

[BACK TO TOP](#)

## Simulation shows life in poverty

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How long could you survive on \$471 a month?

On Wednesday, the nonprofit Bucks County Opportunity Council challenged dozens of volunteers to budget for life at the \$24,500 federal poverty level. Given \$67 a day, participants would need to balance the costs of child care, groceries, housing, health care, transportation and utilities in suburban Philadelphia.

In short, it did not go well.

After failing to buy groceries for three consecutive weeks, a third of the event's participants would die of starvation.

Unable to afford child care, a half dozen of the participants lost custody of their kids.

One unfortunate volunteer was sent to the simulated "jail" for child neglect. In the frustrating rush from her minimum-wage job to the "Food-A-Rama," she left her "baby" on the floor, where the doll got stepped on.

Asked to describe the two-hour experience, poverty simulators used words like "chaos," "degrading" and "exhausting."

Tammy Schoonover, the Opportunity Council's director of community services, told them, "To live in Bucks County, a single parent with one

child and one infant needs \$60,000, and that's not including taxes."

Based on that standard, one-third of Bucks County households wouldn't have enough money to live here. The U.S. Census reports 87,915 households in Bucks earning below \$60,000 a year.

If you go by the federal poverty level, an estimated 15,600 households earn below \$25,000 per year. That's 6 percent of county residents, roughly 36,635 people, considered poor by the federal standard, according to the U.S. Census.

On Wednesday, poverty simulator Jessica Schwartz, of Falls, assumed the role a newly divorced, single parent. Schwartz had a college-aged daughter and a granddaughter diagnosed with asthma and autism.

She had \$1,570 per month, after taxes, from a job paying \$10 an hour. (That's \$2.50 above Pennsylvania's minimum wage.)

Schwartz also had at least \$1,530 in monthly expenses - \$820 for rent, \$285 for child care, \$235 for utilities, \$120 for groceries, and \$40 for miscellaneous items.

But, that didn't include the cost of transportation. Under the rules of the game, Schwartz had to pay a fee for each trip to work, the grocery store, the child care or medical center. And, if you lacked money for transportation, you were stuck.

Kevyn Malloy, a retiree from Middletown, was assigned to play the role of a child. It was an emotional experience, Malloy said.

"I was a 9-year-old girl, and it felt kind of like nobody was in charge," she said. "The chaos was very frightening for me, and I just can't imagine what it must be like to grow up in that situation.

"The adults aren't going to be able to impart skills to me," Malloy continued. "So, I can only imagine that I'm going to perpetuate this lifestyle."

The Bucks County Opportunity Council had stationed tables around the room to represent a discount grocery store, child care center and a pawn shop (that also sold guns). The event in Middletown was designed to highlight the difficulty of low-income families trying to achieve sustainable economic self-sufficiency, organizers said.

Steve Schur, of Middletown, asked whether someone would give the poverty simulation an imaginary bar or liquor store.

"This is just incredibly stressful for me," said Shur. "Could you put an imaginary station in the corner and make it a bar, because I need a drink."

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