

Helping hand Struggles of the working poor affect all of us

A report released last week by the nonpartisan Children First for Oregon organization places Oregon's "working poor" at 600,000.

That category includes families where at least one, and often two adults, are working, but they still struggle to pay for basics like food, housing, childcare and health insurance. Often they are families caught in the middle, making too much to qualify for state or federal assistance but too little to pay for basic needs.

Oregonians in that group have more than doubled since the late 1970s, the report showed.

The working poor are often forced to choose between the basic elements children need for healthy development and education, such as cutting back on nutritious food so they can pay the rent, or leaving babies and toddlers with children too young to safely baby-sit because they can't afford to pay for childcare.

Marie Hoeven, executive director of Children First, said such families are constantly on the brink of falling into financial crisis.

The growing number of working poor is an issue for everyone, not just those struggling. Families that can't afford health insurance strain emergency rooms and county health departments. (Paying for health insurance is clearly a challenge for many of these families, as evidenced by the more than 80,000 children in Oregon who go without it, the report noted.) When basic needs of children aren't met, it makes it harder for them to learn, stressing already overburdened schools and jeopardizing Oregon's future labor market. Living from paycheck to paycheck often means families have no vacation time, no emergency funds, no financial investments, so when disaster strikes they are often forced to seek help from social service agencies.

A revived economy would ease the problem, but it won't solve it. Society must continue to look for ways to help those who are trying hard to pull their own weight but still need a helping hand at times.