

The Bradenton Herald (Florida)

Wages vs. survival: Manatee cost of living high

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Is anyone surprised to read that disadvantaged Manatee County families are not only struggling to survive, but are among the worst off in the state?

A statewide cost-of-living study released this week notes that a single parent with an infant would need to make \$16.19 an hour just to cover food, housing, transportation and other basic living expenses. The average pay for a child care worker here is \$8.57. Preschool teachers average \$11.27 per hour.

A single parent with three children fares far worse, needing to earn \$24.62 an hour to pay for basic needs.

Last we looked, Burgers 'R' Us was not paying that.

Is it any wonder some parents work two jobs?

The study - dubbed the "Blueprint for Prosperity: 2007 **Self-Sufficiency Standard**" - was funded by the Human Services Coalition, a nonprofit organization that supports a living wage. The organization argues that the **self-sufficiency standard** is a far better gauge of the cost of living than the poverty index, which dates back to the 1960s.

The coalition hopes the study will compel Florida's policymakers to press for a living-wage requirement. Among the group's recommendations are a higher minimum wage, increased funding for government support programs such as children's health insurance and child care and tax reform that benefits low- and middle-income families.

We believe that an increase in the minimum wage will only serve to drive up the cost of doing business and thereby cost people jobs

as employers cut back to offset the higher expenses.

We also think the coalition's report should serve as a reminder to people - especially young people - that they need to focus on their education in order to become more skilled and valuable to employers. We hope that younger people will learn to focus on economic stability before bringing children into this world.

The coalition's recommendations could not come at a worse time. The state's Republican leadership is grappling with shrinking revenues and budget cuts. They are also working on revamping the tax structure, be in slashing property taxes or doing away with sales-tax exemptions. Expanding programs and costs appears unlikely.

At some point, though, the state will need to address the problem of maintaining a labor pool. Otherwise, there will be nobody left to ask us: "Do you want fries with that?"

Talk back

Should the state Legislature raise the minimum wage and boost programs for struggling families? Share your views at bradenton.com/opinion.