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## Politicians to break bread with residents

By GINNIE GRAHAM World Staff Writer  
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During August, 32 state legislators will scale back on their food budgets and visit with low-income constituents.

The statewide Walk a Mile program pairs elected state officials with low-income families to give the lawmakers a front-line perspective of life on government assistance.

Participating legislators have agreed to eat on a food-stamp budget based on their family size and communicate once a week with their constituent match. The family and legislator will get together twice during the month -- once at an event for the family and another activity at the legislator's choosing.

"I'm already benefiting from this program," said state Rep. Lucky Lamons, D-Tulsa. "There are two ways a person can change, by what they read and by the people they meet."

The Community Action Project of Tulsa County is organizing the program. It is billed as one of the largest Walk a Mile programs in the nation.

The national program began in 1994 in Washington state at the creation of Natasha Grossman, a student at the University of Washington School of Social Work.

Grossman found many lawmakers never knew or spoke with welfare recipients. As a result, many assessments of social programs and challenges facing low-income families were based on myths or stereotypes.

The program has spread to 26 states including Oklahoma.

Lamons said his match is a woman with five children. The family lost their home and lifestyle after the incarceration of her former husband. The family had lived comfortably on the \$55,000 salary earned by the husband, but lost everything after his conviction.

The family lives in public housing while the mother completes a work-study program to earn a college degree. The oldest child is age 8, and child care has been a problem.

"She is in this situation through no fault of her own," Lamons said. "She doesn't like it and wants to get out of it. That could happen to any woman or stay-at-home husband when you lose a spouse through death, divorce or incarceration."

Lamons said his food budget is \$149 for the month, which will mean a change in his lifestyle.

He said his district has five to six precincts with high concentrations of poverty along with high-income precincts in Maple Ridge and Swan Lake.

"There are some legislators who will stand on the floor and say 'I'm tired of my people paying for your people,'" Lamons said. "Then, I think of my match having two food banks within three miles of where she lives. Those are two facilities that do nothing but hand out food."

"I guarantee there are some representatives who do not understand that."

Lamons said after getting to know his match family, it made him think of his own past. His mother took over the household when he was 10 years old, when his father served in the Vietnam War. His father returned safely, but Lamons said a different result could have changed his life.

"You think of all the things that could happen and think, '(There but) by the grace of God go I,' " Lamons said.

Rep. Pam Peterson, R-Tulsa, said it is important to her to learn about the plight of low-income Oklahomans. Her district is one of the most affluent in the state, with a median income of about \$80,000.

She has not received a match family yet, but plans on participating.

"Even though I'm not facing people in poverty on a daily basis, I want to participate in something to educate myself on the obstacles and challenges they face," Peterson said.

"I consider this an important part of my job to understand what people are going through in this situation."

Peterson said she was not surprised when she found out how many legislators were participating in the program.

"Oklahoma is a special place, and people care about other people," Peterson said. "This is a great, ambitious project."

Rep. Sue Tibbs, R-Tulsa, said she wants to learn about the daily lives of low-income Oklahomans.

"I thought it would be a good way to see the world through someone else's eyes and through the standpoint of a person on assistance," Tibbs said.

Tibbs does not expect problems in adjusting her family's food budget.

"With just two of us here, it probably won't be as difficult for us as it would be if we had children," Tibbs said. "My husband likes to take a list to the grocery store and buys more off the list than on, so he won't be able to do that."

Tibbs has not met her match yet but is already planning an activity for the family. She would like to give a tour of the Capitol and help them understand how she approaches her job as a legislator.

"We hope to teach some people about being part of the process as much as we hope to gain knowledge from them," Tibbs said. "As a state representative, I am just like they are. I get up and have daily routines just like they do. It is good for them to know that public officials are accessible and we do care."

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## Walk a Mile Participants

Rep. John Auffet, D-Stilwell  
Rep. Thad Balkman, R-Norman  
Rep. Gary Banz, R-Midwest City  
Rep. Lisa Billy, R-Purcell  
Rep. Brian Bingman, R-Sapulpa  
Rep. David Braddock, D-Altus  
Rep. Doug Cox, R-Grove  
Sen. Brian Crain, R-Tulsa

Rep. Lee Denney, R-Cushing  
Rep. Dale DePue, R-Edmond  
Sen. Mary Easley, D-Tulsa  
Sen. John Ford, R-Bartlesville  
Rep. Darrell Gilbert, D-Tulsa  
Rep. Wes Hilliard, D-Sulphur  
Rep. Mike Jackson, R-Enid  
Rep. Shane Jett, R-Tecumseh  
Rep. Ryan Kiesel, D-Seminole  
Rep. Lucky Lamons, D-Tulsa  
Sen. Debbe Leftwich, D-Oklahoma City  
Rep. Al Lindley, D-Oklahoma City  
Rep. Jeannie McDaniel, D-Tulsa  
Rep. Jerry McPeak, D-Warner  
Rep. Pam Peterson, R-Tulsa  
Sen. Nancy Riley, R-Tulsa  
Rep. Wade Rousselot, D-Wagoner  
Rep. Ben Sherrer, D-Chouteau  
Rep. Jabar Shumate, D-Tulsa  
Rep. Dan Sullivan, R-Tulsa  
Rep. Randy Terrill, R-Moore  
Rep. Mike Thompson, R-Oklahoma City  
Rep. Sue Tibbs, R-Tulsa  
Rep. Paul Wesselhoft, R-Moore

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