

## **New standard may decide self-sufficiency**

### ***Size of family, area of living are key variables***

BY STACY HAWKINS ADAMS Sufficiency  
TIMES-DISPATCH STAFF WRITER

By the current standard, any American family of three with an income above \$15,020 is not considered poor.

That federal poverty level figure applies if they live in Richmond, Chicago, Los Angeles or anywhere else in the nation.

But a report released yesterday by the Action Alliance for Virginia's Children and Youth insists that differences in family structure and the areas in which families live significantly impact how far a paycheck can go.

The Self-Sufficiency Standard For Virginia provides precise details about how much 70 different family types must earn to pay for housing, food, child care and other basic needs without outside assistance.

The costs vary for each locality in Virginia, by the age of the children and the number of children in a family.

In Richmond, for example, a single parent raising an infant and a preschool-age child would need an income of at least \$34,510 to be fully independent, according to the study.

That same family must earn \$49,636 to live in Fairfax County, \$32,724 in Virginia Beach and \$21,826 in Abingdon.

"Certainly, getting realistic numbers on what it takes to live in an area is very important," Jane Wood, Virginia's secretary of health and human resources, said yesterday after receiving a copy of

the report. "This kind of information is crucial in our efforts to target programs, to prioritize and to make sure we 'get it.'"

The study calls for employers to help families attain a self-sufficient income by offering livable wages.

Legislators and policy-makers are encouraged to reduce costs for families by improving existing supports such as child care and housing subsidies for struggling workers, many of whom are former welfare recipients.

Suggestions also are provided on how human service workers can help their clients obtain more education or consider nontraditional jobs with better pay.

"We've had goals of self-sufficiency for job training and welfare [reform] with no way of measuring our progress," said Diana Pearce, lead author of the study and creator of the Self-Sufficiency Model. "What it takes for an individual to become self-sufficient is different for different people.

"These are real bare-bones budgets," she said. "There's no restaurant or take-out food. These people have to make choices, and it's not because they're bad budgeters."

Virginia is the 27th state to undertake a self-sufficiency assessment.

The Action Alliance gathered data and worked with Pearce, a University of Washington faculty member, to show the

value of assistance from employers and the government, and to counter the one-size-fits-all model of the annually-released federal poverty guidelines.

Those guidelines are based on a food budget of one-third of a family's income. With escalating housing, health-care and child-care costs, that method of calculation is no longer accurate, Pearce said.

By the end of the year, she will have helped create self-sufficiency standards for 35 states, primarily with funding from the Ford Foundation.

Pearce is working with the Washington-based Wider Opportunities for Women, a national women's employment organization, to lobby for the standards to be included in revisions to the federal welfare reform law, which is scheduled to be reauthorized in October.

Connecticut already has officially adopted the standards outlined for its localities, a

Wider Opportunities for Women official said yesterday.

The information provided in the reports have helped that state and others fine-tune job training programs, eligibility programs for the needy and assisted legislators in determining whether to increase fees for some subsidized programs.

Action Alliance officials are hoping for similar results in Virginia.

"It's not about blaming any group, but recognizing that we have to work together," said Suzanne Clark Johnson, executive director of the Action Alliance.

Contact Stacy Hawkins Adams at (804)649-6578 or [sadams@timesdispatch.com](mailto:sadams@timesdispatch.com)

#### LEARN MORE

**WHERE:** Free copies of The Self-Standard For Virginia are available by calling (804) 649-0184 or online at [www.vakids.org](http://www.vakids.org)