

GLOBE EDITORIAL

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Beyond entry level

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IN A WORLD of lists -- from richest to worst dressed -- the Women's Union has come up with a life-changing tool: the top 25 jobs that can help poor women become self-sufficient. The 25 include dental hygienists, nurses, computer specialists, plumbers, electricians, real estate agents, and construction workers -- all jobs with a high number of openings that pay at least \$40,598 a year.

Why \$40,598? That's how much it takes for one adult living in Worcester to raise one preschool and one school-aged child, according to the union's Massachusetts Family Economic Self-Sufficiency Standard, which measures the cost of living across the state. This is a bare-bones estimate. It includes housing, child care, food, health care, and transportation costs but leaves out saving for college, credit card payments, or the occasional restaurant meal or vacation. Boston's costs are higher.

Massachusetts should use the jobs list to set a high standard: helping people find careers, not just work. But current research shows smaller gains. The Women's Union looked at federally funded workforce development programs in Massachusetts, including welfare-to-work, where participants' average earnings increased from \$7.41 to \$8.01 per hour. If these workers put in a 40-hour week, they'd earn about \$16,660 a year -- not nearly enough to support a family in Worcester, according to the self-sufficiency standard.

The Women's Union analyzed the skills required to move people into the jobs on the top 25 list. A key finding: Women need training in math, science, and computer skills.

Making smart early job placements is crucial. Working as a cashier has limited potential for advancement. By comparison, a first job in computers or the construction industry has many more opportunities for advancement.

The best way to put these findings to work is through partnerships. Public schools should excel at teaching math and science both to educate students and protect them from poverty. Community colleges have to keep the road to career advancement open for adults. Community organizations can recruit, teach basic skills, and provide mentors and long-term support to see women through their careers. Employers should help design workforce programs. And state officials should insist that public programs move people on to career ladders. The state's Department of Workforce Development can set high expectations, unify the many workforce development options, and make access to good jobs easier.

Short-term job placement strategies such as "Work First" that often place people in entry-level jobs without a clear path for advancement don't help Massachusetts families achieve economic independence. The Commonwealth's motto should be Work that Supports Families First. ■