

New standard gauges family self-sufficiency

by Carlotta Grandstaff

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A recent report on what it costs to support a family shows what many Montana families already know too well: Earnings above the federal poverty line still fall far short of what is needed for families to meet their basic living expenses.

That and other findings form the basis of a new report called the Self Sufficiency Standard for Montana. Written by Dr. Diana Pearce of the University of Washington and an organization called Wider Opportunity for Women (WOW), the report compares the self-sufficiency standard to the federal poverty line, the minimum wage and median family incomes. The report was presented by WOW and the group Working for Equality and Economic Liberation (WEEL) at the state capitol in Helena on Jan. 29.

The report calculates the costs of living for families of various configurations: a single, childless adult, a single mother with one pre-schooler, or one pre-schooler and one school-aged child, and so on. Basic needs like housing, food and childcare are factored in to come up with a formula for economic self-sufficiency.

A single mother with one pre-schooler and one school-aged child living in Great Falls would need to earn \$31,142 a year, without government or private support, to meet her family's basic needs. In Flathead County that family would need an annual income of \$28,688. In Missoula County, a single-

parent, two-child household must spend 23 percent of its income on housing, 26 percent on childcare and 15 percent on food.

"The Self Sufficiency Standard for Montana clearly shows that Montana needs a stronger safety net to help low income families on the path out of poverty," says Kate Kahan, executive director of WEEL. "Unfortunately," says Pearce, author of the report, "many families do not earn self-sufficiency wages, particularly if they have recently entered the workforce. They cannot afford their housing and food and childcare, much less their other basic needs, forcing them to make painful choices between necessities or to accept substandard or inadequate childcare, insufficient food or substandard housing."

Montana's welfare program, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, has helped low income families get by with support programs for food, housing and childcare. But welfare cuts are pending and with those cuts will come reductions in those programs, she says.

WOW, WEEL and other advocacy and policy groups will use the report to advocate maintaining and expanding Montana's safety net when Congress takes up the issue of reauthorizing the federal welfare law later this year.