

Lawmakers experience some constituents' lives

By Judy Gibbs Robinson
The Oklahoman

MOORE -- Over brisket sandwiches in a noisy restaurant, a 25-year-old single mother on public assistance and a Republican legislator sized up each other Monday at the start of a monthlong friendship.

"I thought he would be taller," Elisa Marlowe said of Rep. Paul Wesselhoft, R-Moore, her partner in the Walk A Mile program.

Thirty-two Oklahoma legislators are participating this month in the national program that pairs lawmakers with low-income constituents. For August, they will talk by phone at least once a week and attend two activities together -- one on the legislator's turf; the other on the constituent's.

Seeing the other side

Wesselhoft plans to bring Marlowe to the Capitol and hopes she will be able to sit in when he does media interviews about a controversial bill he is sponsoring.

Marlowe wants to take Wesselhoft along when she goes to get her Women, Infants and Children benefit or to apply for food stamps.

"I think there are some things that could be changed that would make it easier for low-income families to get off of state assistance," Marlowe said. "Once you're down, you cannot get back up."

At a table cluttered with the remnants of their barbecue lunch, Wesselhoft listened with interest, then promised to use his position as vice chairman of the House Government Reform and Agency Oversight Committee to help.

"If she has any frustrations at all with the bureaucracy, I can fix that pretty quickly," Wesselhoft said. "I want to know how those agencies are serving my constituents."

The Walk A Mile program started in 1994 in Washington state and quickly went national. Oklahoma last participated six or seven years ago, said Monica Barczak, program coordinator for Community Action Project of Tulsa, which sponsored this year's revival.

To Barczak's surprise, 14 Democrats and 18 Republicans signed up -- a record for any state since the program started.

"I think it means that state legislators are very concerned and aware of the variety of circumstances people face out there, and they are willing to learn about them," Barczak said.

Wesselhoft said the program gives both sides a chance to get to know each other and to dash stereotypes that show all welfare recipients are lazy and all Republicans are rich.

"I want to find out about her life and struggles and challenges. And conversely, I want her to see a slice of my life, too. I'm not rich at all," he said.

Erin Verhamme, 28, plans to take Rep. Ryan Kiesel, D-Seminole, fishing and talk to him about reforming Medicaid to help men, like her 24-year-old husband who is too sick to work.

"We weren't able to get medical care. He fell through the cracks because of his age," Verhamme said.

The couple live on her income as a telemarketer, which is so little they qualify for food stamps.

"It's just been very, very difficult," Verhamme said.

Living with real needs

Disabled in an Air Force training accident and in constant pain, Marlowe is working on a college degree while taking care of her three little girls.

"I want people to see that we're not all here because we're too lazy to get a job," she said. "Some of us are here because we have real needs."

In addition to getting to know their low-income partner, participating legislators agree to spend no more than the maximum food stamp allowance feeding their families for the month. For a family of four, that is \$499 a month.

Living on a food-stamp food budget is usually the hardest part for lawmakers, Barczak said.

"Some legislators are able to swing it and others find it's quite difficult," Barczak said. "My goal is that they try to walk a mile in these folks' shoes."