

The Register-Guard

Report from United Way shows over 40 percent of Lane County is “living off the bare minimum”

One in five Lane County households are at or below the federal poverty line — but another 23 percent above that line still don't earn enough to meet the basic costs of living, according to a new study released by United Way of Lane County.

In all, 43 percent of Lane County households struggle to meet those basic costs, according to a new report dubbed ALICE. That's an acronym for Asset-Limited, Income-Constrained, Employed.

The report also assesses the percentage of households in each of Lane County's cities who are either below the federal poverty line, or above the line but below the ALICE “threshold.”

The city with the highest percentage of households below the ALICE level was Florence, at 51 percent. The coastal city of Dunes City was the lowest, at 34 percent.

Half of all households in Cottage Grove are beneath the ALICE threshold, the study found.

“This is a call to action,” said Elena Fracchia, director of income and engagement for United Way of Lane County, who helped compile the report.

The four main issues identified by the study as factors that keep many Pacific Northwest households in the ALICE realm are a large number of low-wage jobs, a high cost of living, a difficulty finding jobs near housing, and a lack of sufficient public and private assistance to meet needs.

Fracchia said she hopes that the local United Way's conversations with businesses, nonprofit groups and others, being conducted now in conjunction with the release of the ALICE report, will prompt community action.

Residents in Lane County must “lean in and figure it out,” she said.

The report uses publicly available data from multiple sources, including the U.S. Census, U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics and the federal Agriculture and Housing and Urban Development departments. The report was compiled by a coalition of academics and nonprofit groups nationwide.

In the study, the ALICE threshold is determined by the average level of income each household needs to afford the basics, accounting for food, childcare, housing, taxes, transportation, health care and a small miscellaneous expenses category.

In Lane County, the study assumes that a single adult would need to earn \$18,300 annually to sustain a “household survival budget.” That works out to an hourly wage of \$9.15. The minimum wage in Oregon is \$9.25 an hour.

A family of four in Lane County — two adults, one preschooler and one infant — would need an annual income of \$54,516 to meet that household budget bar, according to the study.

At that annual salary of \$18,300 or lower, many Lane County individuals are living at the bare minimum, and unable to cover auto repairs, dine out, travel or buy household furnishings without financial strain, say Fracchia and other

United Way leaders.

While that budget provides some cash for the single adult's miscellaneous expenses — \$139 per month — it does not allow for savings, which means he or she could be left without a safety net when unexpected expenses arise.

However, Fracchia also noted that falling below the ALICE threshold doesn't necessarily mean an intolerable type of poverty.

"There are going to be people subsisting just fine on these levels," Fracchia said. The ALICE report "is a new way to combine the research that has already been available."

The study also includes an "economic viability dashboard" for each county in the states of Oregon, Washington and Idaho. On a scale of 1 to 100, with 1 being worst, the "dashboard" rates both housing affordability (37) and job opportunities (43) as "poor" in Lane County. Community resources (56) are rated "fair."

At 43 percent, Lane County was neither among the highest or lowest counties in Oregon in terms of percentage of residents falling below the ALICE threshold. Malheur County was highest at 56 percent; Gilliam County was lowest at 29 percent, followed by Clackamas at 30 percent.

The research is a continuation of successful ALICE reports that United Way first produced on the East Coast. The initial study in 2009 focused on Northern New Jersey, with subsequent assessments in Connecticut, Florida, Indiana, Iowa, Louisiana and Michigan before reaching the Pacific Northwest.

Jim Cooper, president and CEO for United Ways of the Pacific Northwest, approached the ALICE team and asked them last spring to assess the situation in this region.

Locally, United Way of Lane County officials say they plan to use the results to connect community partners and combat several key concerns identified in the report.

"It doesn't help anyone not to see the problems," said John Stapleton, a local architect and United Way advocate.

Follow Junnelle on Twitter [@JunnelleH](#) . Email junnelle.hogen@registerguard.com .