



Denver Post editorial touts new study from the Colorado Fiscal Policy Institute
“Between a rock and welfare”
May 17, 2007

It doesn't fit the image of Colorado most of us hold, but one in five households in our state doesn't make enough to cover basic expenses, according to a new study by the Colorado Fiscal Policy Institute.

In round numbers, that is about 247,000 households, which translates into at least twice that many people. Even the researchers were surprised.

These people aren't the very poor who qualify for government programs. These are the so-called working poor, those "in-between" people who have jobs and families but who struggle to pay rent or a mortgage and to put food on the table. They earn too much to be considered poor by outdated federal poverty standards.

"These are families whose income is inadequate to meet a bare-bones budget," said Diana Pearce, a University of Washington professor who did the research.

The study argues for more government assistance to the working poor, concentrated in the Denver metro area and in southern Colorado. The study recommends realistic goals, such as raising the gross income limit for food stamps; expanding eligibility for children's health care and child care; issuing vouchers to cover transportation and housing costs; and increasing college financial aid.

Last week's study was followed by a report on the state's children showing Colorado exceeds the national rate of uninsured children (14 percent versus 12 percent nationally), and it is behind in the rate of mothers getting prenatal care in the first trimester of pregnancy (79 percent versus 84 percent nationally).

Society often ignores the working poor. We forget about those who were laid off in the 2001-03 recession and have yet to find jobs with comparable wages, or the single moms who want to work full-time but don't because they can't afford day care, or those burdened with heavy medical bills or housing costs and have nowhere to turn.

We supported the federal increase in the minimum wage to help the working poor. We support state efforts to develop a comprehensive plan for health care reform. (Close to 800,000 Coloradans don't have health insurance, including 180,000 children).

But other steps need to be taken as well, and the report's recommendations about updating aid programs deserve careful consideration by policymakers.

Such assistance isn't the only answer, of course. Business leaders, economic development experts and educators need to pay close attention to the struggles of the working poor. The creation of well-paying jobs and properly educating people to fill them are vital to easing the conditions that have created the working poor.
