

Study sets standard for poverty in Delaware Wages to stay off welfare measured

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A single parent with two preschool-age children needs to earn \$31,000 to \$42,000 annually to live without government help in Delaware, according to a study released Tuesday. The figure is lowest in Sussex County and highest in Wilmington.

The Metropolitan Wilmington Urban League commissioned the study, "The Self-Sufficiency Standard for Delaware," to inform state government and business leaders about the true financial needs of Delaware's needy families, said Helen Foster Parson, economic development director for the nonprofit community-development group.

The study's authors said the self-sufficiency standard is a more accurate measure of economic need than federal poverty guidelines because expenses vary according to a family's size and where they live. A family of three earning less than \$15,020 annually would be considered poor using the federal standard, compared to \$31,000 to \$42,000 using the self-sufficiency standard calculated for Delaware.

"This is a very Delaware-centric report," Parson said. "This is the first [measure] of its kind in Delaware."

The report's self-sufficiency standard includes a family's expenses for housing, food, child care, transportation, health care and taxes. The figure is what the family would have to earn to not need welfare, food stamps, child-care assistance and other help. The report calculates a self-sufficiency standard for 10 kinds of families - one or two parents and various ages of children - in each county, Wilmington, Newark and Dover.

The report does not estimate how many families have incomes below the standard in Delaware.

Wider Opportunities for Women, a national advocacy group for economic independence for women, and Diana M. Pearce, a University of Washington professor, conducted the study. They have written similar reports for 30 other states since the mid-1990s.

Parson and other proponents of the standard had few specific recommendations about how the information should be used. In general, the Wider Opportunities organization contends the standard provides guidance for policymakers and program providers.

The group said the standard helps governments and organizations target their education, job training, work

force development, and welfare-to-work resources. It also shows policymakers how subsidizing child care, transportation or health care impacts the wages necessary for working families to make ends meet.

James H. Gilliam Sr., chairman of the Metropolitan Wilmington Urban League, said deciding how to use the study should be the next step for community advocates and government leaders.

"Now the big question is, 'What are we going to do about it?'" Gilliam said.

Parson said she understands the state is facing a projected \$250 million to \$300 million deficit in the 2004 budget, which begins July 1. But the report can help set an agenda for when the state's financial situation improves, she said.

"What goes down, must come back up," Parson said. "And when it does, we need to be prepared to put in place some of the things we've talked about."

Parson said she would like to see it incorporated into Gov. Ruth Ann Minner's Livable Delaware agenda, a strategy to curb sprawl and prepare for growth. Minner spokeswoman Kate Bailey said the governor supports that idea.

The report includes examples of how other governments are using the measure. For example, Santa Clara County, Calif., used the standard to help create a job-development program that targets high-paying transportation jobs, the report states. Massachusetts officials used the standard to measure the effectiveness of job-development programs.

Parson said the standard will be updated every three to five years.

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