

Oregon's working poor are caught in the middle

The Associated Press

ASTORIA — It doesn't matter how hard Jessica Bouvia and Alex Forsgrem work.

Forsgrem, 24, makes \$7.20 an hour working full-time at KB Toys, while Bouvia, 20, makes \$8.86 working at the OshKosh store.

At the end of the month, the Astoria couple are left with nothing, as they cobble together the two salaries to support their 4-year-old daughter, Wynter.

They are a family caught in the middle, with pay checks that are too big for them to qualify for state or federal assistance, but too small to pay for basic services.

A report released last week by the nonpartisan Children First for Oregon organization says that they are among 600,000 Oregonians classified as the "working poor" — a population that has more than doubled since the late 1970s.

"Those low-income working families, they're working very hard, but they still struggle to pay for and have the resources to pay for the basics like health insurance, housing and child-care and nutrition," said Marie Hoeven, executive director of Children First.

"Often these parents are choosing between the basic elements children need for healthy development and education. They are families that are constantly on the brink of falling into financial crisis."

The county-by-county report says that nearly 22 percent of Clatsop County children border on poverty, making them almost as vulnerable to deprivation as the 17 percent of children who are actually classified as poor.

Statewide, a third of Oregon children live in or near poverty.

Children First defines low-income families as those living

below twice the federal poverty line, or \$36,800 a year for a family of four.

Living from paycheck to paycheck often means families have no vacation time, no emergency funds, no financial investments and are stretched to put food on the table.

Paying for health insurance is a challenge, as evidenced by the more than 80,000 children in Oregon who go without it, according to the report. In the Bouvia household, the entire family goes without health insurance because they make too much to qualify for the Oregon Health Plan.

"If I was still working full-time there (at OshKosh) we could have gotten insurance for \$150 every other week," Bouvia said. "That's why we didn't do it"

Instead, they take Wynter to the county health clinic when she gets sick.

Despite that sacrifice, Bouvia said she would "rather work and make too much to get on assistance."

In addition to health care, finding quality child care is another hurdle for many low-income families, the report says.

In Clatsop County, there are only 17 slots per 100 children, a drop from the 21 slots available five years.

The Child and Family Development Program, part of the nonprofit Community Action Team, has 92 children on a waiting list for Head Start programs in Astoria and Warrenton.

"A lot of those children fall right above the poverty lines," said Director Joyce Ervin. "A lot of them don't qualify for Oregon Health, food assistance. Many haven't had any kind of dental care. When you aren't meeting basic needs for a child it makes it harder to learn."