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Lawmakers walk a mile in lives of the poor

By GINNIE GRAHAM World Staff Writer
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Program provides insights into struggles and budgets

Tammie Clark will be off all government assistance one day, but she wants her legislator to see how it's been a safety net for children.

Her family is one of 32 in the state to be paired with an elected official through the month of August in the Walk A Mile program. The program connects state lawmakers and low-income families so they can learn about each other's lives.

"I'm doing this for my daughter's Head Start program," Clark said. "I saw this as a way for at least one representative to see how the state and federal funding is paying to help these children."

Clark and her husband live in Wagoner County and have seven children. Clark first encountered government assistance at age 12 when she was placed in foster care after being abused.

Throughout her childhood, she bounced between foster and state homes and became an emancipated minor at 17. She earned a high school equivalency diploma and certification as a paralegal.

But when she became a single mother at age 28 with four children, she found that working to pay all the bills without support sacrificed good parenting. She decided to accept government assistance so she could focus on raising her children.

"If it wasn't for that help, I would have been too stressed out to teach my kids what they need," she said. "Help my kids is all I ask. If I lose medical insurance, I'll be all right. But we need to make sure it's there for kids."

Clark is attending Northeastern State University for a bachelor's degree in criminal justice. She uses Medicaid for medical coverage and has a child in the federally funded Head Start program.

She plans to invite her match, Rep. Wade Rousselot, D-Wagoner, to attend a day at Head Start with her daughter.

"Legislators need to know what they are voting on," Clark said. "Head Start makes sure the parents get involved. They help set goals, make home visits and send books home with my daughter so we can read to her. It's making us become better parents."

Clark said she would like to know how elected officials set the funding levels for programs.

"We have mothers separating from fathers so they can qualify for health insurance, and that isn't right," she said. "I hope these legislators get a good look and go back and make better decisions for the children."

Walk A Mile is being organized by the Community Action Project of Tulsa County and is the largest in the country. Participating legislators have agreed to eat on a food-stamp budget based on their family size.

Rep. Dan Sullivan, R-Tulsa, said he is participating to listen to the problems facing low-income families needing assistance. He said seeing the food budget amount was eye-opening. He also learned of the restrictions, such as not using the subsidy for soap or paper products.

"It shocked me to see that number, and that is for a month," Sullivan said. "People who need (food) assistance truly are in need of assistance. That's not a backup figure; that is it and all they have that month."

Sullivan sits on the Health and Human Services Committee in the Legislature and is part of a Medicaid task force to examine changes in the medical reimbursement rates. He plans to go grocery shopping with his match and invite the family to attend a speech he will give.

"I always believe if you get to understand what the problems are, you will have much better policies," Sullivan said.

Sullivan said he would like to go with his match when the family renews a state assistance application, which occurs every three months.

He said he has not seen how the process works and what type of paperwork is involved. The family match says the experience has been frustrating.

"We have a lot of good people working for the state government who are dedicated to their jobs," Sullivan said. "But some may not relate to the needs of the people as well as they should."

Tulsa resident Tinesha Seymore found that keeping up with bills while raising a 9-month-old daughter is impossible. She has plans to become an oncologist and serve as a hospital administrator advocating for patients.

To get there, she needed help.

"I haven't been on assistance long, and I never thought I'd ever need it," she said.

She is participating in the Emerge program, offered through the state Department of Human Services to help single mothers earn a college degree. Seymore also gets help from food stamps, medical care, housing and a child-care subsidy.

Seymore said she will likely invite her match, Rep. Jabar Shumate, D-Tulsa, to go to school with her one day. She gets up at 6 a.m. to take a bus to her child-care center, then walks or takes another bus to Tulsa Community College.

"It shouldn't be optional to the legislators," she said. "They should have do this. It's only for one month, and it will help them know the levels and hardships we deal with every day."

Ginnie Graham 581-8376
ginnie.graham@tulsaworld.com

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