



Report identifies the cost of survival for state families

By Hugh Lessig
Daily Press

July 11 2002

RICHMOND -- A family of three is not considered poor once their income rises above \$15,020 a year. That's what the federal government says.

Advocates for Virginia's children say that standard is deceptively low, and on Wednesday they proposed a new way of measuring what people must truly earn to be self-sufficient. They also called on state lawmakers and business owners to pay attention to it..

The Self-Sufficiency Standard for Virginia isn't one number or a set of numbers. It consists of hundreds of numbers that describe what different types of families must earn to survive in the state.

For example, a family of three in Newport News - an adult, an infant and a preschooler - must earn \$31,395, more than twice the official poverty level, to be truly self-sufficient.

Members of the Action Alliance for Virginia's Children and Youth, the statewide nonprofit group that developed the measurement, urged Virginia's policy-makers to use the Self-Sufficiency Standard when developing programs to help the poor.

"This standard moves beyond the one-size-fits-all approach of the federal poverty measure," said Suzanne Johnson, president of the alliance, who spoke at a news conference in the Capitol. "It provides Virginia-specific information that can be used to improve the lives of Virginia's most vulnerable families."

Johnson applauded Gov. Mark R. Warner for working to increase access to a state health insurance program for poor children. But she said the state could spend more on child-care subsidies for low-income, working parents, because that could allow the state to draw matching federal funds.

The self-sufficiency standard for each type of family in each locality considers the cost of housing, child care, food, transportation, health care and taxes. The advocates said it is a decidedly no-frills standard

- no trips to the local video store, no fast food.

"The Self-Sufficiency Standard does not reflect Friday nights with Blockbuster and a pizza," Johnson said, "but the barely adequate cost of supporting a family."

Jill Hanken, an attorney at the Virginia Poverty Law Center, said the Self-Sufficiency Standard contains several messages for lawmakers and service providers. Among them: The working poor need better access to training and education to earn a self-sustaining wage.

"The standard can be very important to validate what many of us have known for years," Hanken said. "And that is that families aren't lazy and they aren't bad budgeters. They simply don't earn enough money to meet their basic needs."

Also speaking at the news conference was Elizabeth Wash, a Hampton business owner. Wash said she read the alliance's report and was intrigued by it. The owner of Shred-It, a paper-shredding company, said she always prided herself on paying her workers a fair wage and benefit package.

"What surprised me about this, when I opened it up and started looking at the numbers, was, 'Wow, these numbers are high,' " she said. "This provoked a lot of thought for me. It showed me that self-sufficiency isn't just an increment above minimum wage. It is sometimes a multiple of minimum wage."

Diana Pearce, a researcher at the University of Washington, authored the Self-Sufficiency Standard. She is a former director at Wider Opportunities for Women. That organization partnered with the Action Alliance to commission the report.