

Scraping by: The paycheck-to-paycheck life



Hannah Sparling, hsparring@newarkadvocate.com 7:29 a.m. EDT March 15, 2015



(Photo: Jessica Phelps/The Advocate)

NEWARK – Struggle; it's all Tonya Cooper has ever known.

Tonya grew up in Little Texas on the south end of Newark, one of nine children. The family lived in a remodeled boxcar with no running water or furnace. They would haul water from a relative's house for makeshift baths and, during winter, rely on space heaters.

"We struggled. Struggling is not something I'm fond of, but I've done it all my life," Tonya said. "Boy, was it cold sometimes in the winter."

Now 57, Tonya lives on Poplar Avenue with her husband, Chuck, and their adult daughter. Different house, different era, but the story is much the same as Tonya's childhood. The Coopers live paycheck to paycheck, and if it wasn't for her daughter chipping in, Tonya isn't sure what they'd do.

When it comes time for grocery shopping, the Coopers buy what they can with whatever they have left after bills. If they can afford it, they'll buy some hamburger. If not, they won't.

"I'd much rather have fresh fruits and vegetables than the canned stuff, but you take what you can get," Tonya said. "The way things are now with jobs and services, they're cutting 'em left to right. You just live day-to-day. ... As the saying goes, we're one paycheck from being bankrupt."

In Ohio, 1 in 6 people struggles with hunger, according to Feeding America, a nationwide network of 200 food banks. The Mid-Ohio Foodbank, which serves central and eastern Ohio, says 69 percent of its clients have had to choose between food and utilities, and 5 percent have had to choose between buying food and paying rent.

For Tonya, it often comes down to her medication. It's either fill the prescriptions she needs for emphysema and fibromyalgia, among others, or pay the bills.

"There's times I have to let the medicine go just to pay the rent," she said.

The Food Pantry Network of Licking County distributed 3.1 million pounds of food in 2014, compared with 3 million pounds in 2013, a 7.4 percent increase, Executive Director Charles Moore said.

The network also served 1.5 million meals in 2014, compared with 1.3 million in 2013, a 10 percent increase.

Part of that is simply a result of better service — doing a better job directing people toward help, Moore said. Another aspect, though, is that hunger is a larger problem than some may realize.

"I would say the community is aware that there are folks in the county that are hungry," Moore said. "I would also have to say that I believe a lot of the community does not realize the extent of people that are hungry."

The Coopers have been together since 1978 and married since 1981. Tonya has several illnesses that prevent her working, so Chuck is the sole breadwinner at his 37½ hours a week, \$9.50 an hour job.

The couple is in constant scraping-by mode, often working with the landlord when they can't pay the full rent on time or paying the minimum at the last minute to keep the gas on. They don't use a food pantry, though, saying they prefer to leave those resources to people who truly have no other option.

"I can afford to feed us," Chuck said. "Maybe not as well as I'd like to, but we get by. ... This ain't the Ritz here, but it is home."

Tonya is part of the Newark Think Tank, a group dedicated to finding solutions for people struggling with access to food, housing, transportation, employment and health care. She thinks change is possible for people struggling with poverty, but she doesn't have much hope for change in her own situation.

Ultimately, though, that's OK, she said, because while she's not rich, she has what she needs: a loving husband, three great children and "11 beautiful grandchildren."

"I just need someone to love me, to hold me when I'm hurt, a roof over my head," she said.

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Need help?

If you're struggling to get enough food, contact the Food Pantry Network at 740-344-7401. To donate to the organization:

- Give online at foodpantrynewtwork.net.
- Mail or drop off a check at 1035 Brice Street, Newark.
- Drop off food donations — such as peanut butter or canned meat, fruits and vegetables — at the Brice Street warehouse.

Coming In Monday's Advocate

A report shows half of Ohioans are one paycheck away from poverty.

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