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## Group wants low-income aid pegged to living cost

By Deborah Yetter  
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"I know what it's like to choose between food and clothing."

-- Holly Brooks

FRANKFORT, Ky. -- Though it has been a struggle, Holly Brooks, 27, is off welfare, out of a homeless shelter, and working to support herself and her young son.

But she doesn't earn enough at her \$8-an-hour office job to make ends meet, Brooks said.

"I know what it's like to choose between food and clothing," she said.

Brooks and others like her should be earning far more to be self-sufficient in Kentucky, according to a national study released yesterday in Frankfort.

Advocates aren't demanding higher wages for low-income workers, though they would like to see such people advance into higher-paying jobs.

Rather, they called on officials yesterday to stop using the federal poverty level as a baseline for determining who is eligible for services -- such as food

stamps or child-care subsidies -- describing it as obsolete. Instead, they recommend their study as a better measure of what it costs to live in a specific community.

To be self-sufficient in Frankfort, Brooks should earn a minimum of \$11.24 an hour, according to the study. In Louisville, Brooks would need to earn \$14.79 an hour and in Lexington, \$13.46 an hour, according to "The Self Sufficiency Standard for Kentucky: Real Budgets, Real Families."

Yet the average wage for single parents who, like Brooks, have moved off welfare and into jobs is \$7.42 an hour, said Jennifer Brooks (no relation to Holly Brooks), whose Washington-based Wider Opportunities for Women helped prepare the study with Kentucky Youth Advocates.

The federal welfare-reform law that took effect in 1996 has put additional pressure on people to get off public assistance. But many can't support themselves on low-paying jobs, Jennifer Brooks said.

"Many people have gone to work," she said. "What we don't know is whether families are actually better off."

States routinely peg benefits or services at 125 percent or more of the federal poverty level because officials recognize it is too low and people with household incomes above it still need help, the study said.

Kentucky is aware of such studies and would be glad to consider this one, said Michael Jennings, a spokesman for the Cabinet for Families and Children, which oversees welfare and other assistance to poor families.

But Kentucky law requires the Cabinet to tie its benefits to the federal poverty level and the law would have to be changed, he said. Also, Jennings said, state officials are reluctant to make any changes in the system until they find out how much the state will receive from the federal government -- to be decided next year when Congress votes on how much to provide states in welfare funds in future years.

Under welfare reform, Kentucky, like most states, has shifted much of the federal money once used to pay cash assistance instead to help people in low-paying jobs with costs of education, job training, transportation, housing and childcare subsidies.

Kentucky spends about \$255 million a year -- two-thirds of that in federal money -- on welfare. But much of that now goes to help former welfare recipients who have found low-paying jobs.

The major concern for state officials and advocates is whether Congress will reauthorize at least the same amount next year as this year for states when the welfare bill comes up for funding -- so

that states can continue to use that money to help the working poor.

"You cannot do welfare reform on the cheap," Jennifer Brooks said.

Diana Pearce, a University of Washington professor who developed the method used to determine the cost of self-sufficiency, said the study is a more accurate look at the true cost of living.

It assumes no luxuries -- such as eating out -- and factors in local costs of housing, transportation and child care.

"The result is a bare-bones, nofrills budget," she said. "This is the minimum amount people need to meet their needs."

The study of self-sufficiency in Kentucky broke down costs for all 120 counties. In urban areas, it broke down costs for living in high and low-cost neighborhoods. It determined that Louisville is the most expensive place to live and that several rural counties -- including Breckinridge and Pike -- are the least costly.

Kentucky is the 18th state that the group has evaluated using the "self-sufficiency" measure, which takes into account where the

person lives and cost of living for that area, as well as the number and ages of children in the home. Jennifer Brooks said her organization hopes to have

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**Jennifer Brooks, of Wider Opportunities for Women, which helped prepare the study on costs of living with Kentucky Youth Advocates**

taken the study to 35 states by the end of this year.

Several cities and one state, Connecticut, have adopted the findings as a more accurate measure of the welfare of working families and how to best assist them, she said.

Officials can use the measure to find out what help they need to provide -- job training, child-care, health insurance -- and as a more accurate way to determine who is the most at risk. For example, a single adult earning \$8 an hour would be at less risk than a single mother trying to pay for day care and support a child on the same salary -- though both would be above the federal poverty level, Jennifer Brooks said.

The federal guidelines consider a single person earning less than \$8,590 per year to be in poverty; for a parent with one child, an income of \$11,610 or less is considered to be in poverty.

Holly Brooks said that once she got her \$8-an-hour job, she was able to buy a car and move into her own apartment. And she still gets some assistance -- the state helps pay for her infant son's day care and he gets health insurance through KCHIP (Kentucky Children's Health Insurance Program), which pays for medical care for children of low-income parents.

But even with that help, she said, it's a struggle to pay the bills each month. And she has no means to pay for an unexpected calamity -- such as when her used car caught fire and was destroyed.

Luckily, her family was able to help her get another car, she said.

Advocates urged state officials and lawmakers yesterday to continue current levels of assistance and -- even in tight budget times -- look for ways to increase assistance to those most at risk.

State officials also must work to make sure people who leave welfare understand they still may be eligible for food stamps, child-care subsidies and help with housing and transportation.

The state's own surveys show that not everyone eligible for such assistance is using it and officials have said that they want to do a better job of letting people know they could be receiving benefits.