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WORKING POOR SPEND LIVES JUST A STEP AHEAD OF DISASTER

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For the working poor, life on the economic edge means routine anxiety.

Every day begins with "crossed fingers and held breath, hoping the car will start," said Leah McCullough, a board member of Hopelink, an Eastside social service agency.

You hope your child's coughing doesn't mean he or she is ill, because you lack health insurance. Staying home to care for your child could cost you your job.

Those and other factors place low-income workers in a precarious place economically. Yet they are being overlooked in the growing gap between haves and have-nots, McCullough and other speakers said Friday in a panel discussion organized by the Workforce Development Council of Seattle-King County.

Federal poverty guidelines are outdated and inadequate, participants said to about 100 people who work at social service and employment agencies, community colleges and foundations. The event was held in the NewHolly community.

By definition, a family of four in the United States is considered impoverished if its household income is no more than \$20,650. But even a household earning \$36,051 - the median for a four-person family in Washington - likely would be struggling.

The topic can result in little interest to making changes among those with influence. When University of Washington professor Marcia Meyers was in Olympia recently to talk about the new West Coast Poverty Center that she directs, someone told her it should have a different name

because "no one wants to talk about poverty anymore."

What determines the poverty line is "very politicized," she said. "When you change the line, you change the story."

A better measure than federal guidelines is the "**Self-Sufficiency Standard**," said UW senior lecturer Diana Pearce, director of the Center for Women's Welfare.

The standard she devised considers not just food costs - the sole expense factor in federal poverty guidelines - but other household expenses. Her method also takes into account geographic location and a family's size and makeup.

By Pearce's calculations, one in five households in Washington do not earn enough to be self-sufficient. That's 2 1/2 times the amount of those who fall below the federal poverty line, she said.

Many workers with inadequate incomes aren't necessarily in the wrong profession but in the wrong position within that occupational category, Pearce said.

For instance, a manager at a convenience store could earn more income by getting a managerial position at a larger business.

The problem of the working poor could be addressed by raising wages, lowering the costs of child and health care and housing, and offering parents tax credits, Pearce said.

McCullough called for increased wages, job training and other support services.

Panelist Stephen Norman, executive director of the King County Housing Authority, recommended more federal investment in housing programs. Local rents are increasing 8.5 percent annually while salaries rise only 4.5 percent, he said.

Dave Sieminski, manager of United Way of King County's asset-development programs and another panelist, said that long term, the emphasis should change from "getting by" to "getting ahead." That comes through a progression of maximizing income, building savings, and gaining and expanding assets, he said.

ADDING IT UP

The Workforce Development Council of Seattle-King County invites citizens to view its panel discussion and weigh in on issues of the working poor at seattle.247townhall.org.

To use the Self-Sufficiency Calculator, go to www.thecalculator.org.

To read a Seattle P-I special report "Hard work, hard times" on the working poor, see goto.seattlepi.com/r1077.