



## Social services help get struggling workers on their feet

By Karina Donica

Many Louisiana families earning above the poverty line are far below earning what they need to cover their basic living needs, a recent report has determined.

**The Self-Sufficiency Standard for Louisiana**, as the report is called, shows a parish-by-parish analysis of income needed to avoid deprivations and/or economic assistance.

In relative terms, Ouachita Parish rates as one of the less-costly parishes to live in the state.

But in an increasingly uncertain economy and with major industries leaving Ouachita Parish, being self-sufficient may become a challenging task for more families.

Although the report doesn't account for emergency expenditures, it identifies the essential expenses that an average family has, including housing, child care, food, health care and transportation.

"Policymakers, researchers, legal advocates and individuals are using the report to better understand income adequacy", said Diana Pearce, a professor at University of Washington in Seattle and author of the report.

"The report is helpful because it gives you a realistic idea of what you need," Pearce said.



**Medria Taylor, 25, and her sons Letroy, 1, center, and Isaiah, 2, play ball at the Twin Cities Early Head Start.**

Medria Taylor, 25, a single mother of two, says her goal is to be economically independent in a near future. In the meantime, however, she has to count every penny to stretch her salary but also needs help from government subsidies to make ends meet.

"I have been on welfare," said Taylor, who recently completed her certified nursing assistant certificate at Louisiana Technical College in Bastrop.

Taylor pursued her education technical degree through the Workforce Enforcement Program, a government-funded education plan.

"Even if you have a trade or a college degree it is still hard. It's very tight," Taylor said.

With her CNA degree, Taylor said, she ensured herself a better job at St. Francis Medical Center's CIU in

Monroe and improved her take-home pay.

With an annual net income of \$10,200, Taylor said she is earning better than she would be working as a restaurant waitress.

Her current income, though, is still \$14,571 short of what's sufficient for a single parent with two children, based on the report.

According to the Self-Sufficiency Standard report, Taylor would have to earn \$24,771 to cover basic expenses.

"I love the department I work in, I love the people I work with, but I am only making so much money," Taylor said. "The money I make now is just enough to pay my bills, but if I was not receiving food stamps and not receiving any help at all, I couldn't pay the rent."

Taylor said she is aware that many people frown at the thought of government assistance, but she is merely using the resources that were created to help people.

"Many people think people like to be on welfare but don't realize how hard it is," Taylor said, explaining the long waits and tedious paperwork she sometimes has to fill out.

The help she has received from the government is paying off. Taylor said she is gradually decreasing her dependence on welfare.

Taylor said many women wait too long to look for help, decreasing their opportunity to prevent personal economic disaster.

"No one should be ashamed because they need help," Taylor said.

While Taylor works at St. Francis Medical Center, her children Isaiah, 2, and LeTroy, 1, are cared for at the Twin Cities Early Head Start, one of three new centers in the Monroe-West Monroe area that provides child development care for newborn to 3-year-olds at no cost.

"Her ultimate goal is to find housing for her and her children and to be independent," said Chelle Brazzel, Early Head Start program director.

Brazzel has followed Taylor's case and described her as "a success story."

"She went back to school and graduated at the top of her class," Brazzel said. "She was able to find a job and now has an apartment she pays with her salary, all through the job skills and encouragement from the Early Head Start staff."

As part of the child-development focus, Early Head Start works with parents to help them define goals, including jobs, education and budget.

Depending on the individual needs, the center offers a center-based program and a home-based program.

Taylor began in the home-based program where a "home visitor" worked with her 90 minutes a week and talked with her about goal setting and child-development skills.

Judith Mower, regional vice president of Volunteers of America, who wrote the grant for the three early head start centers, said the center is a high-quality program that helps families identify their goals.

"If they want a house, where are they now? Before you have a house you have to have a budget, before you get a budget you have to have a job, so we break it down to those baby steps," Mower said.

One of the requirements to be part of the program, however, is active parental involvement.

"We believe that the first teacher of the child is the parent, so we want to teach the parent how to parent," Brazzel said.

As Taylor continues pursuing her goals at the Early Head Start center, she also hopes to upgrade her job classification level by studying to be a registered nurse beginning next spring.