

Imagine that you are a stay at home mom with two young children and your husband is seriously injured in an automobile accident, leaving him unable to work and you are facing eviction. Imagine that your father passes away unexpectedly, leaving you severely depressed and grieving. Imagine that your benefits at work do not include dental care and you are developing an abscess.

For many of us here in Centre County the beautiful surroundings, abundant resources and wide variety of opportunities allow us to go about our daily lives, unaware of the difficulties facing many of our neighbors. For the members of the 2016 Class of Leadership Centre County, Health and Human Services Day provided us with a tremendous opportunity to role play through some of these scenarios with the help of over 35 local human service agencies. On this day, we represented some of the most vulnerable populations in our community. I have to believe that we each came out of this day with much more than we ever anticipated.

Reality set in first thing in the morning as we were split into multiple family units, each facing different struggles and difficulties. With the help of agency representatives from the Centre County Council for Human Services, we completed a poverty simulation. For an hour, we were faced with making difficult decisions, such as whether to buy food for our families or pay rent. It did not take long for some class members to resort to any means necessary to help their family survive. All the while there were agencies available to help our families meet our needs, but many of us were so overwhelmed by the stress and desperation we felt that we never thought to reach out for their help. We realized that not only were we unaware of the levels of struggle present in our community, but also the resources and assistance that the human service agencies in Centre County offer.

Fortunately we spent the afternoon visiting numerous agencies throughout the community to learn more about the services available locally. These agency visits highlighted some things that we do very well in Centre County. In Centre County, we:

- Respond to tragedies and crisis with action. Many of the agencies we had the pleasure of visiting rose up as a response to a tragedy or identified need.
- Collaborate and communicate. The agencies we visited are interdependent. They make referrals to one another; they are MOU partners on special projects; and they are members of the Centre County Council for Human Services and the Centre County United Way. They work together to meet the needs of our community.

Our hearts, eyes and minds were opened through this experience and we were all moved to do more. Some class members plan to learn more about the vast variety of services available and help increase awareness of available resources throughout the community. Other class members connected with individual agencies and plan to become board members or dedicated volunteers. There are other class members who I am sure, will be the leaders who help our community come together to respond to the next identified need.

There are opportunities for everyone in Centre County to help our neighbors, whether it be through your time, talents or treasures.

Submitted by Jamie Jones, LCC Class of 2016 and Director, Centre County Child Access Center