



# MONTGOMERY The Journal Online

The Daily Newspaper of Montgomery County, Maryland

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Welcome to the Montgomery Front Page Section 17-Nov-00

I can choose my power company.  Yes  No

## Swimming upstream to make ends meet

By JENNIFER JACOBSON

Journal staff writer

A family of four needs an income of almost \$50,000 to meet basic living needs in Montgomery County, according to a report recently published by the nonprofit Wider Opportunities for Women.

The "Self-Sufficiency Standard Report" shows it takes an annual income of \$49,668 to live at the minimum level without federal or state assistance.

In 1984, when the first report was released, a family of four needed \$15,574 to live at the same level.

"The high cost of living in the Washington metropolitan area means that low-income working families have a difficult time making ends meet," Montgomery County Department of Health and Human Services Director Charles L. Short said in a statement. The report was released in conjunction with HHS and the county's Community Action Board.

The report, updated every three years, highlights the large gap between the self-sufficiency standard in Montgomery County and federal poverty income guidelines used to determine eligibility for federal and state programs - \$17,050 for a family of four.

Local officials say the federal poverty standard does not reflect the high cost of food, housing and basic living costs here and say they must work to fill in that gap by providing help to those families earning less than \$50,000 annually.

"The county has worked to respond to the needs of its low-income residents through its Rewarding Work Initiative and other programs, and we will continue to look for ways to help people in need," Short said in the statement.

The initiative began last year and was the second part of the county's welfare reform initiative, begun in 1997.

"Our welfare rolls are down 85 percent in the county," Short said in an interview. "Having done that, we're concerned that a lot of people are living very much on the edge because a lot of them left welfare and took low-paying jobs."

The Rewarding Work Initiative includes such components as the first locally enacted Earned Income Tax Credit in the nation, health care for uninsured adults, housing, job-training and transportation assistance. The county also provides school-based health care services and child care subsidy programs, including the Working Parents Assistance Program, he said.

Jennifer Brooks, director of Self-Sufficiency Programs and Policies at WOW - a locally based national nonprofit that has published self-sufficiency

standard reports for 14 other jurisdictions throughout the country - called the standard "a tool for states and advocates to use to ensure programs are in place that will help low-income families have incomes necessary to make ends meet."

The family of four in the report includes two working parents, one school-age child and one preschool child who requires child care. A family of three with one working parent, a school-age child and one preschool child who requires child care needs virtually the same annual income, according to the WOW report.

Ron Miller, program manager for the Community Action Board, said no county can calculate the number of families of four - or any size - that meet the minimum income level. He said that, according to 1996 data from the county Department of Park and Planning (the most recent data the county has), 62,000 Montgomery families have earned incomes below

\$45,000.

“With the high cost of living, the question is: How do we ensure families get to a self-sufficient income?” Brooks said. “We can raise wages and lower costs.”

To that end Brooks said: “We can ensure people have access to education and training” and “make sure families have access and eligibility for subsidies - child care and transportation,” among others.

Housing, child care and taxes are the three biggest costs for families in the county, she said.

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My power company is now my \_\_\_\_\_.

