a waiting list to get into affordable housing through the County Housing Authority, including 907 county residents. The rest are either outside the county or state.

"My proposal is that when developers are asking the city for incentives as they build new apartment complexes, that they would consider providing 10 percent, or even just 10 of the units, below market rate so that an ALICE family could afford it," Palmeri said. "If someone is going to ask for incentives, we're going to ask if there's wiggle room where they can build the units, too."

Palmeri said that while poverty and homelessness may never be eliminated, local officials can help lift people out.

"Having a roof over your head will at least give you a better chance," Palmeri said.

## **What employers want**

Female job-seekers and working women in poverty aren't the only ones frustrated. Another group is Oshkosh employers, Knautz said, who are struggling with a lack of employee buy-in and retention.

According to the Women's Fund report, half of all women working full time, year-round can be found in one of five occupations: office and administrative support, management occupations, sales and related (including retail), production, and business and financial operations. These are jobs women held at the time of the 2017 study. It found that men, on average, out-earn women in each of these fields by anywhere from \$7,000 to \$23,000.

These aren't necessarily the best-paying jobs with a clear path to promotion, which is what is needed to gain self-sufficiency, according to Brian Covey, FSC director of outreach and development. The FSET program has Oshkosh employer partners that have identified what they need in a labor force.

"We want to help the Wisconsin employers tap into a labor pool that has the skills and an idea of where they want to go in a career, and also have a stable home life so they can have a stable work life," Covey said.

FSET has identified industries and occupations in the area that provide higher wages and make a better quality of life possible: manufacturing, logistics, office administration and call centers. Covey said the FSET program hosts a free four- to six-week training program for individuals to get the skills for success in one of these areas.

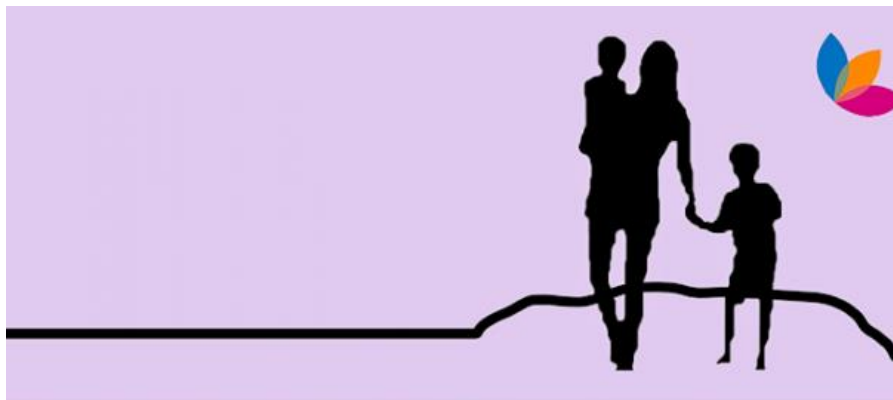
“The goal is that they attend these trainings, which leads to a higher-paying job so they can get out of poverty and into a career path because these are the jobs that offer higher pay and a clear path forward,” he said. “I think training and education are the surest paths to higher earnings.”

Yet if those original barriers aren’t dealt with, maintaining employment remains an overriding issue for women.

## Part 8: Solving poverty becomes public, private mission

August 6, 2019

By Samantha Strong, Herald contributor



This series was written to bring to light the large number of Oshkosh women who are struggling just to get by – some without any savings, daily essentials or support. Education and awareness are the first steps to dealing with the issue of poverty here but can only go so far. Action needs to be taken to make any progress toward helping the 20,000-plus households struggling in Winnebago County.

Day By Day Warming Shelter founder Tina Haffeman now volunteers at LEAVEN, a nonprofit organization that aims to stabilize and empower Fox Cities residents in financial crisis by providing financial assistance, referrals and case management to take up their near-term and long-term basic needs.

Haffeman said she would like to see a LEAVEN-inspired system in Oshkosh because all resources are housed in one building, without overlap, meaning if someone comes to LEAVEN for help with rent, they can be directed to additional help with utilities, budget counseling, employment, health care options and more simply by walking down the hall. LEAVEN also provides case management and assistance for those interested in taking on the root causes of their poverty and to find a way to self-sufficiency.

Haffeman said she often encounters people, even influential Oshkosh community members, who think this system might do more harm than good, but Haffeman said her experience has shown her that addressing the immediate crisis is crucial so that a person is more ready to make future plans for a better life.

“When some people come to LEAVEN, they often feel desperate, they’re often humiliated to be there,” Haffeman said. “Nobody thinks about or wants to be in poverty. Sure, there are people who come in chronically, but that is a relatively small percentage and they’re referred to programs with professionals who can help. When everybody does better, everybody does better.”

### **Ways to help**

Mary Ann Dilling, Oshkosh Area United Way president and chief executive, said she’s been working with area businesses to better understand the needs of the community and explain how they can help, including employing people of lower incomes, providing more flexible schedules and more inclusive benefits. The function of the United Way is to provide funding for programs and resources that help those in need.

“My job is to go to the companies and tell the story of the biggest challenges in Oshkosh,” Dilling said. “I talk to community leaders and tell them what we’ve observed.”

Dilling said the best starting point for finding resources is 2-1-1, a United Way service that connects those in need with information about community services such as employment, affordable housing, mental health care, dental care, legal aid and child care. Simply dial 2-1-1 on any phone or visit [211now.org](http://211now.org).

Dilling said she firmly believes this community can eliminate or at least reduce poverty.

“We care about each other and we want to make a difference — we want to help each other,” she said. “We just need to educate the community because I truly believe people want to help and want to make a difference in this world.”

## **Mental health, chronic stress**

One of the undeniable effects of poverty on someone struggling is chronic or toxic stress and anxiety, according to Doug Gieryn, Winnebago County Department of Health (DOH) director. The DOH is working on an initiative to promote social connectedness and inclusion within the Oshkosh community because getting people connected can help eliminate the social stigmas surrounding poverty and help provide more resources.

“People in poverty tend to have poorer health because of some of the other conditions they face, such as not being able to access transportation, safe housing or having a safe environment,” said Cindy Draws, DOH public health nurse.

Draws said women in poverty face additional health hazards related to pregnancy and childbirth.

“Women in poverty have poorer outcomes in terms of birth and lifetime issues as the child grows, so providing prenatal care is crucial,” she said. “We also do ‘new mom calls’ to give them an introduction to motherhood and tell them some of the community resources.”

Pregnancy and childbirth can affect a woman’s health in a multitude of ways, but for women also struggling with poverty the added stress of limited income can be detrimental to other components of a healthy lifestyle — diet, a safe place to live, dental health, other aspects of health that relate to basic human needs. All of these come into play and impact different parts of someone’s life, which also impacts the child’s life and can continue the cycle of chronic stress, Draws said. Chronic stress for a pregnant woman can also lead to early delivery and a harder start to life.

The DOH works to connect women with any health-related resources they may need, including a baby crib or car seat, prenatal care and mammograms.

For women feeling isolated in their community, stress can take an even bigger toll on their mental and physical health.

“We’ve been working more with social connectedness, recognizing how people in communities may not always feel connected or like they belong, and that’s especially true for people in poverty,” said Lynnsey Erickson, community health strategist with the Winnebago County Department of Health. “People feel like they don’t have the support they need to make the next steps and get the support they need to get out of poverty.”

Erickson said the stigma around mental health paired with the lack of community support makes it even harder to get out of poverty.

“We need to be investing in things in the community that foster that social connectedness like the library,” Erickson said. “The library is where people go to search for jobs and get a better education and teach their kids to read. The library is a big community space and we need to make these types of services easier to access because it will help with that social connectedness piece.”

Mayor Lori Palmeri said she plans to continue promoting this issue in her leadership term, as it is one that impacts just about every aspect of the community. She has put a focus on safe housing and introducing a transportation utility fee that would eliminate large surprise bills for street and sidewalk repair that can potentially give families financial distress.

“The government’s primary job is to protect its citizens and work for the common good,” Haffeman said. “What else could your taxes be better used for than lifting everyone up?”

## Part 9: Women's Fund paves way to self-sufficiency

August 26, 2019

By Katie Neitzel, Women's Fund development and communications manager



Over the last eight weeks, Oshkosh Herald contributor Samantha Strong shared with the community the realities of poverty in Oshkosh, and specifically its effect on women. The information shared is shocking, but not unfamiliar to the Women's Fund of the Oshkosh Area Community Foundation.

Having been a partner in the Status of Women in Northeast Wisconsin Report for the past eight years, the Women's Fund has seen the numbers regarding women and poverty only increase. The clear evidence found in the report convinced the Women's Fund it was time to take a proactive approach at supporting women who are living in poverty.

Oftentimes women living in poverty are a product of generational poverty. They grew up living in poverty and most likely their parents did as well. To truly help a woman get out of poverty, the barriers preventing her from being self-sufficient must be broken, especially if she has children.

The Women's Fund has implemented a new program — RISE 2.0 — to do just that. With all her basic needs taken care of, a mother can focus on becoming self-sufficient and getting her family out of poverty.

The Women's Fund is not alone in this venture, which was started at the beginning of 2018. Partner Evergreen Retirement Community has provided houses on their property for two mothers who are required to pay 25 percent of their income to rent and must either have a job or be in school. In collaboration with Christine Ann Domestic Abuse Center, the mothers take weekly classes on financial sustainability, parenting, and love and logic, among others.

The Women's Fund provides funding and resources to assist the mothers with child care, education, employment and other necessities needed to allow the women to focus on becoming self-sufficient.

Both families have now been in the program for over a year and have made great progress. One mother is going to school for her master's degree and the other has secured a job as a certified nursing assistant and is interested in learning more about a career in phlebotomy.

The goal of RISE 2.0 is for both families to be able to get to a place of self-sufficiency within three years. Through this program, the Women's Fund is striving to gather specific data that will show how much money and resources are needed to get a family out of poverty and back on their feet.

"At the end of the RISE 2.0 three-year program, the Women's Fund wants to have a detailed plan to provide to others who want to duplicate it," said Karlene Grabner, executive director. "We understand that each person's situation will be different but this study will give us a benchmark starting point. We are not equipped or have the staff to continue to run this program after the three years, but we know if we can provide the evidence-based research to show this program works, we hope others will be able to take over and expand it."

To learn more about the Women's Fund or how to help, visit [Women.OshkoshAreaCF.org](http://Women.OshkoshAreaCF.org) or call 920-426-3993.



## Benefits cliff needs adjustment to promote progress

August 26, 2019

By Josh Dukelow, WHBY Fresh Take Host and public policy professional

For months, Samantha Strong has reported in these pages on the struggle faced by women living in poverty in the Oshkosh community. She spoke to the agencies there to help, and the employers who wish they could do more. In response, some readers say these women need to work harder, to “pull themselves up by their bootstraps,” to get ahead.

But what does that mean in the context of escaping the cycle of poverty? How can putting in more hours and earning higher wages actually undermine efforts to achieve financial stability and independence? As part of the series, Samantha discussed the “benefits cliff” and how it can work against women trying to work their way out of poverty. So what is the benefits cliff, exactly?

In public policy, the goal of many social programs is to provide financial assistance to people in need. The definition of “in need” varies from one program to the next, but often uses annual household income as the measurement of financial condition. As such, if household income rises, benefits are often reduced, or cut off completely.

And that’s the idea. Benefit programs are not intended to be permanent. These “cut off” points can, however, cause abrupt changes in a household budget. That puts recipients in a tough spot, having to choose between slightly higher wages or continued benefits that might be worth much more.

For example, a mother could work full time and still receive benefits. When she is eligible for a raise, she has some math to do to determine if she should accept it. You see, those higher wages would mean a higher annual household income, and that higher income might eliminate her eligibility for the benefits she relies on.

What should she do? The amount by which her wages would go up does not equal the amount of benefits she lost. That means, by accepting the raise, she would actually reduce her total household resources (income plus benefits). Therefore, despite working hard to earn that raise, she might turn it down in order to preserve her benefits

While this decision might make no sense in your mind, this is a rational choice for her to make. Despite the fact that she refused a raise, accepting it would mean having even less to run her household. She may want to reduce her reliance on benefits, but she can’t afford to lose out. So what can we do to reduce this perverse incentive?

First, we can change how eligibility is calculated. Most benefit programs use household income levels to determine eligibility. More programs could create sliding-scales, rather than hard “all or nothing” benefit cliffs, as people earn their way off the benefit.

In those cases, as your income grows your benefits decline gradually, thus reducing the cliff-effect that promotes the decision to turn down the raise. By keeping some benefits, though reduced, the impact on the household budget is mitigated. Wisconsin’s Homestead Tax Credit program is an example of a program that utilizes this kind of gradual scaling-down of the benefit payment. As you grow your annual income beyond a certain level, the benefit you get starts to shrink, but it doesn’t go away entirely. Therefore it shouldn’t blow a hole in your budget.

Another alternative employed in the design of some benefit programs is to partner with employers to ensure that wage increases (that can trigger benefit losses) are big enough to actually leave the worker better off in the end. Wage subsidies, paid through the employer, can eliminate the cliff effect and create incentives for working harder and earning higher wages without putting much-needed benefits at risk.

By addressing the benefits cliff problem, public policymakers can improve the plight of people working to escape poverty. The solutions are available, and public awareness of the problem has never been higher. Let’s see hope Oshkosh lawmakers will take the lead on tackling this tricky problem.

*Josh Dukelow holds a master’s degree in public policy from UW-Madison, and started his career working as a policy analyst in state government. Dukelow is the radio host on WHBY’s Fresh Take program.*