



# Poverty level not same as cost of living

**Gap widening as people with 'good jobs' can't make ends meet, but don't qualify for government aid**

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**By Mike Bockoven**

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Arranging aid for people who need it to get by financially is something Heather Cline-Ford is used to. Recently, however, she has noticed an increase in a certain section of her clientele.

"I don't know if it's the economy recently, but it seems like people who have been OK in the past are calling," said Cline-Ford, the outreach programs coordinator for Central Nebraska Community Services in Grand Island. "We have people with really good full-time jobs -- they work at banks, they work for the school system -- they're calling."

Those people who have "good jobs" don't qualify for much aid, Cline-Ford said. Many times there's very little that can be done for a family who makes a certain amount of money but can't afford to clothe their children or fix their car.

"If you don't qualify, you fall through the cracks," she said. "Those cracks are getting wider."

Cline-Ford isn't the only one who has noticed that trend. Last month, the Nebraska Appleseed Center for Law in the Public Interest released a report that concluded it costs much more than what the federal government says is needed to support a poor family in Nebraska.

According to the study, a single mother with one preschool and one school-age child living in Grand Island needs \$26,018 to support the family's most basic needs. The federal poverty level for the same family is \$15,020.

However, Steve Virgil, attorney for the Living Wage Opportunity Project, as the study is known, said certain aspects differentiate Central Nebraska from the rest of the state. According to the study, such things as the cost of commuting, medical insurance and rental property are even worse west of Lincoln and Omaha than they were inside it.

While the difference isn't that great, he said, little things such as an extra couple of miles here and a slightly more expensive rental property there can spell big bucks for a family on the verge of slipping through the cracks.

"The cost of commuting, for example, is going to be a little more, like 10 to 15 percent, in rural areas because things are further spaced apart," he said. "It doesn't look like much on paper, but when you add it up, there can be a substantial impact."

Overall, Virgil said, there is a significant gap between people eligible to receive certain aid and people who could benefit from it. While that

gap differs in certain counties, Nebraska is in pretty much the same boat overall.

While some urban areas have a higher cost of living, all numbers are based on cars that don't break down and grocery prices that do not fluctuate and don't take into account disasters or expensive costs such as home repair, an illness or other factors.

The solution to the problem is slightly more difficult. Because families that have a member with a "good job" are not making ends meet, the situation needs to be such that jobs pay enough to meet basic needs, Virgil said. If some sort of work support is not created, the situation will become more and more desperate for the state and for families.

"As we look at economic development in western Nebraska, we have to recognize the real needs are much more substantial than we think they are," he said. "We have to create jobs that pay more than \$10 an hour. If not, there needs to be some work support to bridge that gap."

Mariette Horky, Salvation Army family services coordinator in Grand Island, said she knows all about people falling through the cracks. Horky, whose organization turns no one away when they ask for food, said the most common reason for coming to the food pantry at the Salvation Army is a familiar one -- the family couldn't make ends meet.

"Families who have high-paying jobs and then lose them come to us for assistance," she said. "We've seen a lot of that, especially with plants laying off people and people being really nervous. It's something people know is there and take advantage of."

Cline-Ford said she has also seen a change of pace this holiday season. While Toys for Tots and other drives provide toys for needy children, she said the requests this year have been slightly more basic.

"People are asking for clothes," she said. "They're not asking for toys or for themselves. They need basic necessities like clothes, and we are seeing more of that."