

More than 300,000 below Self-Sufficiency Standard

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A new report measuring how much money it takes for families in Mississippi to meet their basic needs has been released by the Mississippi Economic Policy Center (MEPC).

The 110-page **Self-Sufficiency Standard for Mississippi** 2009 report was introduced at a news conference last week in Jackson. Authored by Dr. Diana Pearce, director for the Center for Women's Welfare at the University of Washington, the report was compiled with support from the Enterprise Corporation of the Delta, W.K. Kellogg Foundation, William Winter Institute for Racial Reconciliation and the Women's Fund of Mississippi.

"There are an estimated 330,000 Mississippi adults that live below the self-sufficiency standard," said MEPC director Ed Spivak. "The standard for Mississippi varies by both family type and by geographic location...so, a basic level of income that works in Coahoma County is going to differ from what is needed for Hinds or Harrison counties."

The 2009 report is a follow-up to the first Standard issued in 2003.

The report tracks and measures the true cost of living for families and explains how the Standard differs from the official federal poverty level, how it is calculated, what an adequate income is for Mississippi families and how various public work supports, public policies, child support and other resources can be used as a tool for education, training and research.

First conceived nearly 50 years ago, the official federal poverty level standard is now considered obsolete in many circles.

There is national legislation underway to include a provision to update the outdated poverty level standard. It will be re-modeled by the national self-sufficiency standard, Pearce said.

"The first decade of the 21st century had seen wages stagnate and basic needs costs skyrocket," she said. "Many families are not deemed 'poor' by the official federal poverty measure, yet they lack enough income to meet the rising costs of essentials."

The poverty level devised by the U.S. government is based solely on USDA food budgets that meet minimal nutritional standards. In contrast, the Self-Sufficiency Standard is based upon all budget items faced by working adults, not just food. Other items include housing, childcare, healthcare, transportation, taxes and "miscellaneous" items.

Pearce stated that to close the income gap in the Magnolia State, two basic approaches were required: raising incomes and reducing costs through workforce support programs.

Her recommendations include: increasing access to higher education; providing targeted training for higher-wage jobs; increasing women's access to nontraditional jobs; and, implementing policies that encourage families to establish savings accounts.

"The report tells us that families have a hard time meeting basic expenses not because they lack responsibility but because they lack enough income," Pearce said.

Mississippi is one of 37 states and the District of Columbia with a self-sufficiency standard. The Self-Sufficiency Standard is based on what an adequate income is for families, and how public policy and other resources can help them move towards becoming more independent.

How much income is enough for families to meet their needs without public subsidies? One participant in the study defined economic self-sufficiency as "being able to take care of yourself and your family...you have a job and you can pay your bills."

A self-sufficiency wage means a family or individual is on the road to economic independence and is not forced to choose between basic necessities such as childcare versus nutritious food, or adequate housing versus healthcare, the report cited.

For example, a Warren County single adult would need to earn \$8.64 an hour to meet his or her basic needs--with the addition of a pre-school child, families with one adult need to earn at least \$12.21 per hour. Add a school-aged child and the self-sufficiency wage for a family of three would need to increase to an hourly wage of \$13.52.

In conclusion, the report cites several factors that contribute to the problems faced by many parents seeking self-sufficiency, including the poor economy, lack of education and skills, welfare time limits and restrictions on training programs.

"With this information, the lives of people from Tupelo to Tylertown can be changed and help lift them out of poverty," said Donna Addkison, self-sufficiency project director for **Wider Opportunities for Women**.

For more information on The Self-Sufficiency Standard for Mississippi 2009, go to www.mepconline.org/self-sufficiency-standard/your-standard.php. County-by-county data is available online by going to www.mepconline.org/self-sufficiency-standard/.