



The Bell Policy Center

Research • Advocacy • Opportunity

1801 Broadway, Suite 280
Denver, Colo. 80202
(303) 297-0456 metro Denver
(866) 283-8051 statewide
(303) 297-0460 fax

www.thebell.org

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Wednesday, April 21, 2004

Contact: Carrie Harmon

303-297-0456

BELL POLICY CENTER REPORT HIGHLIGHTS PLIGHT OF LOW-INCOME WORKING FAMILIES IN COLORADO

Colorado not doing enough to help families meet basic needs

DENVER, CO....More than one in five working families in Colorado struggle to get by in jobs that do not enable them to meet their basic needs, according to a new report released today by the nonprofit Bell Policy Center. Yet Colorado does not invest enough in programs that help working adults gain the necessary skills and education to escape poverty and contribute more to the state's economy.

Opportunity Lost: When Hard Work Isn't Enough for Colorado's Working Families draws on a new database of some 230 indicators that, for the first time, provides a comprehensive picture of who these families are and why they can't make ends meet. The publication also includes a statewide report card that ranks Colorado's performance in about two dozens areas that impact the working poor.

"It is unacceptable that, in a state that is relatively affluent, so many Colorado families struggle to get by," said Bell President Wade Buchanan. "Hard work and personal responsibility are critical to success, but Colorado could and should be a stronger partner in helping families become self-sufficient."

Buchanan spoke at a forum at the state capital that featured comments by Senator Peter Groff (D-Denver); Tamra Ward, a member of the state Board for Community Colleges and Occupational Education and vice president for public affairs for the Denver Metro Chamber of Commerce; Ann Kelly, Director of Nurses at Arkansas Manor, who talked about how employers' benefit from workforce education and training programs; and Anna Jensen, a graduate of Community College of Aurora (CCA).

"It is clear from our research that many of these families struggle because they lack the education and skills necessary to qualify for well-paying jobs in today's economy," said Dr. Andy Hartman, the Bell's director of policy and research and principle author of the report. "And we are not investing enough in those services and programs-adult education, English language instruction, higher education-that provide families with exactly these skills."

Some of the other key findings include:

- Over 32,000 working families live below the federal poverty line (\$18,392 for a family of four in 2002); and
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- Over 121,000 working families earn less than 200% of poverty (\$36,784 for a family of four in 2002), which is the minimum required to be self-sufficient in Colorado's least expensive counties.
- Nearly half of all low-income working families in Colorado have at least one parent who did not finish high school.
- The services the state does provide often discourage self-sufficiency, such as inflexible work requirements in Colorado's welfare reform program that leave participants little time and inadequate support to improve their skills.
- In many of these areas, the state's hands are tied by constitutional provisions - especially by the Taxpayer's Bill of Rights (TABOR) that severely and artificially restrict its ability to support even the most basic services.

The Bell's report also includes more than a dozen specific recommendations on how the state could do more to help low-income working families move toward self-sufficiency: Specifically, the state should:

HIGHER EDUCATION

- Expand support for need-based financial aid.
- Increase funding for remedial education.

ADULT BASIC EDUCATION

- Expand and improve adult basic education services.
- Provide more adult basic education and English as a Second Language (ESL) instruction that is integrated with job training.

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

- Consolidate economic development efforts under a single program and make job-creation and training a priority.
- Institute tax credits for companies that provide job training for low-wage workers.

HEALTH INSURANCE

- Create a public-private task force to look for cost savings in the state's Medicaid program.

INCOME SUPPORT

- Make the state's Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) permanent (that is, available every year) and increase its value to 20% of the federal EITC.

CHILD CARE

- Access available federal child care funds by appropriating enough state money to qualify for the dollar-for-dollar state match.

"When we say the state should 'invest' in these kinds of resources, we mean that literally," said Dr. Hartman. "Parents who get better jobs not only can support their own families, but they contribute to the state tax base and require fewer public services. It's win-win all the way around."

The Bell Policy Center is a nonprofit public policy organization committed to making Colorado a state of opportunity for all, regardless of race or economic background. The Bell seeks to reinvigorate the debate on issues affecting the well-being of families and working adults. Learn more at www.the-bell.org.

The Opportunity Lost report is part of The Working Poor Families Initiative supported by the Annie E. Casey and Ford Foundations. The Rose Community Foundation, The Gay and Lesbian Foundation for Colorado, and Chambers Family Fund also provided support for this publication. Nine other states either have or will be issuing similar reports. For more information, go to www.aecf.org/initiatives/jobsinitiative/workingpoor.htm.