

BAY AREA

'A dire situation' for working poor 3 minimum-wage jobs required for family of 3 to live

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A single parent with two children living in the Bay Area would need to work at least three minimum wage jobs to care for their family's basic needs, while nationwide the cost of living for many is so high that government subsidies are essential for survival, according to a report released Thursday by a network of family advocacy groups.

The study, "Coming Up Short: A Comparison of Wages and Work Supports in 10 American Communities," was done by the Washington, D.C.-based group Wider Opportunities for Women. The Oakland-based National Economic Development and Law Center, which falls under the national group's umbrella, outlined conditions in the Bay Area at a San Francisco press conference.

The reports used the self-sufficiency standard -- a minimally adequate budget to cover food, lodging, child care and other basic necessities. Advocates say the self-sufficiency standard captures the high cost of living more effectively than the widely used federal poverty guidelines.

To meet basic needs according to the standard, a single parent with an infant and a preschooler needs to earn \$69,241 annually (\$32.78 hourly) in San Francisco, and \$56,932 annually (\$26.96 hourly) in Alameda County.

The federal poverty line for a family of three is \$15,260, and \$18,850 for a family of four. The guidelines are used to determine eligibility for programs such as Head Start, food stamps, National School Lunch and the Children's Health Insurance Program.

"In the Bay Area it's even a more dire situation," said center program specialist Debra Solomon. "The federal poverty line is almost meaningless here. "

Ellen Stroud, advocacy and education manager with the San Francisco Food Bank, agreed with the report's conclusions. The bank has 130 pantries throughout the city and distributed 20 million pounds of food last year.

"The majority of the people we see are the working poor, and they just cannot make ends meet," said Stroud.

Dru Howard, 41, of Berkeley, has an 11-year-old son and a 7-year-old daughter. She said she could not get by without the aid she receives from a child-care program and Section 8 housing.

Howard makes \$13.50 an hour as an organizer with a local nonprofit, she said. Her two-bedroom apartment costs \$1,500 a month, and she pays \$220 a month during the school year for her son's child care. Her daughter's child-care costs are fully subsidized.

"We haven't even talked about food and transportation" said Howard. "What if they have a growth spurt and need new clothes?"

The center said that in 2000, more than 75 percent of families earning under the self-sufficiency standard met their definition of working poor, where at least one adult was working 20 hours or more per week at least half the year.

The working poor tend to be concentrated in low-wage sectors such as the hotel and food service industries, health care and social assistance, advocates say.

In the Bay Area, there were more than 290,000 working poor households in 2000.

The separate national study looked at 10 different cities and counties located in

California (Yolo County), Florida, Louisiana, Massachusetts, Missouri, Montana, New York, Oklahoma, Pennsylvania and Tennessee.

A family would need an income of \$27,660 a year (\$13.10 an hour) to survive in the lowest-cost location, New Orleans. To make it in the study's highest-cost location, Boston, that same family would need to make \$59,544 a year (\$28.19 an hour).

Working full-time at \$12 an hour, along with a package of work supports such as child care, health care and food stamps, a family could meet 99 percent of its needs in the 10 communities.

Such publicly funded supports are increasingly becoming a necessity for low-wage workers. But uneven access to education and government support has left many families fighting to cover basic needs, the report said.

"Nowhere in the 10 communities is a minimum-wage job sufficient to make ends meet for our sample family, and on average only covers 34 percent of the basic costs of living," the report concludes. For more information on the Bay Area report go to: www.nedlc.org. For the national report go to www.wowonline.org.

CHART: HOW MUCH IS ENOUGH IN THE BAY AREA?

The 2003 California Self-Sufficiency Standard measures the true cost of working and raising children in California. It covers the very basic necessities of life, without extras such as savings or entertainment. The standard varies by county, family size and ages of children. Here are the yearly self-sufficiency wages for a single parent with an infant and a preschooler living in the following Bay Area counties:

- Santa Clara County, \$72,578
- San Francisco County, \$69,241
- Marin County, \$68,048
- San Mateo County, \$67,867
- Alameda County, \$56,932
- Napa County, \$55,413
- Contra Costa County, \$55,162
- Solano County, \$51,966
- Sonoma County, \$49,836

*The Federal Poverty Line for the same family is \$15,260..

Source: Californians for Family Economic Self-Sufficiency and the National Economic Development & Law Center