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## State Urged to Widen Economic Safety Net

Low-Wage Earners Struggling, Panel Says

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Maryland should adopt a broader definition of poverty so that thousands of struggling families in one of the nation's wealthiest states can qualify for government assistance, says a commission that is taking a sweeping look at the problem.

One of the final acts of Gov. Parris N. Glendening's administration next month will be to review a report from a 19-member commission on the scope of poverty in the state. As the panel nears completion of its year-long task, members worry their recommendations on housing, health care, the minimum wage and education will be lost in the struggle to overcome a \$1.7 billion, two-year revenue shortfall in state government.

Consequently, the commission's chairman has adopted an almost defiant tone, promising a report for Glendening (D) and Gov.-elect Robert L. Ehrlich Jr. (R) that will point out the "woeful inadequacies" of government aid to poor people.

"There are a lot of working-class folks who are doing their best to pull their weight, and it's not good enough in a high-cost state," said Dana M. Jones, chairman of the panel appointed by the governor and General Assembly leaders. "We think it's time for a change."

With its high median household income and low percentage of residents living below the federal poverty line, Maryland would seem to enjoy widespread prosperity.

But that's not the case, say commission members and poverty experts. The federal poverty guidelines vastly underestimate how much of Maryland's population needs help with rent, health care or other services, said Gregory D. Shupe, director of hunger and

homeless programs for the Maryland Department of Human Resources.

Those guidelines, established by federal formula, serve as a starting point for determining who qualifies for various forms of aid, ranging from subsidized housing to health care. Some states and counties have adopted individual "self-sufficiency standards" for federal job training programs.

The 2000 Census found 434,676 people, or 8.5 percent of Maryland's population, living in need, but commission members believe there are tens of thousands more.

"When you start looking at where families are in terms of income, we see this bulging working-poor population," said Jones, executive director of the Southern Maryland Tri-County Community Action Committee, an anti-poverty agency. "The federal poverty guidelines keep services away from these people, and we've burdened them tremendously."

Low-wage earners feel the squeeze in various ways. Commissioners cited a new study by the National Low Income Housing Coalition, which reported that the fair market rent for a two-bedroom unit in Maryland rose more than 13 percent last year, the steepest increase in the country. According to the study, a full-time worker in Maryland would have to earn \$16.82 an hour to afford that rent without paying more than 30 percent of income on housing.

In health care, state officials estimate that 38 percent of Maryland residents living below the federal poverty line have no private or public health insurance. An additional 23 percent -- whose income is double the poverty level -- also have no insurance. And 19 percent of people earning three times the

federal levels lack insurance in Maryland, the state Health Care Commission reported this year.

"The safety net in many cases is more hole than fabric," said Jeff Singer, a health care expert and member of the poverty panel.

The poverty commission debated whether the real cost of meeting basic needs in Maryland is two to three times the income standard set by federal guidelines. A county-by-county study prepared by advocacy groups in the District and Baltimore found, for example, that a single parent with two young children in Prince George's County requires a basic annual income of \$44,846.

That figure would include housing, child care and health care needs but not extras such as eating out, saving for emergencies or paying down debt, according to the study by Wider Opportunities for Women and Advocates for Children and Youth.

In Montgomery County, a single parent with two children would need at least \$53,927, and in Howard, at least \$49,953, the study found. According to the federal poverty guideline, that family is not considered poor if it earns more than \$15,020 a year.

"You can't sling hamburgers and pay for housing. You just can't do it," said state Sen. Gloria G. Lawlah (D-Prince George's), one of two lawmakers appointed to the panel.

Maryland's assistance programs provide only a fraction of what is needed when federal help isn't available, said Singer, executive director of Health Care for the Homeless, a nonprofit agency that serves 8,000 homeless people in Montgomery, Frederick and Baltimore counties.

During the year, the commission met throughout Maryland to gather testimony from low-income residents and advocates for the poor. The commission's largest audience was in affluent Howard, where it heard remarks from people such as Joanne

Piersall, a Columbia consultant whose business withered as "collateral damage from Sept. 11."

Piersall, 58, suffers from osteoarthritis, high blood pressure and a painful back condition, yet she has been denied federal disability benefits. She has used up all her retirement savings and lives in a federally subsidized apartment while she works part time as an office administrator.

"There is no safety net for certain segments of the population, particularly women over 50 who are single," she said.

Del. Elizabeth Bobo (D-Howard) wants the commission to go beyond enumerating who needs help and recommend specific fixes to state assistance programs. She suggested changing Maryland's welfare-to-work program to expand opportunities for continuing education enrollment.

"We have slews of women who work two full-time jobs cleaning hotel rooms," said Bobo, the other lawmaker appointed to the panel. "The last time I looked, businesses were still looking for people with computer skills."

It won't quickly be clear whether Ehrlich and the General Assembly want to tackle difficult poverty issues, some say, especially as they take on the state's looming budget deficit.

But one backer of the commission said anti-poverty advocates need to shape their message to the prevailing view.

"We're going to have to get more focused on demonstrating that what we do on poverty produces revenue for the state," said Del. Salima Siler Marriott (D-Baltimore), who lobbied for the poverty commission's creation. "We have to demonstrate how this ultimately is going to produce, in the case of a person living in poverty, a tax-paying citizen."

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