

Report: 'Realistic' poverty threshold higher than federal

By Jennifer Huberdeau, North Adams Transcript

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NORTH ADAMS — State Rep. Daniel E. Bosley, D-North Adams, has filed legislation to replace federal poverty-level standards with a "self-sufficiency guideline" — an attempt to help the working poor maintain vital services as they move toward independence.

This is the 13th year he's filed the bill — the measure keeps getting killed.

"The problem is, people are suspicious that some group is going to come along and say that the minimum wage should be \$20," Bosley said Monday morning during an interview at the Transcript. "That's not realistic, but it seems (the bill) would help the social service programs more. What's happening more and more is we have these people who raise themselves above the poverty level and find themselves ineligible for services. They're still poor and find themselves trapped in this limbo. We're left with this question of what to do with this growing group of people."

He added, "Saying people are above the poverty level is a misnomer — they might be above the standard, but they're still impoverished. The poverty level is not realistic for today's society."

State programs are based on the federal poverty guidelines,

which are released annually. For 2007, a family of three making \$17,170 per year is above the poverty line (though they may still qualify for assistance.)

But a recent self-sufficiency study, released by the Crittenton Women's Union in Boston earlier this month, says a single parent in North Adams with a school-age child and a preschooler needs to make \$20.94 an hour to survive without any assistance — public or private. That's \$44,229 per year. The current state minimum wage is \$7.50 an hour, or \$15,600 per year, a third of what is needed.

The study says a single person living in the city alone needs to make \$8.95 an hour, while a single parent with a school-age child needs an hourly wage of \$17.59. A family of four — two adults, a school-age child and a preschooler — needs both parents making at least \$12.14 an hour each, according to the study.

"Over the last three years, the numbers have gone up quite a bit," said Elisabeth D. Babcock, president and chief executive officer of Crittenton Women's Union. "A single parent and two young children needed almost \$35,000 a year to survive in 2003; that's gone up 21 percent, to over \$44,000 a year. The thing that's driving up the cost of living for these people is child care."

The study says the monthly cost of health care has jumped to \$321 from \$209, while child-care costs have risen to \$1,207 from \$942 since 2003.

"It's just a shock to me," Babcock said. "Child care is the fastest growing cost in the state. It's really unfortunate that young families are being faced with this extra burden that is a very substantial cost. The cost of day care for a preschooler is about \$810 a month, while the cost of after-school care is about another \$1,200. In a majority of the state, child-care costs are equal to housing costs, but in your part of the state, child care is much higher."

Alan Bashevkin, director of the Northern Berkshire Community Coalition, said the figures aren't meant to scare people but to give policy-makers and state legislators a more realistic view of what the average person is facing.

"Families and individuals are reaching certain levels and end up losing their state aid," he said. "They lose their child care or housing vouchers and find themselves not able to make ends meet. They go into debt and do what they can. We want to lift people out of poverty and want to help them stop living month to month. We want them to have the ability to put money away."

» Making a home

For the average family of four in North Adams to be self-sufficient, the costs would be:

- Housing \$636
- Child care \$1,207
- Food \$768
- Transportation \$476
- Health care \$366
- Miscellaneous \$345

— *Provided by the Crittendon Women's Union*

Some of the solutions touted by the Women's Union include the release of more child care and housing vouchers by the state and an increase in education, such as offering two-year training programs at vocational institutions.

But Linda, whose last name is being withheld for privacy, a 67-year-old city woman who lives on a limited Social Security check and receives a rent subsidy, said vouchers designed to slowly wean people off assistance are part of the problem. A rise in wages means a cut in assistance — a cut most working poor can't afford, she said.

"It's hard. My Social Security went up because of a monthly cost of living increase — my rent went up the same amount," she said. "Sometimes you're robbing Peter to pay Paul. Sometimes I see something in a store that I'd like to buy for my grandson and I just can't afford it. Most times, you make half a payment or go without something because you need to pay your bills."

She added, "I get \$23 a month in food stamps. I'm a family of one, so it isn't much. But, when you think about it, today, that's a couple gallons of milk, some bread and a couple other things. I remember a few years ago, my daughter and her husband applied for assistance and over-qualified by \$1.70. Both of them were out there working, trying to make ends meet, and they couldn't get any help for their family. I can see why some of these young girls with babies would rather stay on the system than go out there and bust their butts making minimum wage."

Andrea, a single mother of three in North Adams, said her plan of earning a dual degree in psychology and sociology two years ago hasn't helped move her family out of poverty.

"You can give people education, but you need to not only have jobs available, but you need to have employers willing to hire these people," she said. "I earned a dual degree in 2004. When I applied for jobs, they weren't looking at my education; they were asking why I didn't have any experience in the field and why there were gaps in my employment. It was a nightmare."

Now working part time as a personal-care attendant, Andrea said her small salary has affected her monthly benefits, making it harder for her to support her children, ages 9, 12 and 16.

"I was naive to think college was going to just open doors for me," she said. "I had all these hopes. I thought, now I'll be able to pay for my children to go to college, and I'll be able to get the house I've always wanted. I have a four-year degree, and I'm still living in poverty and still using social services. I'm making less money now than if I had stayed home and did nothing."

Bosley said the solution is more complicated than education and additional vouchers — but it's a starting point.

"One of the major problems is that we don't treat people holistically," he said. "When we bring people into the human resources agencies, we don't put together a plan to help them out of poverty. We need to bring in jobs that pay well, but we need to have an educated work force to bring those jobs in. That's why we keep pounding at this idea of a science building at (Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts) because it will help attract those biotechnology jobs."

He added that while a self-sufficiency standard isn't designed to drive up the minimum wage, it will give state agencies a more realistic figure to work with and should help eliminate the growing number of impoverished families who aren't eligible for assistance.

"We need to create a plan to help these people out," Bosley said. "A self-sufficiency standard only means that a mother of two needs to make a certain amount of money to be self-sufficient. We need to give her the tools to find a way to get there."