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SINGLE-PARENT FAMILY NEEDS \$50,321 HERE TO BE SELF-SUFFICIENT

BYLINE: Pat Schneider, The Capital Times

A single parent in Dane County with two young children needs more than \$50,000 in annual income to make ends meet, says a newly released study of living expenses.

Dane County's 2004 Self-Sufficiency Standard -- at \$50,321 annually for a parent with an infant and one preschooler -- makes it one of the most expensive areas in the state for such a family to live.

Only the Waukesha County area of metropolitan Milwaukee-Waukesha, where \$50,551 in annual income is needed to cover basic expenses, is more expensive for such a family.

Areas where a parent with an infant and one preschooler needs more than \$45,000 to get by include all of metropolitan Milwaukee and Kenosha and the St. Croix County area of metropolitan Minneapolis-St. Paul.

Basic family expenses are lowest in Buffalo County, \$23,260 a year; and in

the Ho-Chunk community in Forest County, \$25,799.

The Self-Sufficiency Standard is built on the cost of realistic family needs -- housing, food, child care, clothing, transportation -- by family size and age of children in each county in the state, study author Diana Pearce said this week.

The standard sets the income needed for families of various compositions to cover basic costs without assistance programs like food stamps or medical assistance, or family-provided help like free child care.

"What you get is a bare-bones budget: no takeout, no pizza, no lattes," said Pearce, a professor at University of Washington in Seattle.

"What it tells us is that families have a hard time meeting basic expenses," Pearce said at a Capitol news conference Tuesday where the 2004 study was released. It was first published in 2000.

Some Dane County annual self-sufficiency wages for various families are:

\$15,633 for one adult, up 2 percent from 2000;

\$34,787 for one adult and one preschooler, up 5 percent;

\$44,237 for one adult, one preschooler and one school-age child, up 3 percent;

\$49,434 for two adults, one preschooler and one school-age child, up 4 percent.

The 2004 median family income for Dane County is \$73,200, as calculated by the federal Department of Housing and Urban Development.

The self-sufficiency standard assumes that families are renting, are operating an older car and that both adults in two-adult families work.

It also factors in sales, payroll, federal and state income taxes, as well as tax credits for various family circumstances.

The standard does not allow for retirements savings or emergency expenses.

The various costs and credits are calculated for 70 different family compositions in each county.

The standard was developed for Wider Opportunities for Women, a national organization based in

Washington, D.C. It has been developed for some 34 states and the D.C. area.

The Wisconsin Women's Network has partnered with Wider Opportunities for Women in developing the standard in Wisconsin.'

Cyndi Lucas, program associate for Wider Opportunities for Women, said Tuesday the standard is intended to be used in the evaluation, development and implementation of public policy.

The standard also can be used to evaluate economic development proposals and to determine if the wages paid by businesses seeking government subsidies are adequate for workers to be self-sufficient.

"Individuals can use the information to truly understand what it takes to make ends meet," Lucas said.

The Self-Sufficiency Standard report with wages for all Wisconsin counties and tribes is available online from the Wisconsin Women's Network at www.wiwomensnetwork.org.

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