

Barriers to work leave many on

But a job still
way out of poverty,
United Way told

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HERMITAGE - Though she acknowledges significant hurdles for people who want to get off welfare and get a job, Hope Couch, who once worked in the industry that provides cash assistance to low-income families, said she still believes work is the way out of poverty.

Speaking at the United Way's monthly planning meeting,

Couch, an agency committee member, told the group that only 1,547 people in Mercer County received cash assistance, which is capped at \$393 a month, in March. "That works out to 1.3 percent of the population. That's probably less than what the perception is," she said.

Couch was asked to speak to the group as it continues to work on its efforts to lift families out of poverty. Eventually, the donation-based agency hopes to tie allocations to programs proven to bring families



out of poverty. For the last year, it has been gathering information from social service agencies about the services they offer and the barriers they face when helping poorer families.

Couch provided information that she obtained from the Department of Human Services cash assistance handbook. The information also is available online at dhs.pa.gov/publications.

Couch provided several sce-

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Work

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narios, using a fictional family of a woman with two children, one of whom is handicapped, as her model. At the maximum, she said, the family could receive \$1,494.10 a month in benefits that included food stamps, cash assistance, Social Security disability and child support.

Using that same fictional family, if the woman can work a part-time job at \$8 an hour for 30 hours a week, she would receive \$1,528 a month. The cash assistance would disappear, because the wages earned would disqualify her, but there would be some additional money for child care expenses and food stamps, she said.

Couch also said that while that's what the numbers reflect, the reality is that someone who starts out in the job market, usually starts at a retail or service-related industry job, where hours are unpredictable and far outside what is provided for child care or transportation. Both of those issues then become barriers to working.

Mickey Gula, who has worked for years as a registered nurse, said she's seen it over and over with nurses aides who are hired on the hospital floors. "The hours get cut, sure that happens, but now maybe this mother is leaving a 10-year-old home to watch a 5-year-old from 3 to 11. So she's on her phone, a lot, trying to tell her kids not to go outside and she's on it again to check on them. And everyone is saying 'Hey, she's on her phone. She's on her phone again. She's supposed to be working'

and there are problems," she said.

"Next, she can't find someone to watch them after 6 p.m. and she calls off. And pretty soon, we're telling her we have to let her go because she calls off too much," Gula said.

After-hours childcare is big problem and Joe Fletcher, director of Farrell's Prince of Peace Center, said he doesn't understand why more businesses don't look to fill that niche.

He thought maybe churches and other nonprofit agencies might consider starting a 24-hour daycare, but Gula said often there isn't enough demand to sustain it. She said she knows of one place, in Youngstown, that offers 24-hour childcare. "But that's in an urban setting," she said.

Couch also reminded the group that of the thousands of Mercer County residents who do get food stamps and medical assistance, those benefits, along with the cash, are dollars that are being spent locally.

"It's about \$2.2 million a month that's being put back in our county," she said. "We have to think of these people as consumers," she added.

Jim Byrd, a Hermitage resident on the committee, disagreed with her assessment. "I can appreciate what you're saying about the consumer aspect, but ask yourself about the reality of where that funding stream starts. It might be a driver in our community, but it's not productive, it's reductive," he said.

"That money is coming from the taxpayers and it's not a bottomless well. It's not self-perpetuating. To say that it's an economic driver is a false impression," he added.

Couch agreed with Byrd, but said it's important to consider the cost to society if those programs weren't in place at all. "If we don't keep them healthy and fed, those costs are going to be a lot greater," she said.

There are 19,180 county families receiving food stamps and 27,720 people on medical assistance. Mercer County has a population of 114,884.

She also said the benefits are all intended as supplements, not the sole source of income.

"They are a cog in the wheel. It truly will take every agency to provide whatever support it can. The benefits alone are not enough," she said.

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**Hermitage residents
Jim Byrd**