

# LINCOLN JOURNAL STAR

## Off welfare, moving toward independence

BY NANCY HICKS / Lincoln Journal Star

November 21, 2002

Deb Buckman isn't rich. She pinches pennies and she works a second job.

But these days Buckman, whose first job is with the Lincoln Action Program, can pay all her bills every month. After being homeless at one point and on welfare assistance for several years, the mother of four is finally self-sufficient.

A single adult living in Lincoln needs to earn at least \$6.30 an hour -- or \$13,308 a year -- in order to be self-sufficient, according to a study released Wednesday by the Nebraska Appleseed Center for Law in the Public Interest.

Add a child or two who need day care while a parent works and the wage necessary for self-sufficiency rises dramatically.

A Lincoln parent with two children, one in preschool and one in elementary school, will need to earn more than \$16.27 an hour, or \$34,364 a year, to be able to afford a modest lifestyle with no help from welfare or family members. About 32 percent of this family's income goes for day care.

The information from the study, which looks at the self-sufficiency

standard in all 93 Nebraska counties, will be used during next year's legislative debates when the governor and state senators look at cutting Medicaid and other benefits for the working poor, according to leaders of groups that endorsed the report.

"Last year state leaders cut Medicaid coverage to 13,000 working moms. Unfortunately our policy-makers are walking away (from this problem)," said Milo Mumgaard, executive director of the Appleseed Center.

The study also helps show why welfare, food stamps and day-care subsidies are so important to women who are working their way from welfare to independence, said Maureen Golga, with the Wider Opportunities for Women, a national women's employment organization headquartered in Washington, D.C.

"I think a lot of us don't want to believe it takes this high of an income to be self-sufficient, said Steve Virgil, attorney with the Appleseed Center. "We don't want to believe that so many people are on the borderline."

Family self-sufficiency, as measured by the study, is the

income level that allows the family to live in decent housing, keep the car insurance payments up, buy food and pay for day care, without any help from government programs or private programs, according to Diana Pearce, a researcher with the University of Washington's Center for Women's Welfare, who conducted the study.

Self-sufficiency means the family doesn't need to use food stamps or go to a local food pantry. "But there is no pizza here. There are no Happy Meals," she said.

The standard includes rent on an apartment or home that has a bedroom for the adults and no more than two children share a bedroom. That means a one-bedroom apartment for a couple and three bedrooms for a parent or couple with three or four children.

It also assumes that both parents work and includes car and transportation expenses.

Family self-sufficiency is somewhere above the federal poverty level, which is \$15,020 for a parent with two children, but below the point where parents can stash a lot of cash aside in a savings account.

Neither welfare nor a full-time minimum wage provide for self-sufficiency for a family. Welfare and food stamps for a single parent with two children in Nebraska is \$8,760 a year. You can earn \$13,898 a year on a full-time minimum wage job.

Since living costs vary from region to region, the study provides Nebraska specific information, county by county, Golga said.

The self-sufficiency wage is higher in Lincoln and Omaha where housing and day-care costs are higher than in rural areas, according to Golga.

And the amount needed to be self-sufficient varies by family size and by the number of children young enough to need day care. An adult in Saline County needs to earn just \$5.83 (\$12,323 a year) for self-sufficiency. An adult with an infant and preschooler -- and almost \$600 a month in day-care costs -- needs to earn almost twice as much, or \$10.07 an hour, according to the study.

A parent with a school-age child (thus minimal child-care costs) and a teenager needs to earn less, about \$8.47 an hour (\$17,990) to be self-sufficient in Saline County.

Everyone shares the responsibility of helping people move into self-sufficiency, Golga said. Employers need to pay living wages and provide reasonably priced health insurance. People need to get adequate education and plan for their future. And government needs to provide the critical support in education and the safety net for those who are moving into economic independence, she said.

Buckman remembers what it was like to be in that transition

between being really poor and almost making it.

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She had finally gotten a full-time job in Lincoln and didn't need welfare help, including housing assistance. But there were a couple of years where Buckman said she was "constantly begging from Peter to pay Paul."

She juggled the bills and always had at least one in the "we're going to cut you off mode," she remembers.

State day-care subsidies were limited then so Buckman's elementary-aged child stayed home alone after school. And she talked her day-care provider into giving her a discount.

Because of state budget problems legislators in many states are being forced to make tough choices, Golga said.

"A lot of people say the cost is too great to keep providing these services. But what is the cost to families who no longer have safe and reliable child care in their lives, who no longer have safe and reliable health care in their lives." These families must choose between a doctor visit and a winter coat for a child, between food on the table and health insurance premium, she pointed out.

We cannot dismiss the need of families because it is too expensive, Virgil said.