

## **Making a living**

*By JOAN BARRON*

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CHEYENNE -- Two single mothers, one in Cheyenne and one in Casper, know what it's like to try to stretch wages from low-paying jobs to cover groceries and rent with the help of food stamps and other assistance.

Both found help through the "Our Families, Our Futures-Young Parent" program.

Crystal King of Casper was in the first class of Casper women to participate in a program that trains female heads of households for jobs traditionally reserved for men.

King, 30, is now an in-town seasonal truck driver with the JTL Group. She is almost making ends meet, but falls on the border of what is considered a liveable wage in Wyoming.

During the summer trucking season, King brings home a little less than \$2,000 a month, slightly more than the \$1,703 that a single parent of a preschooler needs to be considered "self-sufficient."

At the same time, though, she also works close to 60 hours a week trucking, as opposed to a traditional 40 hours, and pays nearly \$100 a week in child care for her 4-year-old daughter.

Julia Tate of Cheyenne, 20 years old with a 2-year-old daughter, spent four months in a job training program and completed an internship in a field that pays higher wages.

Tate began work with the Holland & Hart law firm in Cheyenne on Jan. 24 and receives medical and dental insurance. She also has doubled her salary and is eligible for tuition reimbursement if she continues her education.

"Looking back, I realize I needed a little help and training to get me here, but I am happy to share that my daughter and I are much better off and excited for the future," Tate said.

Tate told of her experience during a news conference Wednesday in the Capitol Rotunda, where Gov. Dave and first lady Nancy Freudenthal released the "Wyoming Self-Sufficiency Standard," a report that can help guide public and private sector policies and actions by determining how much income working families need to make ends meet in Wyoming.

The report charts the actual cost of living and working in each of Wyoming's 23 counties and on the Wind River Indian Reservation. It measures how much a family must earn to pay for housing, food, child care, health care, transportation, taxes and other basic

necessities without public assistance or help from family and friends.

Diana Pearce, director of the Center for Women's Welfare at the University of Washington, said the standard is a "bare bones" budget that allows no take-out foods or restaurant meals -- "not a pizza, Happy Meal or latte."

Pearce, who conducted the research and wrote the report, said that when a family's income is below the bare-bones level, the household head must make choices between essentials -- adequate child care or the rent, for example.

The problem is especially acute for single mothers who face a gender wage gap in Wyoming, she added.

"There's no place in Wyoming you can live on the minimum wage," Pearce said.

Most counties require a wage of \$12 to \$14 per hour for a single parent with two children, an infant and a preschooler. Carbon County required the lowest wage, \$12.38 per hour, while Teton County, at \$21.62, required the highest wage.

Wyoming is the 37th state to develop the standard, which has been helpful to policymakers in other states, the governor said.

"It's important to bring Wyoming families out of poverty," Nancy Freudenthal said. She said families need services, not just subsidies, and employers who value their workers.

"So many Wyoming women are single parents," she added. "Together we can make this happen. We can educate people what it costs to live in this wonderful state."

Several state agencies, including the Departments of Family Services, Corrections and Workforce Services, paid for the \$38,500 study.

Other states have used the standard to counsel low-income families, set eligibility guidelines for government assistance and inform employers about the adequacy of the wages they offer, the report said.

King, meanwhile, said that during the winter, she collects about \$1,300 a month in unemployment, waiting for the on-season to start again.

"Wyoming is a good place to live, but wage-wise, it's hard to make a living," she said. "You can get by, but you can't live. It just sucks. It's a struggle. You can't go do things -- you have to put all your money toward bills. Even enjoying the great outdoors takes money."

King said she was lucky to find a trucking company that provides some flexibility for her schedule, and she hopes that her Class A license will provide more opportunities for

financial stability.

"I'm not there (self-sufficient) yet, and I know that," she said. "But I'm building confidence, and I know I can do it."

Star-Tribune reporter Jenni Dillon contributed to this report.

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