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GLOBE EDITORIAL

The Boston Globe

The cost of thriving

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SINCE 1998, the Women's Union has asked a pertinent question: How much does it really cost to live in the different areas of Massachusetts? The way to find the answer is the Family Economic Self-Sufficiency Standard. Forget the federal guidelines that set the poverty level at \$19,350 for a family of four. The self-sufficiency standard more accurately shows that in order to pay for housing, transportation, child care, taxes, and other expenses, a family of four in high-cost Boston has to earn \$54,612. These numbers demand action -- policies and programs that increase earnings.

This week the Women's Union for the first time has zeroed in on one part of the city, the Dudley area. The neighborhood includes parts of Roxbury and North Dorchester once home to barren lots and broken dreams. There's more to do, but Dudley now has new homes, new stores, and revitalized streets.

Missing are family-sustaining wages. More than 5,100 households -- 63 percent of Dudley families -- have incomes that fall below the self-sufficiency standard. Some 2,900 of these families are in an economic dead zone. They don't earn enough to pay all their bills, although many earn too much to qualify for government aid. Some people skimp on food and health care. And some accrue debt that ruins their credit for years.

An obvious solution is to help people increase their earnings. This is often seen as tedious government work -- having to provide health insurance, education, housing help, welfare, and child care. But look at individuals and it's easier to see the excitement of helping people thrive.

Tyeshea Clarke and her two children became homeless after a fire in her apartment building. The family had to move to a homeless shelter, but Clarke also enrolled in an employment program run by Partners Healthcare. Now she works at Massachusetts General Hospital in the sterile processing unit and wants to become a nurse. She needs help with housing and day care while she climbs up from the entry level.

Sharon Stapleton works 40 hours a week as a preschool teacher. She earns \$1,600 a month, and more than half goes for rent, even though the state gives her a partial subsidy. She's fallen behind on payments for her daughter's college education. She leaves her 11-year-old son home two days a week because she can afford only three days of day care. She also needs help with healthcare.

Dudley is fortunate to have partnerships of community organizations, employers, and foundations that are helping people climb the ladder to prosperity. Helping these residents succeed would be good for Dudley, Boston, and Massachusetts.

CORRECTION --An editorial Sunday misstated the size of the proposed Medicaid cut in President Bush's budget. It is \$45 billion. ■

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