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Raise your voices over the growing income gap

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By Karan Gill, Special to The Times

VOICES warning of a faltering national economy have become louder the past several months. Those voices barely amount to a whisper in Washington. The unemployment rate remains at record lows with job vacancies at record highs. All signs point to future growth.

What about the whispers?

According to the latest Washington State Job Vacancy Report, produced by the Employment Security Department (ESD), "the bulk of openings were not for high-paying jobs nearly half of vacant positions were offering less than \$10 per hour."

Even worse, more than 70 percent of the job vacancies do not pay enough for a single-parent household with two children to be self-sufficient in the region.

The **self-sufficiency standard**, adopted by the Workforce Development Council of King County, accounts for variations in cost of living by family size, composition and geographic location. The standard measures how much income is needed for a family to adequately meet basic needs without public or private assistance.

In South King County, a self-sufficiency wage is between \$16.26 and \$24.38 for a single-parent, two-child household, or \$12.68 and \$13.85 per adult for a two-parent, two-child household. According to the latest job-vacancy report, only 8 percent of vacant jobs offer a wage higher than \$25 per hour. Most of these \$25-or-more-per-hour jobs require at the very least a bachelor's degree.

Many of the jobs being created here do not provide wages that allow families to be self-sufficient, and this will continue to expand

the gap between higher- and lower-income earners. This trend is taking our economy to a place we do not want to go.

Costs for basic needs since 2001 have increased cumulatively at an alarming rate in King County. The **self-sufficiency standard** rose by 14 to 18 percent in just five years, according to the latest **self-sufficiency standard** report.

Economic strategies that use lower-wage vacancies as springboards to self-sufficient careers, and also allow our businesses to continue to prosper, are needed. Aligning strategies with local market needs helps create this successful partnership.

According to the ESD, the individual occupation most in demand is that of registered nurse, with almost 4,500 openings across the state. Currently, many refugee and immigrant families with health-care backgrounds are underemployed. Hospitals and community-based organizations can partner to work in our richly diverse communities to fill high-demand areas and help place these families into higher-wage jobs.

Another opportunity is in manufacturing. Many employers are providing living wages to attract much-needed, trained and skilled workers. More emphasis on vocational training in our schools and communities is needed to prepare workers to join the labor force. According to the ESD, job vacancies requiring at least an associate or vocational degree have a median wage of \$19.61 per hour.

Indeed, the high vacancy rate of entry-level jobs needs to be filled as long as they are structured as a step to launching careers in higher-paying positions. Employers can

strategize on how to collectively provide career pathways to help their employees advance into self-sufficient wages. Government agencies should take a longer-term view and move beyond requiring that the unemployed take the first job offered to them. Strategies that build on the interests of clients, and link to education, training and credentials, will yield greater returns.

Finally, overall wages need to increase. Although our state does have the highest minimum wage in the nation, it does not put working families on the path to self-sufficiency. Investments in public/private contracts with living wages prove that raising wages catalyzes economic growth.

It is past time to uncover the facts cloaked behind upbeat employment and economic reports. We need to raise our voices to address the increasing income gap with open conversation, deeper examination and systemic strategies. It is a whisper that needs to grow louder.

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