Beyond September 11th
How much does a parent have to earn in order not to have to choose between feeding the family and paying the rent? When does a family no longer need Food Stamps or to rely on relatives for day care?

According to the Self-Sufficiency Standard for the City of New York, a single parent in Brooklyn, New York with one pre-schooler and one school-age child must earn a minimum of $44,592 per year - without any government or private support - to make it out of poverty. That same family would need to earn $44,208 in the Bronx, $46,728 in Staten Island, $46,836 in Queens, $48,048 in Upper Manhattan and $74,232 in Lower Manhattan. By comparison, the federal poverty level for this family is $14,650.

The Self-Sufficiency Standard Report - The report, issued in September 2000 by the Women’s Center for Education and Career Advancement in partnership with United Way of New York City (UWNYC), Wider Opportunities for Women (WOW) and The New York Community Trust, was written by Dr. Diana Pearce of the University of Washington and Jennifer Brooks, of WOW.

“Unfortunately, many families do not earn self-sufficiency wages, particularly if they have recently entered the workforce,” said Dr. Diana Pearce, the report’s lead author. “They cannot afford their housing and food and child care, much less their other basic needs, forcing them to make painful choices between necessities, or to accept substandard or inadequate child care, insufficient food, or substandard housing.”

The Self-Sufficiency Standard for the City of New York charts the actual cost of living and working in New York City. It measures how much a family must earn to pay for housing, food, child care and other basic necessities – if they do not receive any help from friends, relatives or the government – based on the ages, as well as, number of children in each household, and where the family lives. The report also measures the impact of subsidies from employers and governmental agencies in the quest for families to sustain economic self-sufficiency.

The Federal Poverty Standard - The Federal Poverty Standard, in contrast, was developed 40 years ago by Mollie Orshansky when families paid little for housing and taxes and nothing in child care, because women were not expected to work. Given these realities, the US Department of Agriculture estimated that moderate-income families spent one-third of their earnings on food. Orshansky then used the “economy” food budget developed by the agency and multiplied it by three, establishing the thresholds we now use as the federal poverty line which are only updated annually, averaging in increases in consumer prices. As it is a national average, the federal poverty line is the same for a family living in rural Alabama as it is for a family in San Francisco.

As everyone who has tried to raise a family in the last decade knows, food is no longer the biggest expense of a family’s budget. Housing and child care alone count for more than fifty percent of a family’s monthly budget (see Chart A). When geographic differences are calculated in, it is no wonder that the federal poverty line of $17,029 for a family of four seems low. In a recent National Public Radio Poll, 64% of respondents say that a family of four with an income of $20,000 is poor and 42% say a family of four earning $25,000 is still poor. Mollie Orshansky recently stated, “They haven’t changed it in all the time since it was mandated by Congress... Anyone who thinks we need to change it is perfectly right. I told them that then but they didn’t do it.”

Chart A

Percentage of Income Needed to Meet Basic Needs
Based on Self-Sufficiency Standard for a Family with One Parent, One Preschool-age Child and One School-Age Child in Bronx County (The Bronx), NY, 2000

- Housing: 20%
- Child Care: 33%
- Food: 12%
- Taxes: 17%
- Miscellaneous: 8%
While the Self-Sufficiency Standard numbers seem high in comparison, the Standard is a very modest budget that does not take into account any recreation, restaurant food, cable television, vacations, new clothing, additional costs related to children with special needs, or savings for college or retirement. The Self-Sufficiency Wages documented in this report reflect at what point a parent does not have to choose between, for example, shelter or food.


For many who have recently returned to or are entering the labor force for the first time, Self-Sufficiency is a goal not a reality. For many who have recently returned to or are entering the labor force for the first time, Self-Sufficiency is a goal not a reality. They may be forced to go without or to select inadequate food, shelter, or child care. These families often have the most tenuous foothold in the marketplace and frequently end up cycling in and out of public benefits and jobs as minor setbacks knock them out of the job market. For these families the Standard points to two strategies to bridge the income gap: (1) raise wages or (2) reduce costs through supports. These strategies are not mutually exclusive, but can and should be used simultaneously or sequentially.

There are a number of ways in which communities can help reduce costs of low-income families, and help them attain self-sufficiency including, public subsidies, child support, and health care coverage. Targeted temporary public subsidies can have a tremendous impact on a family’s Self-Sufficiency Wage. A single parent in Brooklyn with an infant and a preschool child receiving child care assistance, Food Stamps and Medicaid only has to earn $8.04 per hour as compared to the Self-Sufficiency Wage of $21.38 per hour. Reducing the high cost items such as child care, food and health care can enable a parent to better support her family on lower wages. This family however is only eligible for these supports for a brief time.

After one year the parent is no longer eligible for transitional Medicaid (the child is eligible for Child Health Plus) and this increase in health care costs of $128 per month necessitates the parent earning higher wages which, in turn, increases her child care co-payment and makes the parent ineligible for Food Stamps. After one year the parent is no longer eli-