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What is poverty and how do you define it? That's one of the questions confronting members of the Maine Council on Poverty and Economic Security who had their first meeting today. The council was created last year to identify the number of people living at or near the poverty level and to identify the underlying causes of poverty. The council's task is to examine the long-term effects of poverty and create strategies for eliminating it in Maine.



Members of the Maine Council on Poverty quickly determined that even defining poverty in Maine is no easy task, much less eliminating it. Nicole Witherbee says many economists like to refer to federal standards for poverty that are ultimately expanded by increasing those parameters by up to 200 percent.

The federal budget analyst for the Maine Center for Economic Policy says assessing how tough times are for Mainers need not be so arcane. "None of this is really rocket science," says Witherbee. "It takes little more than common sense to figure out that \$18,310 a year is inadequate to support a family of three, or that less than \$26,000 a year will mean extreme hardship for a family of five. Most of us here know people who make twice that amount and still struggle to make ends meet at the end of each month."

Witherbee and other members of the council will spend the next year trying to get a handle on who should be defined as poor and how that definition varies around the state. For example, a Portland single mother with two jobs may be underemployed and fit the definition if she's not earning enough to cover her household costs. And a Millinocket papermaker may not qualify, even if he doesn't have a job.

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State Sen. Kevin Raye represents Washington County and says poverty is a way of life for many. "In my part of Maine there are a lot of people who are living in or near poverty, who are cobbling together a living from various things, from clamming one time a year, making wreaths another time of year. You name it. And that's been the way it has been for a very long time."

What frustrates panel members like Jesse Vear is that for years, the most successful economy on earth seemed to devote more of its resources to accommodating poverty rather than confronting or reducing it. Vear, a member of Portland Organized to Win Economic Rights, says the American economy facilitates poverty through its tax structure and relies on many getting next to nothing in order to provide more to others. "Poverty is no accident. It is a part and parcel of an economic system where some few people benefit from the sacrifices of many, many, many people who are working hard to provide all that wealth that is flowing upwards."

State Sen. Philip Bartlett is a Gorham Democrat who also chairs the Council. He says his panel is poised to infuse some accountability in poverty programs. "This Council does not have a statutory end date. It's designed to be ongoing. And my hope is over the next several months we can put together some very concrete actions that can be taken immediately--some will be legislative action but hopefully, a lot without--and begin moving forward in a process that can clearly reduce or eliminate poverty in the state of Maine over the next decade."