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The price of self-sufficiency in Colorado

Report traces true cost of meeting basic needs for state's families

By John Sanko, News Capitol Bureau

What does it really cost for a family to meet its basic needs, including food, clothing and shelter in Colorado?

Well, a single adult in Denver with one preschooler and one school-age child must earn \$18.90 per hour or \$756 a week, the Colorado Fiscal Policy Institute said Wednesday.

It's \$11.26 an hour in Yuma County and \$20.61 an hour in Eagle County, where the Vail ski resort area is located.

Those were among the findings released at a news conference on the west steps of the Capitol by a group that said it hopes lawmakers will use the figures in determining the true needs in helping families reach self-sufficiency.

The institute released a "Self-Sufficiency Standard for Colorado Report" which calculated self-sufficiency wages for 70 family types in all 63 counties in Colorado. It was written by Diana Pearce, a University of Washington sociologist.

Her report determined that families in Colorado need to earn at least twice the federal poverty level to meet basic needs such as housing, child care, health care, food, transportation and taxes.

Among those attending the gathering was Lola Duran, a 35-year-old single mother with two daughters, Elizabeth, 9, and Monique, 13. She has battled to get off welfare, and now works part time to care for her older daughter, who has special needs.

"I want to be more self-sufficient, but it's hard," said Duran, who juggled going to school, working part time and raising two daughters. "I want to work full time, but it's hard."

Pearce said she hoped the findings would be used to help officials realize "what it really costs to live, what it really costs to be self-sufficient in Colorado."

She said her budget figures were "bare-boned" and didn't include take-out foods -- "no pizza, no latte."

"What the standard tells us is that lower-wage jobs alone, even those well above the minimum wage or the official poverty level, simply do not allow families to meet their needs," Pearce said.

Jennifer Brooks, director of self-sufficiency programs and policy for Wider Opportunities for Women, said she hoped the report would lead state officials to reject the "one-size-fits-all approach" used by the federal government.

Two state lawmakers, Reps. Andrew Romanoff, D-Denver, and Betty Boyd, D-Lakewood, said they hoped the new findings would be applied to legislation in Colorado to help families get out of poverty and stay out.

Comparing the cost of living

Hourly wage required for single adult with two children:

Houston	\$14.86
Chicago	\$16.32
Philadelphia	\$16.79
Denver	\$18.90
Milwaukee	\$20.24
Boston	\$20.41
Los Angeles	\$21.06
New York (Queens)	\$22.95
Washington, D.C.	\$24.71
San Francisco	\$25.89