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LEAGUE OF WOMEN VOTERS: Study says more than 25 percent of Kansans are poor

Federal poverty level is unrealistic, says convention speaker

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Salina Journal

Working hard and following the rules isn't working for thousands of Kansans. And it hasn't been working for decades, a speaker said Saturday at the League of Women Voters state convention in Salina.

Many Kansas workers are trying hard to grab a hold of and live the "American dream," said **Tawny Stottlemire**, executive director of the Kansas Association of Community Action Agencies.

Not only are these workers struggling to live the American dream, they are struggling to live. They struggle to provide housing, food and shelter to their families, she said.

"More and more working Kansans feel themselves living on the edge," Stottlemire said. "Unless we act soon to better understand who is really poor, our economy, communities and people -- and not just the low wage workers -- will suffer."

Stottlemire was invited to the state convention, which was at Kansas Wesleyan University, to talk about a report her agency released last fall titled, "Living on the Edge: A Report on the State of Low-Income Working Kansas Families."

KACAP, based in Topeka, is a private, not-for-profit association that supports community action agencies and human service networks.

Among the findings of the study is that "the 2004 federal poverty threshold ... in reality apply only to the poorest of the poor."

By federal standards, only 11 percent of Kansans are poor. The reality is that when you use a Basic Family Needs Budget, which factors in real costs of food, housing, transportation and child care, more than 25 percent of Kansans qualify as poor, Stottlemire said.

"I submit to you that the official definition of poor should be twice that of the federal poverty level," she said.

The Basic Family Needs Budget doesn't include any frills or savings, just necessities, she said. Using it as a guideline, a single parent with one child would need to earn just more than \$35,000 a year to meet the budget.

Stottlemire said that finding didn't surprise her and many other poverty advocates, but seeing it on paper was "startling."

Living on the edge

• **WHAT:** "Living on the Edge: A Report on the State of Low-Income Working Kansas Families"

• **WHO:** Produced by the Kansas Community Association of Community Action Programs

• **WHERE:** Download the report from www.kacap.org or call (785) 234-0878.

Pointing out the problem is easy, she said. It's much harder to come up with solutions to social problems, she said.

Too often, Americans and policymakers try to create solutions individually. Poverty is a multilayer problem, and a multilayer plan of solutions is required, she said.

Americans first have to decide if poverty should be a concern. And if it is, who's job is it to help, Stottlemire asked the group.

"If they are working hard to fight their way out of poverty, do they deserve help?" she asked. If the answer is no, she said we might as well be saying that "their work isn't valued and their families don't matter."

Stottlemire and her agency suggests convening a summit made up of policymakers, Kansas leadership, business people, labor groups, working Kansans and nonprofit groups.

"We have to push past political lines and find some common ground," she said after her speech. "Deep down, I think we all believe in supporting people; we just have different values on where that help should come from."

Perhaps if more people, especially policymakers and those in leadership positions, could put faces with the problem, they would better understand, she said.