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## Metro poverty level pegged high

**BYLINE:** MARGARET NEWKIRK

Advocates for the poor have calculated "self-sufficiency" standards for metro Atlanta in an effort to show that the federal poverty level is too low.

The study, prepared by the University of Washington School of Social Work for Atlanta's Women's Policy Group, says metro Atlanta is the toughest in the state for those leaving welfare. And DeKalb County is the toughest of all. The study says a DeKalb single parent with two children under school age would need to make \$44,153 a year --- or almost \$21 an hour --- to make ends meet.

That's \$4 more than the \$17 an hour the state says DeKalb workers earn on average. And it's dramatically more than the wages earned by those leaving welfare.

The study estimated the average rent for a family of three, including two children, as \$966 a month. The figure was based on fair market values set by the Section 8 rental assistance program.

The study's finding about the Atlanta cost of living comes as a statewide series of public hearings on Georgia's social services budget rolls into Atlanta today. It also comes as Congress finishes debate on the next stage of welfare reform, with advocacy groups for the poor arguing that reform won't work without additional dollars for high-quality job training.

A range of advocates touted the study at a news conference Tuesday. They included a formerly homeless single mother who says she is struggling to make it despite a degree in social work, and journalist Barbara Ehrenreich, who has chronicled life on minimum wage.

The advocates said their intent is to introduce more realism into the debate over welfare reform. They say their new yardstick more accurately reflects what it takes for low-income families to live on than do official federal poverty guidelines.

The \$14,129 a year the federal government sets as the poverty line for a family of three is "the same in Manhattan, Kan., as it is in Manhattan, N.Y.," said Diana Pierce, the University of Washington researcher who designed the new standard.

Pierce's standard includes housing, food, transportation, medical and child care, and taxes. It does not include entertainment or eating out.

### GETTING BY

Here's what's required for a family of three -- a single parent and two children under school age -- to live, according to the University of Washington School of Social Work.

- \* Cherokee:..... \$43,731
- \* Clayton:.....\$44,039
- \* Cobb:..... \$43,788
- \* DeKalb:.....\$44,153
- \* Fulton:..... \$40,260
- \* Gwinnett:.....\$43,649