

Struggling to pay for basics

Necessities out of reach for low-income families

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How do you survive on half the income you once earned? For Karen Bengé of Ontario, it's all about eliminating small expenses.

Instead of buying soda, Bengé makes lemonade from the fruit growing in her backyard. She also cashes in her recyclables instead of "giving it to the trash man."

A report "Making Ends Meet" by the California Budget Project released last week highlights challenges families face in meeting basic living expenses such as rent, food, child care and transportation.

It also calls for policymakers embroiled in budget debate to support public benefit programs that help working families.

More often than not, Bengé, a chemical soap saleswoman who only a few years ago was making \$70,000 a year, is forced to hit up local food banks to get her through the end of the month.

"I come here when I absolutely have to," Bengé said while picking up canned goods from Inland Valley Hope Partners in Ontario. "This way I only have to buy milk and tea. When I can't afford that, I will be at the end of my rope."

According to the study, an hourly wage families need to earn to sustain "a modest standard of living" is three times the state's minimum wage.

A single parent living in San Bernardino County needs to earn at least \$28 per hour to support a modest standard of living - \$31 in Los Angeles County.

"Really?" asked Latesha Everard of Bloomington, a welder and a mom to a 5-year-old Iyalonie. "Where am I going to find a job like that? Not even union pays that much."

Everard has been looking for a job for the past two months without much success. Lately, she was forced to sleep in her car.

"Minimum wage is \$7.50 and they expect us to make it," she said. "I understand the economy is bad, but it's way harder out here in California. Not even Wal-Mart is hiring right now. You leave this state and it's much better. I moved to Idaho and I found a job in two weeks."

The CBP estimated that a basic family budget included necessities such as child care, food, transportation, housing and health care.

It also assumed that families were renters instead of owning their home, and that health coverage was purchased privately with no assistance from an employer.

The estimates did not include savings for retirement or college tuition.

In families where both parents work, each has to rake in \$18 per hour or \$75,000 per year.

Families where just one parent has a job are able to make do with less per year - \$54,000 - but that meant one parent has to earn at least \$25 per hour.

Vivian Saucedo, a mother of four, never had a job that paid more than \$10 per hour. A recent split with her spouse meant she will have to rely on food stamps to feed her children.

Like Bengé, she came to Inland Valley Hope Partners to pick up cereal and canned vegetables.

"Mommy, are we buying food?" asked her 4-year-old daughter Frankie as a volunteer handed them a grocery bag with baby wipes for her younger brother. "I love food."

CBP acknowledged that many Californians support their families on less than the standards estimated in the report - they either get health coverage from their employer or leave their children with a family member while they work.

Others like Saucedo rely on public programs such as state-subsidized child care or Medi-Cal in order to make ends meet.

"Our report strives to paint an accurate picture of what it costs for working families to pay the bills," said Jean Ross, an executive director of the CBP. "We found that making ends meet remains out of reach for millions of Californians. As state policymakers craft a spending plan this summer, it's important that they support the public systems and structures that working families rely on."

Assembly Democrats have proposed plugging the \$19.1 billion deficit by imposing a tax on oil production, eliminating planned corporate tax breaks and borrowing from the state's recycling program.

Senate Democrats want to raise taxes on vehicles, alcohol, corporations and income.

Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger is calling for eliminating CalWorks, the state's welfare program, and cutting millions from Medi-Cal; the state's In-Home Supportive Services program for the elderly and disabled; and Healthy Families, the state's children's health insurance program.

Republicans are largely backing the governor's proposal.

"Politicians need to step out of their box and see what they are doing to us," Everard said. "These are hard times and people need to stick together instead of fighting against each other."

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