

## The Bradenton Herald (Florida)

### Average hourly wages in Manatee County

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By Donna Wright

\$11.27...preschool teacher

\$13.08...construction- related worker

\$21.03...education, training, library workers

\$25.29...post-secondary teacher

\$26.92...registered nurse

\$40.39...sales manager

SOURCE: Florida Research Economic Development, Labor Market Statistics

Florida families are struggling to make ends meet, a statewide cost-of-living study released Tuesday said.

Manatee County families are among the hardest hit, according to the Blueprint for Prosperity: 2007 **Self-Sufficiency Standard**. For example, a Manatee County single parent with an infant would need to earn at least \$34,193, or \$16.19 an hour, to meet the actual cost of basic needs in the area.

A single parent with three children - an infant, a preschooler and a school-age child - would need to earn \$51,999, or \$24.62 an hour, to cover food, housing, transportation and living costs, the study said.

Sarasota County is more costly - a single parent with three children would need to earn \$59,384 to cover basic needs.

Those figures didn't surprise Maj. Robert Pfeiffer, social services director of the Salvation Army in Bradenton. "There are certainly no single parents that I am aware of who are making \$24.62 an hour in

Manatee County and that is probably why we are seeing the huge increase in our shelters and our feeding programs."

The sufficiency standard study was funded by the Human Services Coalition, a nonprofit that promotes a living wage.

The standard is derived by calculating the cost of housing, child care, food, transportation, health care, miscellaneous items (clothing, household items, telephone, etc.) and federal, state and local taxes. Tax credits for which low-income families are eligible also are considered.

Diana Pearce, of the Center for Women's Welfare at the University of Washington in Seattle, created the standard and led the Florida study.

"We looked at bare-bones, no-frills budgets, including fair-market rents for housing and the cost of subsidized child care," Pearce said. "The result is a calculation of what it costs for a family to pay for all its needs from month to month but not to save money for a home or a child's college fund or unexpected emergency."

Daniella Levine, president and chief executive of the Human Services Coalition, hopes the study will prompt local and state leaders to push for a living-wage requirement in Florida. "The **self-sufficiency standard** is a powerful tool to help people understand the true cost of living. Without this information, policymakers cannot address the real problems affecting workers."

The coalition recommends the following actions:

Raise the minimum wage, provide families with paid medical leave and offer better job training.

Ensure that all Floridians have access to safe, affordable housing.

Increase access to and funding for government support programs such as children's health insurance and subsidized child care.

Enact tax reform that relieves low- and middle-income families of their disproportionate tax burden.

Adopt the **self-sufficiency standard** as a benchmark for income adequacy.

Pfeiffer agreed something must be done, blaming the gap between rising prices and wages for the crisis. "Families just can't keep pace. We are seeing the working poor, the people who have jobs but who cannot afford an apartment. The people who are working two jobs and can't afford to pay their bills."

Levine says the **self-sufficiency standard** is a far more accurate indicator of what people need to earn than the poverty index, which was developed in the early 1960s and assumes only one parent works. The sufficiency standard assumes all parents work and factors in work-related costs.

The study also revealed a wide disparity in the cost of living throughout Florida. In Hamilton County in the Panhandle, which has the cheapest cost of living, a single parent with an infant, preschooler and school-age child could get by on \$35,920, or an hourly wage of \$17.01, the study showed.

Palm Beach County is the most expensive. The same single-parent/three-children household would need an annual income of \$70,242, or an hourly wage of \$33.26, to get by.

Despite the study's dire outcomes, Sally Hill, a Suncoast Workforce Board spokeswoman,

said local families in need can get assistance.

"Suncoast Workforce Board, through its regional employment and training centers called JOBS ETC., offers services to individuals who are looking to move into better positions through assistance or training to upgrade skills," Hill said.

While the workforce board has not tracked cost of living data, Hill felt the **self-sufficiency standard** study underplayed the many assistance programs available to Floridians.

"There is assistance out there for people who can't make ends meet," Hill said. "We can refer people to those resources."

Those interested should contact Beverly Stockton, project director for JOBS ETC., at 358-4200, ext. 108. Raise the minimum wage, provide families with paid medical leave and offer better job training.

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