



## **New report released: Working poor families have trouble meeting basic needs**

By Tim Hull

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Coinciding with the Bush administration's recently announced plans to drastically expand welfare reform, an Arizona children's advocacy group released a study this week suggesting that the state's working families have trouble meeting even the most basic needs.

Sponsored by the Phoenix-based Children's Action Alliance, the report calculates what it takes in each of Arizona's counties to be economically "self-sufficient." That is defined in the report as the ability to pay for six "basic needs:" Housing, childcare, food, transportation, health care, and a miscellaneous category that includes items like clothing, phone service, and diapers.

The report concludes that in Pima County a single adult working full-time supporting one preschool-aged child needs to make \$13.60

per hour, or \$28,728, just to pay for the basics.

Two adults, both working full-time and supporting one child of pre-school age and one of school age need to make \$9.75 an hour each, or a total of \$41,165 annually just to survive by the report's standards.

Without the childcare expense, the needed wage goes down significantly, the report said. A family of two adults with one preschool-age, and one school-age child in which only one of the adults works full-time needs an hourly wage of \$11.27, or \$23,803 annually to survive by the report's standards.

Pima County's needed hourly wage is significantly lower than that of Maricopa County, where the same two-parent, two-child family would need to make as much as \$11.68 per hour to get by, the report said.

The report's salary calculations take into account the many tax credits available for low income families - the earned-income credit, the childcare tax credit, etc. - and the taxes that most affect low-income earners.

In releasing the report, the Children's Action Alliance charged that most of the state's working families have not reached the report's definition of self-sufficiency.

"Wages at self-sufficiency levels are hard to come by in Arizona," according to Liz Barker, a spokesperson for the alliance. The alliance said that roughly 30 percent of working parents in Arizona earn less than \$8.70 per hour, and of the state's top 50 occupations only eight have a median wage higher than \$15 per hour, and nearly 20 have median wages of less than \$10 per hour. That means that there are a lot of Arizonans who, despite working full-time, cannot get by without some form of public assistance, according to the report.

The report's findings are bolstered, at least anecdotally, by who visits the Community Food Bank branch in Green Valley, according to its director, Karen Jacques.

"Probably most of our emergency food box clients are working," she said.

"We have a lot of clients who have

children and one or both parents are working but they are just not making enough - minimum wage or less."

The minimum wage is \$5.15 per hour. Starting July 1, any company that contracts with Pima County will have to pay its workers at least \$8 per hour as part of the county's "Livable Wage Ordinance" enacted earlier this year.

According to the self-sufficiency standard in the report, however, neither the minimum wage nor the livable wage would come close to meeting a typical working family's basic needs - not to mention any extras like entertainment, car repairs, furniture, etc.

"There are too many people in Pima County who are living on \$6 and \$7 an hour wages," said Carrie Feind, a caseworker at Green Valley Assistance Services. "They seem to get by on \$800 dollars a month, and they are able to do it, but they are not getting the quality of life that they should have."

"The Self-sufficiency Standard for Arizona," was written by Diana M. Pearce, a professor at the University of Washington in Seattle, in conjunction with the Washington-based employment organization Wider Opportunities for Women.