

Panel discusses female poverty in county

PAMELA BUSHNELL
News-Leader

More than 100 people attended a panel discussion on "Breaking the Cycle of Female Poverty in Nassau County" at St. Peter's Episcopal Church in Fernandina Beach on Feb. 7. The event was sponsored by the Women's Giving Alliance, an initiative of the Community Foundation of Northeast Florida.

Participating on the panel were Wanda Lanier, CEO of Barnabas; Jennett Baker, RN, BSN, executive director of the Coalition for the Reduction Elimination of Ethnic Disparities in Health; Angie McClellan, Families in Transition liaison for Nassau County School District; and Father Stephen Mazingo, rector at St. Peter's. The panel moderator was Kathleen Ligare, co-chair of outreach for the Nassau Connector Group of WGA.

Members of the panel presented information on the occurrence and contributing factors of poverty among women.

Among factors putting women at greater risk for poverty is that women tend to earn less when



PAMELA BUSHNELL/NEWS-LEADER

A panel discussion on female poverty in Nassau County was sponsored by the Women's Giving Alliance, an initiative of the Community Foundation of Northeast Florida. From left, Kathleen Ligare, Jennett Baker, Wanda Lanier, Angie Page McClellan, and Father Stephen Mazingo of St. Peter's Episcopal Church.

employed. Women tend to cluster in lower paying jobs and occupations than men and, even when working in better paying jobs, have historically experienced a pay gap. Further, women are more likely to have responsibility as family caregivers, a role that

can interfere with their ability to maintain employment.

Another factor is that many households today rely on two incomes to make ends meet. Women who were relatively secure in a two-income family may be thrust into poverty by

divorce or death of a spouse. For minorities with a high rate of incarceration, the breadwinner may be absent for years with poor prospects for employment when he is released. Better policies toward re-integrating felons back into society and the workplace

are needed, according to Baker.

Baker commented that many women are not prepared to become the sole supporter of a family. Her advice to all women is "always plan to be single."

Baker also observed, "The structure of poverty has changed." Whereas extended family used to be available for support in a crisis, she notes many in the younger generation have moved away to find better jobs and there is less intergenerational support available for families now.

McClellan shared that she has a caseload of 450 homeless children she is serving in the Families in Transition program in the Nassau County School District. Most of those families have no friends or family in the area to turn to in a crisis.

Father Mazingo agreed that churches continue to be resources for people in need but are often overwhelmed by the numbers of people seeking help. He shared that most of those who approach him in a crisis tend to be single women and he has noted a pattern of "double generation" single women households in which

the grandmother is also single.

Lanier, who has worked with homeless and crisis intervention agencies in both Jacksonville and Nassau County, noted that the needy population in urban areas tend to be younger and that resources are more readily available to them. In the more rural setting of Nassau County she observes the needy tend to be older, between the ages of 45 and 60. There also are fewer resources available.

She describes an endless cycle she calls "the tyranny of the moment" in which needy families are constantly facing the same crises of survival over and over. Barnabas Center is implementing a national model called "Bridges Out of Poverty" that works on both the individual and community levels to try to break the poverty cycle.

Lanier views the single greatest problem in Nassau County thrusting people into "functional poverty" is the lack of affordable housing. "And we are not talking public housing here. We are talking about housing that con-

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sumes no more than 30 percent of household income," she said.

References were made during the discussion to The Florida United Way 2017 ALICE report that found, based on actual cost of living figures, it takes a family of four in Nassau County an annual income of \$53,088 to meet a basic survival budget with nothing left over for emergencies or savings. The median household income for the county is \$52,000, just below the survival budget established

by United Way, meaning half earn less.

Forty-six women in Nassau County have become part of a "giving circle" of the Women's Giving Alliance to help fund and find solutions to these and other women's issues. WGA was formed in 2001 under the auspices of The Community Foundation of Northeast Florida. The Nassau Connection is among a total of 409 area women who donate a minimum of \$1500 a year to WGA, \$1000 of which goes to grantmaking, \$300 of which goes to an endowment fund and \$200 to adminis-

trative costs.

In 2017, WGA members provided \$447,000 in grants benefiting women and girls in Northeast Florida. Barnabas Center in Fernandina Beach has been a grant recipient since 2015. For more information about the Women's Giving Alliance, visit wganeff.org or call 356-4483.

Its parent organization, The Community Foundation, provided \$37 million in grants to various organizations in 2017 in Nassau, Duval, Clay, Baker and Putnam counties.

pbushnell@fbnewsleader.com