

The Spokesman Review

For many, the existing wage isn't a living one

By Paula Davenport Staff Writer

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Study shows large job gap in Northwest

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A husband and father of three, David Meyersberg makes \$9 an hour working full-time at a Spokane call center. His wife had been working two jobs until recently, when she opened her own cleaning service.

Despite all the hours they spend on the job, they're hard-pressed to make ends meet, said Meyersberg, 56, who holds a bachelor's degree in business administration and an associate's degree from a culinary school.

Meyersberg is not alone. A report released Tuesday shows tens of thousands of people in Washington and Idaho stretched just as thin because they don't earn a living wage.

The report, "Searching for Work that Pays: 2007 Northwest Job Gap Study," shows only 23 percent of job openings in Washington pay enough to support a family of three, composed of one adult and two children. And for each of those openings, there are nine applicants.

In Idaho, it's even worse. Only 13 percent of jobs available there pay enough to support that same family of three. Competition's tougher, too. For each opening, 14 people are standing in line.

The information comes from the federal Bureau of Labor Statistics and the Employment and Training Administration. The March 2005 Current Population Survey, completed by two federal agencies, was used to calculate the number of job seekers.

Joshua Welter, director of Washington Community Action Network, helped author the 2007 study. Its release Tuesday coincided with a hearing in Olympia on whether Washington should require companies awarded state contracts to pay living wages.

A living wage, the study says, covers such basic needs as food, housing, utilities, transportation, health care, child care, clothing, some personal items, some savings and taxes – without public assistance. People who earn living wages are also able to handle emergencies and plan ahead.

"The bottom line here is that an individual looking for work that makes ends meet for their family can't find jobs in the current economy that do pay a living wage. Our state needs to ensure that all jobs pay a living wage, that a family working full-time should not be living in poverty," said Welter from his Seattle office.

When money's scarce, people are forced to make harsh choices, said Welter.

"With so many people unable to find living wage work, you find more and more people making tough tradeoffs. 'Do I pay for healthcare or pay the heating bill? 'Do I pay for childcare or put gas in the car?'" Welter asked.

"Results of the report are clear," he added. "For job seekers looking for a living wage, the market is limited, particularly for families."

Experts say the problem calls for action in at least two areas: Cultivating a pool of people skilled and ready to work and creating more high-quality jobs. One Spokane executive search firm, Personnel Unlimited Inc., sends many of its candidates outside the immediate region to find work, said Brandi McHenry, the office manager.

"Spokane isn't the greatest market, that's why 90 percent of our business is outside the area," McHenry said. "It's not that people (in Spokane) don't have the skills, it's just that people can't make it on \$8 or \$9 an hour."

Jeff Zahir, regional labor economist for the state Employment Security Department, said the study raises questions about both "corporate greed" and the "skills gap" between the working poor and those who are getting by.

"I don't think the study places the onus on anyone," he said, "but it sure challenges us to think about the answer to those questions."

On the Web

"Searching for Work that Pays: 2007 Northwest Job Gap Study" looks at the job situation in Washington, Idaho, Oregon and Montana. View it online at: http://www.nwfc.org/pubs/2007.0206_NW.Job.Gap.Searching.For.Work.pdf

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