

Low-income, working families struggling in the Bay

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SAN FRANCISCO -

The high cost of living in the Bay Area is not news, but for families laboring full time at minimum wage, it belies the belief that work leads to self-sufficiency.

A family of four in the Bay Area, for example, would need to make between \$55,740 and \$79,944 — depending on whether one or both parents worked — in order to stay financially afloat, according to a 2005 study done by the California Budget Project, which created regional estimates of what it considered to be basic living costs.

“People used to assume if you were poor, it’s because you didn’t work,” said Jean Ross, the executive director of the nonprofit policy group. “A large number of Californians are at or near poverty standard, despite the fact that they derive most of their income from work.”

Even at San Francisco’s higher minimum wage of \$9.14 per hour, two working parents would make less than \$3,000 per month, and they spend at least one-third of that on the median monthly rent in The City.

With a family, child care costs can strain the budget. However, it could reduce income if it were cheaper for the family to keep one parent at home to take care of the kids. Health insurance — often provided by an employer to workers with higher-salaried positions — is often not afforded to most minimum-wage workers, who then add the cost to their monthly budget, or do without.

Adding to the burden, transportation costs — from the daily mass-transit fees or the higher-priced insurance premium that drivers pay when they live in poor, urban neighborhoods — limit families’ mobility and opportunity.

In San Francisco and San Mateo County, there are local efforts to mitigate these financial weights: subsidized work-force training; free preschool programs; universal health care programs that are just now being enacted; and, in San Francisco, a local earned-income tax credit and rent control, among other initiatives.

Currently, San Francisco is facing legal challenges to its universal health care program. Outreach for other programs often falls short — preschool spots in The City remained open weeks before school started.

And the largest challenge to low-income working families is when their income exceeds levels of participation in programs that help keep them afloat.

Parents interviewed by The Examiner say they persevere — if not for their own dreams, then in the hope of a better life for their children.

Despite their best effort, parents' hardship is often passed on to their offspring. According to a study by the nonprofit family-advocacy group Children Now, San Francisco kids in two-parent households living on less than \$41,000 a year have an 86 percent chance of being in good or excellent health, compared with the 96 percent chance children from families making more than \$60,000 a year have. The former are also less likely to be enrolled in preschool, and fare worse on standardized tests than their more affluent peers.

"Education, work-force opportunities — all the way up, it moves up with the income level," said Carole Watson, the chief community investment officer for the United Way Bay Area.

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