



## Study examines price of independence

By Cynthia T. Pegram / The News & Advance  
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Independence comes at about \$9.62 an hour for a mother and baby in Lynchburg.

The \$20,326 price tag for self-sufficiency is data from a statewide study released by Action Alliance for Virginia's Children and Youth, a nonprofit organization.

The study tallies local costs of such basics as housing, food, transportation, health insurance and childcare.

Self-sufficiency means life at salary-level with no public or private assistance. And no extras.

In Lynchburg the tab is lower than other places, "but families are facing some pretty substantial costs," said Diana Pearce, lead author of the study.

Pearce, of the University of Washington, heads the team that did the calculations for Virginia. Wider Opportunities for Women coordinates the standard nationally, and Virginia is the 27th state to have the self-sufficiency calculations done.

One of the things the study does, said Maureen Golga of WOW, is to show that the women who can't make it without assistance are not lazy, nor are they unable to live on budget.

"It's because they don't earn enough to meet basic costs. They're struggling to make ends meet, and these

numbers validate that," she said. "If you need \$15 an hour to make it, and you're only earning \$7, you must be struggling."

Both Pearce and Golga were in Richmond to launch the study through Action Alliance, but gave telephone interviews as well.

"I think the real beauty of the report is if you can put it in the hands of legislators - this is reality in Central Virginia," said Golga. "Look at localities across the state. Use the information to make smart choices about providing services to low-income families."

Pearce noted the wide range of income needed to be self-sufficient.

A mother of an infant and preschooler living in Fairfax County would have to earn \$23.50 an hour to be self-sufficient. In Lynchburg, she would have to earn \$17.50 an hour to support her children.

Yet, Pearce noted, lower costs to live don't often come in areas that have higher wages.

In Virginia, she said, the costs of housing and childcare can be over half the budget. And in highest cost areas, it can be twice as high as the lowest cost areas.

The studies show that the counties of Amherst, Appomattox, Bedford and

Campbell have roughly the same cost of living.

The full report, with data tables, is at [www.vakids.org](http://www.vakids.org).

The study listed an income of \$6.69 an hour for a single adult in Lynchburg. That's about \$14,125 a year.

Area professionals who work with families trying to move into assistance-free life say the self-sufficiency numbers aren't realistic for Central Virginia.

"It's really not enough money," said Dennis Shearin, senior benefits program supervisor for the Lynchburg Department of Social Services. Some of the clients he works with are working more than one job. "Day care is a big issue."

Sharon Swedlow, also of Lynchburg Social Services, said that health care is a major factor in trying to attain self-sufficiency. Twenty thousand three hundred twenty-two dollars may meet the basic needs of a healthy mother and child, but what kind of living situation will they be in at that rental? And without some kind of assistance, she said, "I don't know how you can get by on that amount."

Shearin said he would like to know a little more about the study itself. "It would be interesting to know if anyone tried to do this. Do they try to live off that?"

"This (report) is academia. What you're paid is not what you get."

Even the lowest of the costs are substantially higher than what is now minimum wage, \$5.15 an hour.

There is a difference between a minimum wage and a living wage, said Jeff Gould, executive director of New Land Jobs, an agency that helps people gain skills needed for the workplace.

At New Land Jobs, "one of the things we attempt to do is to get people started in the work cycle," said Gould. "So they may be starting at minimum wage or very near it."

At that level, he said, "they still require some kind of additional assistance until they build up history and experience, and can then move into a living wage."

"In almost no case am I aware of anyone being able to self-sustain on the so-called minimum wage."

Carol Spencer Read is program development manager for Lynchburg Community Action Group (Lyn-CAG).

A single adult could probably get by on the \$6.69 an hour listed for Lynchburg, she said. Without child care or children's expenses to meet, "A single adult can get away with a lot less."

In the employment programs at Lyn-Cag, they seek to place students in jobs that pay at least \$7.50 an hour.

The study says for self-sufficiency for two adults with an infant and preschooler, both adults must make at least \$7.90 an hour (with both working, that's \$33,386 a year).

"I think that's low," said Read. "They're not going to be able to have any expenses."

The study, she said, is a good way to illustrate that what people earn is not enough.

