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COLUMN: John L. Smith

State's child care assistance shortchanges parents and children

Linda Morgan accepted the daunting challenge of being a single working woman charged with raising two grandchildren on a limited income.

What she could not accept was the state's response to her pleas for adequate child care assistance.

"I was told that I could sign my children over to the state of Nevada," Morgan said. "I refused."

When she finally wrangled assistance, the help was so slight she still was devoting more than half her monthly income toward day care.

Working locals long have known Southern Nevada wasn't an easy place to raise children. It's a minefield of bad lifestyle examples, overcrowded public schools, and stressed out social services. It's better suited to "The Dead End Kids" than "The Brady Bunch."

So, it should come as little surprise that Clark County also is a tough place for working-class parents to find quality, affordable child care. That, in short, is

one of many compelling findings of "The Self-Sufficiency Standard for Nevada," an in-depth analysis of what it really takes to get by in each of the state's 17 counties.

The wage figures, it should be noted, are arguably unrealistically conservative, since they don't include even a single Dominoes delivery, Big Mac attack, or overdue video rental. The numbers are only accurate for people who have pulled themselves up by their bootstraps -- and then boiled the leather for soup.

But the analysis, prepared by Diana Pearce and Jennifer Brooks for Wider Opportunities for Women and locally for the Progressive Leadership Alliance of Nevada, gives a far more realistic measure of sufficiency than the criminally outdated federal poverty measure.

But, no matter how you polish the numbers, they're not pretty, especially in the area of child care.

For working-class wage-earners, Nevada's child care co-payment system gives full assistance to those toiling for minimum wage, but swiftly loses its effectiveness. For example, Pearce found that a single mother earning \$8 per hour who gets a \$1-per-hour raise spends the majority (about \$125) of that approximately \$175 extra per month to offset the automatic decrease in her child care co-payment. Between the increased child care costs and income taxes, that raise is erased.

While more than 17,500 children in Nevada received state assistance in 2001, that figure represents only 17.5 percent of the eligible population, according to the report.

Why don't more participate?

They can't afford child care, and the state's co-payment isn't cutting it. In other words, they can't afford the help.

So, children wind up being watched by relatives, neighbors, unlicensed day care, or not at all.

For workers scuffling at the low end of the economic scale, the system is riddled with Catch-22s. In many cases, if they earn slightly more, they receive much less help from the state.

In libertarian Nevada, some would call that only appropriate. After all, the state never promised its residents many handouts. It's those bootstraps again.

Problem is, although the self-sufficiency standard's figures are more realistic than the federal poverty line, they don't taken into account the reality of serious health issues, or the sort of budget overruns that are common to most well-meaning folks.

A single mother with two young children, according to their figures, must earn at least \$33,328 per year in Las Vegas. All talk of "affordable" Southern Nevada aside, it costs more to get by here than in many major cities.

The awful truth is, many working people with children don't meet the definition of self-sufficient.

"Unfortunately, many families do not earn self-sufficiency wages, particularly if they have recently entered the workforce," Pearce said. "They cannot afford their housing and food and child care, much less their other basic needs, forcing them to make painful choices between necessities, or to accept inadequate child care, insufficient food, or substandard housing."

In the real world, something has to give.

If children are our future, what does this say about our future?

John L. Smith's column appears Sunday, Tuesday, Wednesday, and Friday.