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Study: Low-wage jobs won't support family

By GINNIE GRAHAM World Staff Writer
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Working full time is not enough to make ends meet, but social services provide a much-needed bridge to self-sufficiency, according to a national report released this week.

The Wider Opportunities for Women organization used self-sufficiency standards in 10 communities across the nation to determine whether wages and cost of living allowed families to be financially independent.

Oklahoma County was among the communities included in the study.

Maureen Golga, director of the organization's family economic self-sufficiency project, said the study found that in all parts of the country, low-wage jobs are not enough to support a family.

"It might sound surprising, but the study found that not even a \$10-an-hour job meets the self-sufficiency of our families," Golga said. "And, on average, families earning \$12 an hour meet only about 72 percent of basic needs."

In Oklahoma County, the self-sufficiency level for a parent with an infant and a preschool child is \$17.38 an hour, or \$36,697 a year.

A minimum-wage income would cover about 34 percent of basic expenses. At \$10 an hour, about 63 percent of living costs would be covered, and 74 percent of costs would be paid at \$12 an hour, the study shows.

Self-sufficiency standards are determined on a no-frills budget and assume that the employer provides health insurance and that no family member has special needs.

Also, the standards assume no outstanding debt or one-time payments, such as a car.

David Blatt, director of public policy for the Community Action Project of Tulsa County, said child-care costs and housing are a little higher in Oklahoma City than in Tulsa, so the self-sufficiency standard would be a little lower here.

"It would be slightly different, but there are far more similarities than differences," Blatt said. "The basic story would be the same."

"Somebody on minimum wage or moving off welfare to work (is) going to fall way below the standard in most cases. And work supports will partially fill the gap for workers earning under \$12 an hour."

Many families eligible for certain social services do not participate because they are not aware of availability or do not want to go through the process.

Blatt said an Internet-based system developed by the Community Action Project will make it easier for families to know and apply for services.

The Benefits Eligibility System for Oklahomans, which will be expanded in the next year, locates and

determines benefits for families, who can apply online for certain services.

"We think it will cut down on barriers families face in becoming eligible for work supports that make a huge difference between going without and getting vital services they need," Blatt said.

The study's recommendations include using the self-sufficiency measure in determining policies and programs that affect working families; increasing the federal minimum wage; expanding education and job training programs; and creating incentives for states to create programs that move families toward self-sufficiency.

Other locations included in the study are Yolo County, Calif.; Miami-Dade County, Fla.; Orleans Parish, La.; Boston; St. Louis; Yellowstone County, Mont.; Bronx borough in New York City; Philadelphia County, Pa.; and Davidson County, Tenn.

The locations were chosen for diversity in population, size and geography.

Jane Oates, senior education adviser to Sen. Edward Kennedy, D-Mass., said the recommendations point to the need to get some employees earning enough to support a family.

"It is a wake-up call to policymakers on the Hill to stop deluding ourselves that minimum wage is enough for a family to survive," Oates said.

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