

Poverty line must move, study suggests

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Published Thursday, November 14, 2002

If Elizabeth Stegemann's plans work out, a year from now she'll be a college graduate, land a decent job in



Ed Pfueller photo

Elizabeth Stegemann loads groceries yesterday after shopping at Aldi's. She hopes a college degree will help get her off of food stamps.

social work and be able to support her two children.

"I hate to feel like I'm a drain on society," she said yesterday as she filled her cart with groceries she'd pay for with the help of food stamps. "But eventually I'll get a good job."

A new report issued yesterday by the Missouri Women's Council and the Washington, D.C.-based group Wider Opportunities for Women attempts to quantify just how much she'll have to earn for her family to be self-sufficient.

With an infant and a preschool age child, the report says, a single mother in Boone County would have to earn \$32,218 to get by without government or charitable help. Including her fiancée, who is paying child support for another child, Stegemann's family income would have to top \$38,153.

The "self-sufficiency standard" is a measure that some economists want policy-makers to consider when designing programs to help low-income families.

Unlike the federal poverty line, which is \$15,020 for a family of three regardless of where a family lives in the United States, the determination of the self-sufficiency standard relies on a county-by-county analysis of the cost of living. It also considers that children of different ages have different needs and thus different expenses.

Working families who need child care for an infant and preschool child typically spend more on child care than they do on housing, say economists who prepared the report.

Last year, when Stegemann had a full-time job, she, too, was surprised to realize how much she spent in child care. "When I did my taxes literally half my income went to the babysitter," she said. This year, she said, a babysitter has been helping by giving her lower rates.

Developed by Diana Pearce of the University of Washington, the self-sufficiency standard is an amount that offers just enough that a family would have basic needs covered without help from government, charities, or other sources. It assumes that the family eats no meals out, spends nothing on entertainment, saves nothing for retirement or education, and has health insurance partially paid by an employer.

The self-sufficiency reports have been released in 28 states and Washington, D.C. Its authors suggest that the standard can be used to counsel low-income people as they set job training and job seeking goals, to determine eligibility for various income support programs or to evaluate proposals by companies that seek tax breaks from a community.

"We're not out saying all industry must automatically start paying wages indicated in this plan," said Cheryl Grazier, the executive director of the Missouri Women's Council.