

Think Tank moving toward community action

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(Photo: Hannah Sparling/The Advocate)

NEWARK – On Saturday afternoon in the Licking County Library, a group of more than 30 people were brainstorming ideas to rid Newark of poverty.

It wasn't a group of community leaders, though: It was a meeting of the newly formed Newark Think Tank, a grass-roots, ground-up organization dedicated to eradicating poverty.

The group discussed barriers and threw out ideas to make things better.

They broke into subcommittees to delve deeper into topics such as discrimination against people with felony convictions, availability of stable jobs with living wages and gaps in services for people with mental health

issues or substance abuse disorders.

The norm in the middle class is to try to fix problems for people living in poverty, said Lesha Farias, Think Tank facilitator. The Newark Think Tank, however, is about educating people, giving them a voice and empowering them to make a change themselves. It's about solving the problem at its root rather than treating the symptoms.

"Why are there so many people in poverty, and why does it never stop?" Farias asked. "We're lulled into that, thinking that's the reality.

"We can fight the dominant narrative. We can be educated. We hear things from our friends and neighbors all the time, but is it true?"

One of the Think Tank's missions is to educate members, because too often, people who are struggling are pushed aside, Allen Schwartz said. People who are unemployed, for example, might be called lazy, but the reality, according to the Economic Policy Institute, is there are more than two applicants per job opening in the U.S.

"Two people for every single job, and it's not getting any better," Schwartz said. "When they tell you it's your fault you don't have a job, you can push back."

The Think Tank is, well, thinking right now, Farias said, but the ultimate goal is action — identifying problems and finding solutions. That might mean attending public meetings to offer a different voice or perspective, it might mean creating petitions, or it might mean going door-to-door to explain to people in the community what is going on, Farias said.

"We can do lots to educate this community," she said. "We don't want to just change things for one person. We want to change the system. ... There are lots of good things in our community, but there are lots of gaps, too."

The next Think Tank meeting is Oct. 11, although a location has not yet been determined. For now, the group is seeking members who are experiencing some type of poverty or joblessness.

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