

## Thousands in NELA barely make ends meet



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(Photo: United Way)

Ashley Duran is one of the many "ALICE" residents living in Louisiana, working minimum wage and struggling to survive pay check to pay check.

Duran, a coffee barista living in Lafayette, is a single mother with a 5-year-old son, making tough decisions to make ends meet and provide for her child.

"When he was younger, it was easier because I had more help. When my mom moved back to Texas and my son started school I decided to give up the career I had been pursuing as a restaurant manager and go back to being a barista," Duran said.

Being a barista was the only work schedule she could find that allowed her to work 8 a.m. to 3 p.m. while her son attended school.

"Some people might say I make enough to hire a babysitter, but babysitters often make more than I do. I make a little less than \$8 an hour and I watch every dollar I spend and when I spend it. If my car breaks down I'm not sure what we'd do. I don't ask for pity or even help, I'm just trying to do my best to make it work," Duran said.

In Louisiana, 695,719 households — 40 percent of the state's total — are unable to afford the state's cost of living, with conditions still lagging behind pre-recession levels, according to the United Way ALICE Report for Louisiana released Wednesday by the Louisiana Association of United Ways.

ALICE, which stands for Asset Limited, Income Constrained, Employed, places a spotlight on a large population of residents who work at low-paying jobs, have little or no savings, and are one emergency from falling into poverty.

The report detailed what a single person and family of four would have to make in each parish just to afford the basic necessities. While each parish had different calculations, the income levels were very close. For example, in Ouachita Parish, a single adult would have to make \$17,400 a year to survive while a family of four would require \$41,472.

This bare-minimum budget does not allow for any savings, leaving a household vulnerable to unexpected expenses.

United Way of Northeast Louisiana president Janet Durden said the report will lay the groundwork for an action plan to address the needs of communities throughout the state and devise a gameplan to improve the lives of people in those communities.

"It's difficult to look at this data and accept it, but it's important for anyone who wants to change the direction of people's lives. We don't like looking at such high numbers, but it does help put a face and understanding on who ALICE is. The next step will be how United Way can partner with other groups to improve their opportunities," Durden said.

United Way of Northeast Louisiana chairman Ron Berry said the benefit of the report is the understanding of now knowing who represents ALICE in each community. Now it's up to governmental agencies and non-profit organizations to look at the data and determine ways to help.

"We don't know if there is one single answer. There are some existing services in our region that are helpful to an ALICE family. Is that all they need? No, we don't think so. Our future plans will be to use this data in a planning effort to help us determine solutions and improve the financial conditions of ALICE. This is the starting point," Durden said.

Berry said United Way can't be the only agency involved in order to succeed. In the coming weeks the organization will reach out to partner agencies to evaluate the data and determine a course of action.

The United Way ALICE Report used data from a variety of sources, including the U.S. Census. The report unveils new measures, based on present-day income levels and expenses that show how many Louisiana workers struggle financially.

In northeastern Louisiana, approximately 29,229 households are classified within the ALICE population, and 49 percent of all northeastern Louisiana households are living below the ALICE threshold.

Madison Parish and East Carroll Parish lead the state in the number of residents living below the ALICE threshold. East Carroll has 66 percent of its households living below the threshold and Madison Parish has 63 percent.

Sarah Berthelot, Louisiana Association of United Ways President and CEO, said this report helps give a voice to thousands of Louisiana residents working hard, but struggling to make ends meet.

"We all know ALICE," she said. "ALICE is the hard worker who waits tables, fixes our cars, checks us out of the grocery store, cares for our elderly and young. ALICE represents the growing number of individuals and families who are working but are unable to afford the basic necessities of housing, food, child care, healthcare and transportation."

A total of 368,682 Louisiana households fall into what the United Way calls the ALICE population. These are households earning more than the official U.S. poverty level but less than the basic cost of living in their communities. This number is higher than the official poverty level, which accounts for 327,037 households in Louisiana. Combined, ALICE and those in poverty account for 40 percent of all Louisiana households — two of every five households in Louisiana walking a financial tightrope are at risk of falling into a financial crisis with one set back," Berthelot said.

