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A new look at what families need to get by: A Nebraska group will help provide a more accurate measure of the income required to climb out of poverty.

By Erin Grace

What would it take for a family to rise from poverty and be truly self-sufficient without government help?

Don't look at the federal poverty line for an answer.

Most advocates for the poor say the guideline for determining government help is based on outdated methodology and large underestimates of the income needed to sustain an individual or a family. That's why two advocacy groups are teaming up to more accurately measure the income that Nebraska families need to climb out of poverty.

The Nebraska Appleseed Center for Law in the Public Interest has joined a Washington, D.C.-based nonprofit organization's effort to track major costs and determine the income needed to meet those costs based on market rates in specific geographic areas.

That information is expected to be released as early as October.

The Appleseed Center teamed up with Wider Opportunities for Women, a 37-year-old nonpartisan group that works for better economic and working conditions, particularly for poor women.

That organization began its family self-sufficiency study with the state of Iowa during the welfare overhaul legislation of

the mid-1990s. It now works with 33 states, including Nebraska.

The idea is to establish a comprehensive report to give local legislators and advocates a better grasp of the needs of poor families, said Maureen Golga, self-sufficiency project coordinator in Washington.

Golga said the information is a tool, geared toward a variety of purposes including career counseling, public policy-making, expanding Workforce Development benefits and examining welfare reform.

The project, called Family Economic Self-Sufficiency Study, examines housing, food, health care, child care, taxes and transportation expenses for various families at the county level. The study then determines how much money is needed to cover those costs.

For example, research in one Oklahoma county showed a family of three would need to earn a minimum of \$ 34,829 to be self-sustaining.

That's more than twice the \$ 15,020 annual income established by the federal government for the same family. And it's more than the \$ 14,098 that the same family would earn if one member were working a full-time minimum-wage job.

That kind of information persuaded Pennsylvania lawmakers two years ago not to raise child-care-subsidy co-payments for poor families, Golga said.

Donna Wrightson, one of the project's local coordinators, said the data will help rural families who tend to be more isolated.

Omaha attorney Steve Virgil, working with Appleseed, said he hopes the data will give local leaders a realistic picture of the hurdles faced by poor families.

Specific local data, he said, could help shape programs and determine better policies.

"If you're making a minimum wage, you're not even at the poverty line," Virgil said. "If we are to have a state where families prosper, we have to figure out how to meet the needs of families."

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