

(Ten staff members of Community Services/Community Action attended this event)

Boone County Hunger Coalition teaches more than 50 what it's like to be poor

By [Susan Vela](#)

Staff writer

rrstar.com Posted Apr 11, 2017 at 6:58 PM

Updated Apr 11, 2017 at 11:47 PM

BELVIDERE — More than 50 people rushed around the Boone County Community Building today, simulating the crushing, stressful realities of poverty.

They had various roles to play during the finishing act of a daylong poverty summit hosted by the Boone County Hunger Coalition.

Some quickly learned they could not survive a month of destitution. By the end of the hourlong exercise, in which every quarter hour was a week, participants had gone hungry, been sent to juvenile detention facilities, tried drugs, pawned their belongings instead of seeking help from social service agencies and been evicted from their homes because their situations were so dire.

“We didn’t eat the first two weeks. The rest of the time we were just scrambling to pay the bills,” said Veronica Skaradzinski, who works in the University of Illinois Extension Office in Boone County.

She sought help at a table representing a social service agency. Her pretend family needed help paying bills.

“It’s been pretty eye opening as far as learning how people get treated,” she said. “That was the biggest shock for me. Going somewhere and having them just be mean right off the bat before you even talk to them.”

This was the coalition’s first poverty simulation, which concluded a day of speakers from area agencies like Northern Illinois Food Bank, Rosecrance Health Network, Rock House Kids and Rockford Rescue Mission.

“We wanted to raise awareness about the fact that we do have members of our community that are both food insecure and living in poverty and many times both,” organizer Amanda Mehl said.

Mehl, the Boone County Health Department administrator, said one in five Illinois children are food insecure, meaning affordable, nutritious food is beyond their means. The rate is nearly 20 percent in Boone County.

Mehl said hunger deprives children of successful, healthy lives. She hopes the coalition holds the poverty summit, with the simulation, on an annual basis.

“We definitely are getting a good start here with raising awareness,” she said. “(But) there’s a lot more that needs to get done.”

Participants included Belvidere Community Policing Coordinator Tim Blankenship, who was sent to juvenile detention for staying at home alone, Belvidere Superintendent Dan Woestman, who was a 52-year-old man with two children suspended from school, and Belvidere Clerk Shauna Arco, who was a disabled grandfather whose wife had been in jail.

Boone County juvenile probation officer Justin Barber played 8-year-old Chad Chen, who brought home stolen property because he was hungry and his teenage sister was pregnant.

“To see why they might steal is a different way of looking at it,” Barber said. “(In my role), we came back from school and all of our stuff was stolen. We were upset. We found out we could steal someone’s stuff. You could see dad wasn’t really very upset about that. It’s a different way of thinking.”

Barber said he’ll take more time to consider a child’s home life when trying to get them back on the right track.

Susan Vela: 815-987-1392; svela@rrstar.com; [@susanvela](https://www.instagram.com/susanvela)