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Report: Lee County families struggle more than estimated

by Carlie Kollath/NEMS Daily Journal

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TUPELO - About one out of four Lee County households don't make enough money to meet its basic needs, according to a new report from a research group.

In Lafayette County, the number is even higher, the report said, with one in three households lacking enough income to cover basic needs.

Statewide, nearly one-third of non-elderly households struggle to cover their basic needs, according to the "Building Economic Stability for Mississippi Families" report released Thursday by the Insight Center for Community Economic Development.

These are the families that are living paycheck to paycheck, said Susan Smith, director of Californians for Family Economic Security.

The report states the center's case for using a self-sufficiency standard instead of the federal poverty threshold to determine the financial health of working families. Lee and Lafayette were the only Northeast Mississippi counties covered in the study.

According to the report, a Lee County family with two adults and one infant needs \$30,947 a year to cover its basic needs and to be self-sufficient. Yet, the federal guidelines say the same family requires \$18,310 a year.

The center attributed the difference to the federal guidelines including a bare-bones food budget and ignoring differences in local costs of living. The self-sufficiency standard takes into account rent, food, child care, health care, transportation and state and federal taxes.

"As a result, these federal measures drastically underestimate how many people are struggling in today's economy and how much money they need to be economically self-sufficient," the report said.

The report said 26.9 percent of Lee County households, or 5,280, do not have enough income to meet their most basic needs, as measured by the self-sufficiency standard.

The figures are much larger than the federal estimate, which says 13.5 percent of Lee County households, or 2,644, are considered "poor."

In Lafayette County, the same family needs \$33,759 a year to be self-sufficient, while federal guidelines put the figure at \$18,310 annually.

Almost 34 percent, or 3,485 households, in Lafayette County don't make enough money to be self-sufficient, the report said. But federal guidelines consider 21 percent, or 2,160 households, in Lee County to below the poverty threshold.

The report proposes several solutions, including promoting education and cultivating interest in jobs that provide a wage that provides enough income to enable a family to be self-sufficient.

"Mississippi's greatest asset is its residents," the report said. "When nearly one in three Mississippi households cannot cover the costs of their basic needs, the entire state suffers ... By investing in its people, Mississippi stands to position itself to prosper in the global economy."

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