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Cost of living overtaking income

Self-sufficiency study says Nashville family must earn \$37,670

By ANITA WADHWANI

Thousands of Nashville-area workers do not make enough money to pay for basic living expenses, says a report released yesterday by a national researcher, local tax reform advocates and others who will be using it to promote policy changes.

Tennessee is the 25th state to be studied for the "**self-sufficiency standard**" report, a 90-page look at what it takes to get by in each of Tennessee's counties.

"The goal is to put out there what it really costs to live," said Diana Pierce, a sociologist at the University of Washington and principal researcher. The study found that a family of four not getting any government benefits must earn \$37,670 to make ends meet in Davidson County.

In Williamson County, the same family - two working adults with a preschooler and a school-age child - would have to earn \$40,169, making it the most expensive county in the state.

Pierce said those numbers are intended to be more precise than the federal poverty level, which was set this year at \$18,100 for a family of four no matter where the family lives. The study's numbers are based in part

on government estimates for rent, child care and other expenses in programs where the government at least partially reimburses people.

Tennessee advocates for tax reform and the poor, such as the Tennessee Alliance for Progress, the Tennessee Economic Council on Women and the Tennessee Legislative Black Caucus, helped sponsor the research along with the Washington-based Wider Opportunities for Women. They said yesterday that one goal of the report would be to persuade legislators to vote for a state income tax.

"We know this is the reality in our communities," said Michele Flynn, executive director of the Tennessee Network for Community Economic Development. "It's what makes so many of us so distressed" about the current tax debate and proposed cuts in programs to assist working families, she said.

"It's just shameful that five legislators could not step forward," she said, referring to last week's state House vote, which fell five votes short of approving a state income tax.

Flynn said the report would be given to the

five legislators widely believed to have backed off a "yes" vote for a state income tax at the last minute.

Researchers said no precise data is available on the number of families earning less than a self-sufficiency wage. The latest census figures show almost 40% of Nashville-area families earn less than \$35,000 per year.

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