



Wider Opportunities for Women

More Than Numbers

How The Self-Sufficiency Standard Is Changing Communities

In 1996 in response to the devolution of power and resources on issues related to low-income families from the federal to the state and local level Wider Opportunities for Women launched the Family Economic Self-Sufficiency Project (FESS). With the FESS Project in place in states and counties throughout the country, WOW and its partners have been able to both define who needs help and emphasize the importance of wages, work supports, and building prosperity for America's families.

Since the inception of FESS, WOW has established statewide FESS coalitions in 35 states and the District of Columbia. Today, more than 2,000 local and state agencies and organizations belong to WOW's national FESS network. FESS partners include women's commissions, community action agencies, child advocates, job training programs, welfare rights groups, and state fiscal policy organizations. The common link among these groups is the use of a common framework—economic self-sufficiency—to design, implement, and advocate for programs and policies that move low-income families toward economic independence.

A cornerstone of the FESS project is the development of the state specific Self-Sufficiency Standard (the Standard), a tool that calculates how much income a working family needs to meet their basic expenses of housing, child care, food, health care, transportation and taxes, depending on where they live and who is in their family¹. This tool enables individuals, policymakers, advocates, business leaders and service providers to plan, not just how to move families out of poverty, but how to move them forward on a path to true economic independence.

WOW supports the lead state partner organizations in bringing together a diverse coalition of groups that reflect the issues and needs of their respective communities. In state legislatures around the country, the Standard has been used to preserve a range of programs including Medicaid, childcare, children's mental health services and an indexed minimum wage. WOW's combination of national and local experience provides valuable resources and organizing skills to its partners and fosters replication of innovative state-level policies and programs. WOW helps partners meet with their Congressional offices, participate in federal regulatory processes, locate information and resources to meet their local needs, and publicize their accomplishments to help shift the public policy debate at both the local and the national levels.

¹ The Standard was developed by Dr. Diana Pearce who was at that time Director of the Women and Poverty project at WOW. It was created as a geographically specific, family-type specific model. It is calculated for 70 different family types in each county in a given state.

WOW's Leadership for Family Economic Self-Sufficiency

WOW's Family Economic Self-Sufficiency project works at a national level to leverage the combined experience and effort of its 36 state organizing projects to effect national systemic change as well as inform and bolster the program and policy work of each of the state projects. Below are areas where WOW's work has made an impact and some examples of that impact.

Policy

- The concept of self-sufficiency as defined by the WOW Standard or a similar measure was included in the Senate reauthorization language of the main federal workforce and the final bill of vocational education legislation. Key provisions fully integrate the concept of self-sufficiency in the goals and outcomes that would result in more low income students and jobseekers having access to education and training than they would under a more narrow interpretation of federal law.
- More than one third of local workforce boards around the country use the Self-Sufficiency Standard or a similar measure to influence eligibility standards, direct training dollars and establish goals for local workforce boards.
- State Examples:
 - **Connecticut, West Virginia and Hawaii** adopted the Self-Sufficiency Standard in state legislation as the official measure of living costs.
 - **California, Massachusetts and Illinois** conducted analyses that showed how many families earn less than the benchmark established by the Self-Sufficiency Standard. The analysis was subsequently used to target education and training resources and supports to those who need them most.
 - **Pennsylvania - PathwaysPA**, as a part of the Philadelphia Raise the Minimum Wage Coalition, used the Self-Sufficiency Standard as support for the legislative proposal to raise Pennsylvania's minimum wage in two stages to \$7.15 an hour and guaranteeing an annual cost of living wage thereafter.
 - **California** - The California FESS Coalition, led by the **National Economic Development and Law Center** passed legislation for improving access to higher education for low-income individuals, foster care children, and those for who English is a second language utilizing the Self-Sufficiency Standard. The legislation also had intent language that included enabling students to reach self-sufficiency, building a Student Parent Scholar program in California, increasing access to higher education for foster care children and ensuring that programs operating with federal TANF funding promote education and training for jobs that pay self-sufficient wages.

Changing the Public Debate

- WOW coordinated numerous public messaging trainings in correlation with the releases of state-specific Self-Sufficiency Standards throughout the country. Utilizing the self-sufficiency standard in this manner resulted in a change in the public debate on social and economic policies from focusing on poverty to focusing on what it takes for families to make ends meet.
- More than 250 individuals were trained as spokespersons for the Self-Sufficiency Project including employers, opinion leaders, community based organizations, and government officials. These strategies have resulted in extensive press coverage, including news articles, editorials and/or op eds. in the New York Times, Washington Post, Boston Globe, Omaha World Herald, Tulsa World, Los Angeles Times, Nation and Center for American Progress magazines and hundreds of other publications.
- Through participation in national and state meetings WOW educated policy makers and community leaders on the goal of economic self-sufficiency. Meetings included the U.S. Conference of Mayors, The Workforce Alliance, the Coalition on Human Needs, the National Network of Sector Partners and the Working for America Institute, United Way of America, and Goodwill Industries International.
- State Examples:
 - **Alabama** – “Reducing Pay Bad Idea, Group Says” in The Decatur Daily stating that the advocacy group **Alabama ARISE** was fighting against the decrease in teacher salaries that were far from the Self-Sufficiency Standard for that specific county.



- **Wyoming** – “Wyoming Women Face Income Challenges, First Lady Says”, in The Gillette News Record covering the **Wyoming First Lady’s** speech about the pay gap for women and the opportunity that the Self-Sufficiency Standard gives the state to plan for better education and workforce systems in the state.

Program and Direct Service Successes

- The Self-Sufficiency Standard is being used in developing budget worksheets and calculators for use by individuals and their case workers to assess income needs relative to a family’s self-sufficiency, to develop short and long term career plans, to understand their eligibility for public work supports and the impact of wages on access to work supports. Calculators are in place in Seattle and other Washington State counties, New York City, the Bay Area of California, Illinois, and Pennsylvania. Case managers in welfare, workforce, and Head Start systems have been trained on the self-sufficiency Standard and how it is a useful tool in their work to move clients to economic independence.
- WOW developed and implemented a curriculum to train caseworkers in the Seattle-King County, Washington workforce system on how to conduct financial planning, career counseling, and goal-setting in a self-sufficiency context with their clients with the goal to adapt a similar approach for caseworkers in public and private agencies in the country.
- A two-year Workforce Development/Self-Sufficiency Initiative continues to improve the way workforce services are provided in California, Colorado, Connecticut, Washington, DC and Pennsylvania.
- To demonstrate the innovative practices of integrating of self-sufficiency into Workforce Investment Board functioning, WOW developed “Reality Check: A Promising Practices Guide for Workforce Boards”: <http://www.wowonline.org/wow>
- State Examples:
 - **Colorado** – Instructors at **Sterling Correctional Facilities** in Colorado use the Self-Sufficiency Standard in their Transitional Youth Services training and counseling with youth offenders regarding life skills and income needs after Corrections. This is a part of their mission to provide meaningful work and self-improvement opportunities to assist offenders with community reintegration.
 - **New York City** – The **New York Work Alliance** utilizes the Self-Sufficiency Standard in setting program goals and in setting long term goals for the workforce development program participants. The Alliance prepares people from diverse backgrounds for viable employment that increases individual opportunities for self-sufficiency and economic stability.

Strengthening State and Local Capacity

- “*Setting the Standard for American Working Families,*” is a report that summarizes the history, goals, and successes of the FESS Project, and shows how each state is using the Standard to change public opinion, program practices, organizing strategies, and public policy. More than 1000 policymakers, advocates and service providers nationwide received a copy of the report.
- WOW promotes the sharing of strategies among state partners that link national and local efforts, provide them with new tools, and promote. We do this through regular conference calls, weekly electronic updates, individual in person and telephonic technical assistance, convenings and special demonstration projects.
- WOW hosting a national Self-Sufficiency Summit in Washington, D.C. that brought together more than 100 FESS state partners, policymakers, national and state advocates and grant-makers to discuss strategies for improving the status of America’s working families.
- The release of “*Coming Up Short: A Comparison of Wages and Work Supports in 10 American Communities*” provides a national snapshot of how much low-income working families need to make ends meet, the adequacy of different wage levels, and the impact of work supports
- A National FESS Advisory Board advises WOW on the application of the Self-Sufficiency Standard and its collateral projects provide input into the future direction of the FESS Project. The Advisory Board includes over 30 organizations representing national networks of programs addressing issues from health care and low income housing to economic development.
- WOW supports the development and release of updated Self-Sufficiency Standards in the 36 States where initial Standards have been created.



Wages, Work Supports, and Building Prosperity

The following are selected examples of how WOW's 36 state FESS partners and their coalitions have used the State specific Self-Sufficiency Standard to improve both policies and programs for their communities.

Wages

Good wages and benefits are the most basic foundation of helping a family reach economic self-sufficiency. By setting public wage policy, encouraging corporate responsibility, union bargaining, and other strategies, FESS state partners are working to improve access to employment with good wages and benefits or low-wage jobs with clear opportunities to advance into jobs with self-sufficiency wages and benefits.

- **Minimum Wage**

- **Hawaii - the Hawaii Commission on the Status of Women** used the Hawaii Standard to advocate for legislation that would raise the state minimum wage. This bill raised the minimum wage to \$6.75 on January 1, 2006 and \$7.25 on January 1, 2007. Terry Lau, political director for the Hawai'i State AFL-CIO, highlighted the Self-Sufficiency Standard in his arguments for a minimum wage increase: "Today, he said, a family of four would have need a household income of at least \$43,000 to meet those needs. That amounts to about \$20.50 an hour in the case of a single wage earner. We're not even talking poverty wages at \$8 an hour."

- **Living Wage**

- **District of Columbia** - Georgetown University students utilized the help of **WOW** and Self-Sufficiency Standard in their successful campaign advocacy to improve wages for the low-paid, hard-working custodial, food service, and security workers who make their campus function. The current minimum will increase from \$11.33 to 13.00/per hour increase to \$14.00 by 2008, and will be adjusted annually after 2008 utilizing regional price index and labor market conditions.
- **Maryland** - the **Center for Poverty Solutions** and **Advocates for Children and Youth**, proposed state legislation that would require the Maryland Secretary of Budget and Management to consider a specified self-sufficiency standard when setting or amending a pay rate and require that a State employee whose pay rate is less than the self-sufficiency standard receive a specified pay increase.

- **Labor Unions**

- **California** - The **National Economic Development and Law Center** conducted a study of the adequacy of wages among service workers in the University of California (UC) system. At the request of AFSCME Local 3299, which represents service workers in the UC system—mostly immigrants and people of color who do the unglamorous but imperative work of keeping UC campuses and medical centers clean and functioning—NEDLC incorporated the CA Self Sufficiency Standard. The research gained local media attention in CA had a positive impact on contract bargaining.
- **Connecticut** - Thanks to the work of our Connecticut FESS partner, **the Connecticut Permanent Commission on the Status of Women**, when nursing home workers went on strike in 2001, the workers used the Standard to gain public support for their wage negotiations. Through wide media coverage they illustrated how the wages they were fighting for compared to the Standard.



- **Workforce Development**

- **Colorado - The Colorado Center on Law and Policy** successfully got the Eastern Region Workforce Board in Fort Morgan, Colorado to officially adopt the Standard. The Eastern Region Workforce Board, which serves a 10 county region, will use the Self-Sufficiency Standard to determine eligibility for intensive and training services.
- **Chicago - Women Employed** worked with the Chicago Workforce Board and then the state-wide Workforce Investment Board to developed goals to increase customers' ability to achieve self-sufficiency, including utilizing a self-sufficiency calculator based on the Standard,. One of the statewide workforce reporting benchmarks is the percentage of individuals and families at economic self sufficiency.

Work Supports

The Self-Sufficiency Standard calculates how much working adults need to meet their basic needs without subsidies of any kind. The reality for many workers is that they're earning far less than a self-sufficiency wage. It often takes multiple solutions to move families to economic self-sufficiency—wages, benefits, public work supports, opportunities for training and advancement, and a workforce ready to take advantage of employment and training opportunities. For too many working families, a job with good wages is hard to find, and public work supports are integral to helping them make ends meet. Without work supports workers would often have a difficult time retaining or advancing in their jobs.

- **Child Care**

- **Indiana** - The **Indiana Coalition on Housing and Homelessness Issues** has successfully advocated increasing funding for childcare programs that help working families obtain economic self-sufficiency using public benefits. From the modeling of the childcare costs, the coalition demonstrated the childcare policies at work for lawmakers.
- **Louisiana** - Child advocates in Louisiana, including our state partner, **Agenda for Children**, used the Self Sufficiency STandard to advocate a change in legislation where the child care tax credit 2002 implementation left out the very families in most need of child care assistance.

- **Housing**

- **Colorado** - The **Colorado Center on Law and Policy** used the Colorado Standard to determine the impact of affordable housing on family stability and upward mobility. The Colorado Division of Housing draws on the Colorado Standard in its statewide report "Housing Colorado: The Challenge for a Growing State".

- **Health Care**

- **Washington** - The **Washington Association of Churches** used the Washington Standard in its analysis of and discussions with state lawmakers about a detrimental state waiver proposal that would allow modification of Medicaid programs and restrict Medicaid eligibility.
- **Massachusetts - The Women's Union** in Massachusetts developed a statewide Health Economic Self-Sufficiency Standard. Taking the concept of self-sufficiency, the HESS highlights the high cost of health care, the impact of health policies, and the ways different population groups experience these. It can be used as a tool for formulating health policies that ease the burden of health care costs, ensure greater equity in health insurance, and address disparities in the availability of care.



- **Food**
 - **Dade County** -The **Human Services Coalition of Dade County** has worked with businesses, state agencies, and policy-makers involved in the self-sufficiency debate to encourage them to do their part to ensure that food stamps benefits reach as many low-income Floridians as possible.
- **Unemployment Insurance**
 - **Georgia**- the **Women's Policy Group** used the Georgia Standard to demonstrate the need for unemployment insurance reforms to benefit low-wage, part-time working women through research, public education, coalition-building.
- **Transportation**
 - **Alabama - Alabama Arise** uses the cost estimates in the Alabama Standard to advocate for access to public transportation for low-income people. In Alabama, the lack of public transportation is cited as one of the most important barriers facing its low-income residents.
- **Welfare**
 - **Nevada** - The **Progressive Leadership Alliance of Nevada** worked with the Director of Human Resources & Welfare for Nevada to incorporate the Nevada Self-Sufficiency Standard into its needs projections. Additionally, the Director of Welfare has indicated the Standard in his recommendations around caseloads.

Building Prosperity

The Self-Sufficiency Standard is often the key in developing longer-term strategies for moving communities and individuals towards economic self-sufficiency. FESS partners have developed asset development strategies, advocated for change in tax policy, and redirected public investment to employers offering jobs with better wages and benefits.

- **Tax Reform**
 - **Maryland - The Center for Poverty Solutions** in Maryland advocated for the Baltimore Working Families Tax Credit. This city-based policy proposal was possible due to the localized data that the Standard provided as supportive evidence.
 - **Kentucky - Kentucky Youth Advocates** and their coalition partners successfully advocated for the need of a progressive state tax system that provides justice for its low-income women and families. The tax plan exempts people making less than the federal poverty level from paying individual tax and links that exemption to the federal poverty line for future years.
- **Responsible Economic Development**
 - **Nebraska - Nebraska Appleseed** developed a set of job quality standards that corporations should follow prior to receiving public funds. These job quality standards represent a pro-active way of holding corporations accountable for the public subsidies they receive.
- **Financial Lending**
 - **Oklahoma** - The **Community Action Project of Tulsa County**, as a member of the Oklahoma Coalition of Consumer Advocates, advocated for legislation to protect low-income families from predatory lending practices.



- **Individual Development Accounts (IDAs)**
 - **Pennsylvania - PathWays PA** is using the Standard data in its efforts to expand access to individual development accounts (IDAs) for low-income residents of Pennsylvania. IDAs are matched savings accounts, usually tied to financial literacy training and commitments to invest saved assets in education, home-buying, etc.
- **Micro-enterprise Development**
 - **Delaware** - The **Metropolitan Wilmington Urban League** advocated for minority-owned businesses to increase employees' income levels so individuals and families will be self-sufficient. A key component of the Initiative will be to partner with economic development organizations, the City of Wilmington, New Castle County, State of Delaware and others to encourage minority entrepreneurship and job development in historically neglected and economically underserved urban areas in Wilmington and throughout New Castle County.
- **Sectoral Employment Intervention**
 - **Washington D.C. -Wider Opportunities for Women's D.C. Metro Area Program** assisted the public workforce board in securing federal funds to plan a sectoral initiative. The DC Standard was used to identify industry sectors with careers paths that could lead to economic self-sufficiency.
 - **Massachusetts** - Continuing their state coalition work with the Massachusetts Standard and workforce development, **The Women's Union** utilized the Standard to demonstrate high-demand jobs, many non-traditional jobs for women that meet or exceed the Standard. This report is intended to offer government and non-profit entities current information about jobs that are good paying and provide career pathways.

