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The cost of being self-sufficient continues to rise throughout Washington

It's getting more expensive for families to just get by in Washington.

A single parent with one preschooler and one school-age child living in Seattle needs an annual income of \$50,268 just to meet the family's most basic requirements, according to the Self-Sufficiency Standard for Washington 2009 report released today. A similar family living in Spokane County would need \$38,562. The standard for Seattle jumped 35 percent since 2001 and the increase for Spokane in the same period rose by 28 percent.

East King County has the highest self-sufficiency standard in the state, requiring \$57,766 (up 32 percent) for the same size family, while Wahkiakum County has the lowest standard, \$29,324 (up 14 percent).

The report was written by Diana Pearce, director of the Center for Women's Welfare at the University of Washington's School of Social Work. It was prepared for the Workforce Development Council of Seattle-King County, and in partnership with the national organization Wider Opportunities for Women.

The self-sufficiency report charts the actual cost of living and working in each of Washington's 39 counties. Several counties – Benton, King, Kitsap, Pierce and Snohomish – have been split into separate urban areas from suburbs and rural areas. The report measures how much a family must earn to pay for housing, food, child care, health care, transportation, taxes and other basic necessities without public assistance or help from family and friends. Costs are based on the age and number of children and adults in each household and where the family lives. In addition, the report estimates the impact of work supports from employers and governmental agencies on families' efforts to achieve adequate income.

“Unfortunately, many families do not earn self-sufficiency wages, particularly if a parent recently entered the workforce,” said Pearce. “They cannot afford their house, food and child care, much less their other basic needs, forcing them to make painful choices between

necessities, or accept substandard or inadequate child care, insufficient food or substandard housing. These standards are barebones budgets. There is nothing in them for emergencies. And there is no money for such things as entertainment or a pizza.

“For many, help like child care assistance or Apple Health for kids is crucial to making it for low income working families,” she said.

“Our board adopted the self-sufficiency standard in 2001 as the measure of success we would use in our programs for low-income jobseekers,” said Marléna Sessions, chief executive officer of the Workforce Development Council of Seattle-King County. The council used the self-sufficiency standard data to create an online tool called the Self-Sufficiency Calculator (www.thecalculator.org).

“We developed the calculator so that the self-sufficiency standard could be instantly accessible to everyone. We use it with our jobseeker customers not only in career planning and to help them access work supports, but also to track our success in moving people further towards self-sufficiency, instead of just measuring whether or not they get a job.”

Pearce noted that costs have increased significantly throughout the state since the self-sufficiency standard was first calculated in 2001 and recalculated in 2006. In that time the standard jumped 38 percent from \$34,762 to \$47,965 in the Tacoma metropolitan area of Pierce County. Seattle (King County) increased 35 percent, Clark County shot up 25 percent and Kennewick-Richland (Benton County) rose 14 percent.

“These increases are not just ‘inflation,’” she said. “If we had just updated the cost for inflation using the Consumer Price Index, we would underestimate the increase in cost for Seattle by \$6,000 and for Benton County by \$1,200.

“The most significant finding of the study is that costs have continued to rise even as wages have stagnated. A lot of people are working hard but not making a living wage. “The minimum wage in Washington (\$8.55 an hour) is the highest in the nation but it only covers about 40 percent of what a family of an adult with a preschooler and a second child in elementary school needs.”

She noted that among Washington’s 10 largest occupations in terms of the number of people employed, only one – registered nurses – had an annual median income that provided a wage that met or exceeded the self-sufficiency standard.

Pearce, who created the self-sufficiency standard which is now used in 37 states and the cities of New York and Washington, D.C., noted that it differs from the federal poverty level in a

number of ways. The federal poverty level was designed more than 40 years ago to measure poverty and is now outdated and inadequate, she said.

One of the biggest differences between the two is that the self-sufficiency standard varies geographically. The federal poverty level is the same everywhere in the United States, except for Alaska and Hawaii. Thus the poverty level would be the same for a family living in New York City and one in Yakima. The self-sufficiency standard varies not only state by state but also county by county, reflecting the actual minimal cost of living. Also unlike the federal poverty measure, it incorporates the real costs of working families, such as child care, taxes and transportation.

To put the self-sufficiency standards for Washington's two largest cities, Seattle and Spokane, into perspective, the report compares them to eight other American cities. Boston (\$60,898) and San Francisco (\$56,970) have higher annual costs than Seattle. Seattle, however, has a higher self-sufficiency standard than Philadelphia, Cleveland, Denver, Atlanta and Sacramento, Calif. Spokane is ninth on the list, with its standard higher than Portland, Ore.

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The complete report is available at:

<http://www.selfsufficiencystandard.org/docs/Washington2009.pdf>

The self-sufficiency calculator is available at: www.thecalculator.org