

Mississippi Study Measures Income for Families to Meet Basic Needs

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Sep. 2--The Mississippi Economic Policy Center released a new report Tuesday that measures how much income a family in the state would need to handle their basic necessities.

According to the report's authors, Mississippians working at the most common occupations have wages on average below the minimum level of self-sufficiency. The study, dubbed the "**Self-Sufficiency Standard for Mississippi 2009**" tracked and measured the true cost of living facing the state's families today.

The Self-Sufficiency Standard varies by family size, composition, children's age and geographic location. The Standard includes housing, child care, food, transportation, health care, miscellaneous expenses and taxes.

According to documents, "the Standard is a conservative measure that does not include items such as debt repayment, eating out or savings of any kind. It represents a minimum adequate wage needed to live without any assistance."

For instance, a single adult in Jones County would need to make \$7.16/hour or \$15,131 annually to meet the basic needs of food (\$215), transportation (\$235), health care (\$138), miscellaneous (\$101) and taxes (\$185). That same person in Jasper County would need about \$15,638 annually (\$7.40/hour) and \$15,626 (\$7.40/hour) in Smith County. In Wayne County, that person would need to make \$7.28/hour or about \$15,369 annually.

Mississippians can figure out their own self-sufficiency with an economic calculator available at www.mepconline.org/self-sufficiency-standard/your-standard.php.

In a morning teleconference, Ed Sivak, director of the Mississippi Economic Policy Center, discussed the need for the standard.

Sivak said over 330,000 adults in the state "face limited career opportunities" due to a lack of education and other factors. "That stands in stark contrast with the 120,000 job shortfall," he said. "We believe this study will be a powerful tool in reshaping the lives of Mississippians."

Dr. Diana Pearce, director of the Center for Women's Welfare at the University of Washington School of Social Work, authored the self-sufficiency standard.

Pearce noted that the 2009 study, an update of a study done nationally in 2003, looked at what it would cost to meet a family's needs at the most minimal level.

"The most startling finding was how much costs have increased (since 2003)," she said. "In particular, health care is up about 75 percent. Most people's wages haven't gone up. There's been wage cuts. This really substantiates people experiencing the cost squeeze."

Donna Atkinson, family economic self-sufficiency project director for Wider Opportunities for Women, said the objective of the study is to put in place policies to help low income individuals reach an adequacy level.

"We want to move women into career paths that lead to economic self-sufficiency," she said. "But, policies and programs are only the beginning. This study shows how much it takes to make ends meet from Tylertown to Tupelo. This will reshape lives and help lift families out of poverty."

Others joining the conference call included Carol Penick, executive director of the Women's Fund of Mississippi, and Julie Kuklinski, program director for the Women in Construction program.

Both women spoke of non-traditional employment for women that would help them become self-sufficient.

"When women are self-sufficient, their family is self-sufficient and their community is self-sufficient," Penick said.

Penick noted that routes such as the Biloxi-based Women in Construction help women find jobs. The program, which received a grant from the Women's Fund in January 2009, has graduated 45 women with a job placement rate of over 60 percent.

"The coast was devastated by Hurricane Katrina," said Kuklinski, noting the importance of the program. "The coast and Mississippi need more of these programs. This should be a model for the entire country. We believe strongly that it provides women a sense of empowerment and their family a sense of growth and self-sufficiency."