



W.Va. cost of living report to be released soon

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BYLINE: Kelly Regan

How much money does it take to make ends meet in Kanawha County? How does that compare to Clay County? Wayne County? Pennsylvania, New York or California?

Those questions will be answered later this month when state leaders release a statewide self-sufficiency report.

The report will tell readers in West Virginia counties how much money they need to earn per hour, per month and per year to cover basic expenses such as housing, food, child care and transportation.

The report's authors worked for the past six months to gather information, which they hope will influence state policy-makers and individuals who want to get out of debt and/or off public assistance.

"An individual can sit down and figure out how much they would need to earn if they live in a certain area, and use it as a guide for career development," said Nancy Tolliver, director of West Virginia Community Voices.

"If I need to earn \$ 15 an hour, where can I find work that will give me that kind of pay, and how can I find the training to prepare me for the job that I need to be self-sufficient?"

The report is part of a nationwide Family Economic Self-Sufficiency Project that began in 1996, after a University of Washington professor created a formula to determine cost of living for various family types in various places.

The project was coordinated by Tolliver and funded as part of a \$ 2.7 million grant from the Kellogg Foundation. More than 40 state agencies and organizations participated in the project.

Last year, representatives at Washington-based Wider Opportunities for Women called Tolliver to participate.

Wider Opportunities for Women wants each U.S. state to participate within the next year as part of welfare reform legislation they hope Congress will pass. West Virginia is the 24th state to participate.

The report includes 70 family types, for example, two adults with infant, two adults with preschooler, two adults with school age child, two adults with teen-ager, etc.

The formula does not include entertainment, credit card bills or loans.

"There's no fluff at all in this process," Tolliver said.

In some other states, business groups have opposed the self-sufficiency report as another effort to raise the minimum wage.

Jennifer Brooks, director of self-sufficiency programs at Wider Opportunity for Women, said the report is not intended to be anti-business.

"Getting to the self-sufficiency wage does not fall on the shoulders of any one group. It's the joint responsibility of many groups," Brooks said.

"Clearly, we want employers to pay decent wages that have benefits and clear career paths, but it's also the responsibility of government to make sure that people have access to education and training, and individuals certainly have a responsibility to take advantage of the opportunities that are out there," Brooks said.

Steve White, director of the Affiliated Construction Trades Foundation, said the report is important for economic developers.

"We've been critical of past efforts where, yes, jobs were created, but they were minimum wage jobs and not jobs that could support a family," White said.

"The self-sufficiency standard gives us some honest data on what does it really take to support a family and therefore gives us some goals to aim for when we're trying to create jobs," White said.

Tolliver agreed. "You want to attract those kinds of industries that would offer a wage that would cover the cost of living, so that the families that live in that area can be self-sufficient without depending on subsidies," she said.

"Because that's the whole goal of economic development is to make West Virginia families self-sufficient."

For information on the report, call Tolliver at 558-0530.

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