

WELCOME

Welcome to the Community Action Poverty Simulation! During the next couple of hours, you are not at the Florida Hotel and Conference Center for a facilitator training. You are in Realville, USA. You are Ann Aber or Zeke Zuppot or another low-income individual or family member trying survive month to month, paycheck to paycheck. Your family unit is struggling, but their profiles do not represent the lower end of the poverty spectrum. Many of your families do not, technically speaking, fall below the poverty line. Rather they typify the average or vast majority of low-income homes. Likewise, your expenses in the simulation are based upon average amounts, not the lower or upper end of the scale.

BUY-IN

Portions of today can feel like a game-- we are using play money, props reminiscent of your favorite childhood pastimes, and yes even with a group of people in the human services sector, a spirit of competition can fill the room. However, I want to reinforce the fact that this is a simulation, not a game. The situations you will be enacting are lived experiences, based on the stories of Community Action clients.

And as many of you know from personal experience or your work experience, poverty is no game for the over 40 million Americans living in poverty at any given moment. In fact, Mark Rank, a sociologist from Washington University has found that by age 60, 80% of Americans will experience economic hardship that will send them below or hovering near the poverty line. That's the vast majority of us, our families, our neighbors, our friends, our beloved community. Let the gravity of that statistic sink in for a minute. Think about what this costs us, what it robs from our communities. And think for a second about how easy it is to forget this statistic. How numb those of us with economic security and class privilege can become to the real struggle of the countless around us. How income levels draw district and neighborhood and school lines, not only insulating the haves from the hardships of the have-nots, but also siphoning these groups off from each other, robbing each of the resources the other bring.

Today we gather for the Community Action Poverty Simulation to sit with these uncomfortable truths, in the spirit of sensitizing us to the day-to-day realities of life faced by people living with low-incomes and to motivate us to become caring community members, called to justice, and committed to ending this inexcusable epidemic of poverty in a land of plenty.

PURPOSE

Our purpose in this simulation is to engage in a shared experience that illustrates some of the structural barriers, as well as some of the personal and emotional repercussions people in poverty face. It is primarily a way for us as a group to go through a shared experience, in order to challenge the misconceptions and stereotypes society feeds us about inequality and the poor. The simulation shifts the conversation about poverty from unfeeling statistics to embodied human realities. It is merely a tool to open our hearts and minds. Our success in doing so, is entirely up to you, collectively, we get out of it what we put in. Only by earnestly engaging in our simulation role, by participating in a debrief that will happen afterward, and by contributing your own invaluable perspective can we meet this goal.

DISCLAIMERS

I want to be clear though that we are not, we cannot simulate every aspect of poverty. Three hours in a fancy hotel could never capture the full reality of these family scenarios. We can't simulate the compounding effects of toxic stress or the reality of daily, communal, and generational struggle and oppression. On the other hand, these scenarios represent humans, full of complexity and not only strife, but also joy, hope, pride, generosity, and community. There are profound strengths in low-income communities that are ignored in society and sometimes this simulation. I hope we can these nuances with care over the next few hours, while still being open to the insights the simulation can offer. Going back to that statistic of 80%, we know that many of us in this room have or do live on low-income. It is firstly important to collectively acknowledge this—we have a profound wealth of expertise about poverty represented in this room. The simulation is springboard to share that knowledge. Therefore, if the next couple of hours do not mirror what you know to be life in poverty, please do share this with your peers in the debrief. Those conversations are why we are here.

COMMUNITY NORMS

In order to have these difficult dialogues, it helps to make some commitments to each other, so I want to take a few minutes to agree on some group norms that we can hold each other accountable to. Think about what conditions make it easier for you to contribute to group dialogue. I will start with... [make example community norm, then elicit rest from the group]

FAMILY GOALS

Now that we have these guidelines in place and you've heard quite enough out of me, I am going to give you some time to go study the contents of your packets in your family groups. Each packet contains a description of your Realville family members; your sources of income, possessions, and bills; identification documents; and other items that will be necessary to survive the month. You will have 10 minutes to review these items, and we will be circulating the room so you can ask questions as they come up. After your 10 minutes are up, I will blow the whistle and give you more information about your responsibilities and the community resources that are around the room.

Alright, you've had a chance internalize the role you will be playing over the next hour. It is critical that you act the age and position of the role you've been assigned. If you are a child, you will probably not have the knowledge to give your parents advice on where to seek resources. Or if you have not eaten all day, you are likely to cry and complain. If you are an adult seeking work, you may become frustrated, irritable, or desperate in your search to maintain food and shelter for your dependents.

RULES and RESPONSIBILITIES

This is your task, to act within your role and given means to provide the necessities for your family throughout this month, which will consist of 4 15-minute weeks, which will begin and end with a whistle. When I blow the whistle please stop whatever you are doing and return to your homes until I tell you to start the next week. During these weeks, you will want to keep your home secure, feed your family on a regular basis, keep the utilities on, make loan or rent payments, and handle the unexpected situations life inevitably delivers. If you work, you must report to your employer or get an approval for leave time. If you have children, you must ensure that they are in school or otherwise cared for while you are at work.

TRANSPORTATION

In order to meet these needs, you will have to utilize the community resources around the room, and in order to travel to these stations, you will have to secure transportation. As you know, transportation is one of the biggest barriers for low-income families. Community resources are rarely conveniently clustered, so you will need to account for the cost of public transportation, or the fuel and maintenance costs of owning a personal vehicle, or even the time and effort it takes to walk from place to place (especially during extreme weather and temperatures). During our simulation, the orange transportation passes in your packet represent the cost of transportation. You cannot go to any community resource without one. The only exception to this rule is the school. We are lucky enough to have a school bus system in our community, so school-aged children will not need transportation passes to go to class each week. When you arrive at any of these tables, the resource workers will need a pass from you and each person with you before you can interact.

COMMUNITY RESOURCES

Now, let's take a quick tour of Realville. You will want to pay close attention to where each resource is, because you don't want to waste those precious transportation passes by going to the wrong place.

Tour the room, stopping at each community resource and giving very limited information about what each table provides. Be sure to touch on:

-Employer: If you have a full-time job, you will need 5 transportation passes to get to work (1 for each day of the week), and you must stay for 7 minutes. You must be at work and ready to go within 3 minutes of the start of the week. If you are late, you could lose pay or even your job, so it is a good idea to head straight to work when you hear that whistle

blow. If you are employed part time you will need 3 transportation passes when you arrive to work each week, and you will stay for 4 minutes.

-Quik Cash: This is where you can purchase transportation passes for \$1 apiece. If you have run out of transportation passes, you can still come to Quik Cash to buy more, as long as you have \$2 to trade. Additionally, Quik Cash acts as a traditional banking alternative, so they meet some other needs you might have for cash.

-School: This is the only community resource where you are not required to have a transportation pass. We are lucky enough to have a school bus in Realville. Therefore, children can travel to and from school freely each week without having to buy or give those orange passes in your packet. Parents, note that week 3 is a school holiday, so will need to make alternative childcare arrangements that week.

TERMINOLOGY

Some terminology will come up during this simulation that you may or may not be familiar with. Just in case... EBT stands for Electronic Benefits Transfer card. This is the money distributed by the Department of Social Services for Food Stamp and cash benefits. TANF stands for Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, which the federal government's program to provide cash benefits to qualifying families for a limited time. If you have an EBT card in your packet, it means that you are currently receiving this form of assistance. Your monthly amount is printed on the back of the card. If you do not have a card in your packet, you might still be eligible for some of these benefits, but you will have to apply at the DSS.

DIRECTOR'S ROLE + DEBRIEF

Lastly, before we get started, I am the mayor of Realville for the next couple of hours. You may come to me if you have questions about the simulation, and I won't charge you a transportation pass. Jessica and I will also be the facilitators for the debrief following our four weeks. If you have an issue or comment that you would like incorporated into that dialogue, feel free to file that in your head for future use or even let us know in the moment. When the final whistle blows at the end of the 4th week, please return quietly to your family groups. Jessica and I will give you further instructions from there. Ready? Blow whistle!

AFTER THE SIMULATION

That concludes your 4 week simulation in Realville, USA! Before we do anything else, I want to give a big thank-you to our volunteers. They have dedicated a big, long chunk of their day to be here, and it is such a privilege to work with them today. Most of these volunteers have been doing this for years, so you and I are lucky to have learned from the very best today. Let's give them a big round of applause.

Now that the simulation portion of today has concluded, please put all of your materials back in your packets... don't forget about the nametags! I know these past couple of hours have been incredibly draining. Let's take a 15 minute break to hit the restrooms, collect our thoughts, chat with neighbors, etc. When the clock hits 3:00, please meet back in this room. Then we will split up into our debrief groups.