

OPINION: Left out to dry; What would it take to really value working families?

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At a time when issues of morality and family values infuse so much of our public discourse, consider the morality of neglecting the needs of working families struggling to afford basic necessities like housing, utilities, healthcare and food. Pennsylvania's low-wage earners are working harder and longer, often holding down several jobs to make ends meet, and still just barely getting by.

In Pennsylvania, almost 20 percent of working families earn so little they have difficulty surviving financially, and one in nine jobs in the Commonwealth pay less than a poverty-level wage. The Commonwealth ranks 22nd in the size of income gap between the lowest-earning 20 percent of working families and the highest-earning 20 percent of working families, with households at the top earning 7.3 times more than those at the bottom.

This data is included in a national report released recently, "Working Hard, Falling Short: America's Working Families and the Pursuit of Economic Security," a product of the Working Poor Families Project, a national initiative supported by the Annie E. Case, Ford and Rockefeller foundations. The study provides a groundbreaking new look at the nation's low-income families and the policies of federal and state governments to help (or hinder) families in developing financial security.

The study confirms what too many families know by experience: Work alone -- even full-time work -- doesn't ensure a decent standard of living, especially in an economy characterized by slow wage growth and even declining wage-adjusted wages for many workers.

Valuing children and families is hollow rhetoric when we turn our backs on one-fifth or more of our families that can't make ends meet no matter how hard they try. A worker making \$5.15 an hour, 40 hours a week, for a full year grosses \$10,712. That's not enough to live on, in any part of the Commonwealth.

The Working Hard, Falling Short study focused

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on working families earning less than 200 percent of the federal poverty threshold, a level considered necessary to allow for a minimally decent standard of living in most parts of the country, including Pennsylvania. But this is a conservative measure -- families in some counties in the Commonwealth need substantially more than 200 percent of the poverty level to make ends meet. In Lehigh County, for example, it takes wages of \$41,906 annually for a family of four (with one infant and one pre-school child) to pay its basic expenses, according to the 2004 edition of the **Self-Sufficiency Standard for Pennsylvania** Sufficiency, a publication of PathWaysPA.

It takes governmental commitment to an array of federal, state and community strategies to address the inevitable hardships facing many working families. Pennsylvania's policies in some areas, including work supports such as child care subsidies for working families, are beginning to better address the needs of low-wage workers. But we have a long way to go.

The study found that Pennsylvania's investments in adult education and literacy ranks 24th among states, and less than two-thirds of unemployed adults who are eligible for job training actually receive it. The National Partnership for Women and Families recently gave Pennsylvania a grade of D for failing to ensure any sick leave benefits for private sector employees, meaning that too many working Pennsylvanians already struggling to make ends meet lose vital income when a child is sick.

And federal leadership and commitment is essential. Congress needs to increase the minimum wage and provide automatic increases pegged to the cost of living; maintain and expand the Earned Income Tax Credit, and give states and localities the resources to provide families the healthcare, childcare, and income supports they need to supplement their wages.

Then, when we talk about family values, we'll mean it.