



September 22, 2009

Living costs are up for residents of county area

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The cost of being self-sufficient in Madison County can range anywhere from almost \$21,000 to more than \$47,000, depending on the size of the family, a new study reports.

Recently released by the Mississippi Economic Policy Center, the "Self Sufficiency Standard for Mississippi 2009" evaluates "the true cost of living" in each of the 82 counties without public or private assistance. Madison County is not the county with the highest standard but it does fall within the top 10 most expensive counties.

"It measures how to meet needs at minimally adequate levels," said the author of the study, Diana Pearce of the University of Washington School of Social Work.

Meeting the basic necessities in Madison County of housing, child care, food, transportation, health care, taxes and other miscellaneous costs of daily living means a single adult needs to earn \$20,884 a year while a family of four, two adults with a preschooler and one in school, need \$41,612 annually. For the single adult, that means earning an hourly wage of \$9.89 while each adult in the family of four would need to earn \$9.85.

The study shows the highest cost of living here - \$47,212 - belongs to an adult with an infant, preschooler and a schoolage child. That adult would need a job paying \$22.35 an hour to earn that much.

"This is what it really costs to pay the bills," said Donna Addkison, family economic self sufficiency project director, Wider Opportunities for Women, who participated in last week's report release. "It's a dollars and sense approach to meeting needs."

The aim of the report, based on the most recent data available, includes recommendations for closing the income gap so working people can afford basic necessities.

Hearing the numbers for Madison County, Pat Bruce, who has worked with those living in poverty, said the cost of living appears high even for those not on any type of assistance.

"At these standards, some of the women I work with will never be self sufficient," said Bruce, who runs Pat Bruce Ministries that encourages women to improve their education to take care of their families. Also for several years, Bruce worked with Madison Countians Allied Against Poverty, getting to know hundreds of families across the county in need.

"If any of my ladies had this type of money, they would be rich," she said. "I have families I work with living on \$700 or so a month."

In the study, the most startling fact, Pearce said, is how much costs have increased since she did a similar self-sufficiency report in 2003. While the costs of living have risen 20 to 30 percent, people's wages have not gone up at the same rate, if at all, she said. "We're seeing that people are experiencing a cost squeeze."

The report shows in Madison County that the self-sufficiency wages for different types of families are :

- \$32,188 for an adult with a preschooler in 2009, up from \$22,604 in 2003.
- \$39,472 for an adult with an infant and a preschooler this year, up from \$22,434 in 2003.
- \$34,588 for an adult with a preschooler and a schoolage child this year, up from \$28,219 in 2003.
- \$28,551 for an adult with a school age child and a teenager in 2009, up from \$20,957 in 2003.
- \$47,212 for adult with infant, preschooler and schoolage in 2009, up from \$36,669 in 2003.
- \$45,958 for two adults with infant and preschooler in 2009, up from \$38,421 in 2003.
- \$41,612 for two adults with a preschooler and a schoolage in 2009, up from \$36,782 in 2003.

In adjoining counties, the report shows that for single parent with three kids - the highest figure in Madison County - the self-sufficiency wage is \$34,462 in Yazoo County, \$46,753 in Rankin County, \$34,677 in Holmes County and \$43,956 in Hinds County.

For the family group with the lowest self-sufficiency wage of \$28,551 in Madison County, neighboring counties have lesser needs: \$21,409 in Yazoo County, \$28,060 in Rankin County, \$21,423 in Holmes County and \$25,725 in Hinds County.

Each county's data and an online calculator for families to check if they are making a self-sufficient wage are available at: www.mepconline.org/self-sufficiency-standard.
