

Sunday, September 30, 2001

Editorial: Self-sufficiency study has shocking numbers

Study reports on the living wage that Pennsylvania families need to earn to be self-sufficient. The findings show why so many families with decent incomes are struggling to get by.

As Allegheny County Council wrangles over whether to adopt a "living wage" resolution, a recently released report shows that the debate is largely meaningless. That's because chances are very good that whatever the final "living wage" number is, it won't come close to providing the income that families really need. The disparity between the official living wage and the real living wage - as with the official poverty level and the real poverty level - is all too clear in the wake of the "Pennsylvania Self-Sufficiency Standard, 2001" report that was released by the United Way of Pennsylvania and the Women's Association for Women's Alternatives last week. The standard is a precise measure of how much income it takes for working families to manage in today's economy, the sponsors say. The income figures for Allegheny and Beaver counties are soberingly high. In Beaver County, a family of four - two adults, one infant and one preschooler - needs an annual income of \$43,750. In Allegheny County, the same family would have to make \$48,324 to get by. To earn that kind of money, the Beaver County couple would have to work two jobs that paid \$10.36 an hour, while their Allegheny County counterparts would have to make \$11.44 an hour. Here are some other yearly self-sufficiency incomes from selected counties: Fayette, \$41,748; Lancaster, \$42,744; Philadelphia, \$46,668; Warren, \$38,090. These families aren't living in the lap of luxury. The study examined the actual costs associated with

daily life and employment in Pennsylvania based on geographic location and family type. It measured how much parents must earn working full-time to cover housing, childcare, transportation, food and other expenses if they do not receive any public or private subsidies. As the lead researcher for the project said, "The Self-Sufficiency Standard is a bare-bones, no-frills budget. For example, the food budget does not include any take-out or restaurant food, i.e., no pizza or Happy Meals." The study also shows how irrelevant the "official" poverty level numbers really are. For example, the official federal poverty level for a family with one adult and two children is \$14,630 a year. Yet the study found that this family of three would need an income of \$39,991 in Allegheny County and \$36,751 in Beaver County to be self-sufficient. In fact, it found a single person needs an income of \$16,850 in Allegheny County and \$15,474 in Beaver County just to get by. The findings are in line with other studies, including one done four years ago by the University of Pittsburgh. They go a long way in showing why so many families that have what appear to be decent incomes are struggling to stay afloat financially. When Congress was debating welfare reform, we argued that more attention should be paid to the needs of the working poor. The income levels for self-sufficiency show just how far we as a nation must travel to do so - and how many more families, many of them fiercely independent, hard-working and proud, are struggling to get by.