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Healthy suggestions offered in a time of 'crisis' at Somerset YMCA

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By **CHARLIE ZAVALICK**, Editor

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BERNARDSVILLE - Has the nation's economic meltdown caused a crisis for Somerset Hills residents?

That and other related questions were asked during an oft-times emotional public forum hosted by the Healthy Outcomes Partnership (HOP), a new local coalition, along with the Somerset Hills YMCA, at the Bernards High School auditorium on Monday night, June 15.

A crowd of about 100 residents attended the discussion, which featured a distinguished panel of experts in subjects ranging from the media, business and mental health. The event was dubbed "Who Pulled the Rug Out? A Community Conversation about Economic Uncertainty and how it affects us all."



Speakers attending a forum on dealing with economic uncertainty last Monday at Bernards High School include, from left, the Rev. Peter Roselle, pastor of King of Kings Worship Center in Basking Ridge; Michael Aron, senior political correspondent for New Jersey Network; business executive Daryl Brewster of Mendham; and Dr. Leslie Becker-Phelps, a Basking Ridge psychologist. (Photo by Charlie Zavalick)

The HOP is a coalition of human services organizations and individuals concerned with public mental health and youth and family development. Its stated goal is to "address common barriers to healthy relationships and to help people connect with the resources they need to overcome these problems."

Panelist Daryl Brewster, the head of Brookside Management, LLC of Mendham, shared some insight into the circumstances that led to the current economic situation. The former CEO of Krispy Kreme Doughnuts, Inc., asked the crowd who was to blame. The question prompted a variety of responses, including government regulators, corporate leaders and plain old greed.

"We all got caught up in that same greed," Brewster said. "We borrowed from the future to spend now. We have just lived through the good old days, the biggest party ever. Now we have the hangover."

"As a society we all helped contribute to this," he added.

His advice was to adjust expectations to the new world order with what he called the three R's: 1) Recognize reality; 2) Reassess expectations; and 3) Reset where you're going.

Residents were asked whether they thought the financial situation is indeed a crisis.

"Our community is facing a quiet, unspoken crisis," said Lauren Luik, a community volunteer and member of the HOP Steering Committee, at the beginning of the program.

Some in the crowd agreed.

"There is a crisis in my neighborhood," said Basking Ridge resident Leslie Workman.

Some disagreed, including one middle-aged gentleman who said he was out of work for six months.

"Crisis is a strong word," he said. "It's tough. When that rug got pulled out you ask, why me?"

But, he said losing a family member or friend is what he considers a crisis. Trying to find employment requires a plan. "You've gotta be flexible," he noted, and work through the situation.

Seeking Help

The other speakers on the panel addressed the importance of getting help when dealing with financial problems and the resulting difficulties.

The Rev. Peter Roselle, a businessman and pastor of King of Kings Worship Center in Basking Ridge, called the situation in the Somerset Hills a "stealth crisis" affecting a "high achieving culture."

"No one has to go through the stress alone," he said, adding that he has seen many "stress fractures" forming in the community."

He noted that there are a lot of people in the community getting psychiatric help due to financial difficulties. "When the world is imploding, people need to know help is available."

"We have to pull together as a community," he said. "We should try to be empathetic and sympathetic to what people are going through."

He cited a few examples of the financial problems felt locally, noting that the YMCA has seen a 20 percent increase in the number of people seeking financial aid, while other organizations including the Somerset Hills Visiting Nurse Association are seeing drop offs in grants and donations.

He also noted that the Somerset County Family Services has seen an increase in the number of children coming in for psychiatric screening due to family pressures.

Addressing similar issues was Dr. Leslie-Becker-Phelps, a clinical psychologist with a private practice in Basking Ridge. She said a lot of people under great distress are ashamed to seek help and often don't until it is too late.

"We're hurting more than ever but don't realize it," she said. "We cannot help but feel the stress that surrounds us."

Some of the symptoms of dealing with financial stress include increased headaches, being more irritable, overwhelming sadness, lack of appetite and fatigue, she said.

"When we say we're sick with worry, this is not just a saying," she said.

Many tend to become more reliant on unhealthy coping mechanisms, such as drinking or gambling, she noted. Better ways to cope include exercise, eating healthy, taking care of relationships and maintaining a routine, she added.

"If you're constantly feeling over your head, get help," she advised.

Robert Lomauro, chief executive officer of the Somerset Hills YMCA, noted that the Y is a "neutral place where people can go."

"It's really about connecting with people," he said. "We can do a lot more together than we can alone."

Several residents told of the difficulties they experienced trying to find employment in an impersonal world where thousands of resumes are screened over computers.

One place residents can turn to get employment assistance in their job search is the YMCA's free Career Forum program, which meets from 7 to 9 p.m. every Tuesday at the Y. Bernardsville resident Denis Dooley, who serves on the program's steering committee, noted that many people are initially reluctant to use the service because of pride. But he said the program is finding its niche and has helped many individuals over the years.

"We try to give people the tools to be successful," he said. "We're very much in favor of what you're doing here."

Other residents spoke about the value of religion and prayer in overcoming the difficulties in their lives.

"We can be stronger when we ask for help," said Basking Ridge resident Nick Sant Foster. "I think of a miracle as changing minds."

"Fear pulled the rug out," he added, referring to the title of the public forum. "Worrying is like praying for what you don't want to happen."

Moderating the program was Michael Aron, a Montclair resident and senior political correspondent for the New Jersey Network (NJN.)

"This is a good place to be stressed because there's so many helping hands," he concluded.

For more information on the Healthy Outcomes Partnership, residents can contact Lauren Luik at laurenl@mcspr.com or YMCA staff member Susan Kamins at skamins@somersehillsymca.org. For more information on the Career Forum program contact Sylvia Velez at (908) 630-3530 or svelez@somersehillsymca.org.

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