

Living wage for city being calculated

Full report from Human Development Council expected by end of summer

CHRIS DONOVAN TELEGRAPH-JOURNAL



Natalia Hicks of the Human Development Council is calculating a living wage for Saint John. PHOTO: CHRIS DONOVAN/TELEGRAPH-JOURNAL

SAINT JOHN • The Saint John Human Development Council is calculating a living wage for people living and working in Saint John.

"This is something that people making minimum wage will be able to bring to their employers to prove that they are not making enough money to live in the city," said Natalia Hicks of the HDC, who is conducting the study.

The study is based on expenses for a family of four, including two children aged three and seven.

The current minimum wage in New Brunswick is \$11 per hour, but Randy Hatfield, executive director of the HDC, guesses the living wage for the city will come to around \$15 to \$20 per hour.

The study is being released in five parts, with the first three already available to the public.

The HDC has released the monthly cost of medical care, child care, and food, and will soon release the calculated cost of shelter in the city. All four parts will be put together and a fifth sheet is expected to be released around the end of August calculating the full living wage of a family of four in Saint John.

So far, calculated healthcare costs came to \$164.81 per month, food came to \$782.17 per month, and childcare came to \$1,026.20 per month.

"We have looked at basic living costs and factored in subsidies that are available to people making minimum wage," said Hicks. "The wage we are calculating is essentially what you need to come out even at the end of the year and stay out of debt. It is certainly not the wage you need to get rich or save money."

When the calculations are complete, the HDC will circulate the data to local employers and work with the city to create a distinction for employers who offer a living wage to their employees, according to Hicks.

"The process of calculating the wage is different for every portion of the report," Hicks said.

She has used some data that is national mixed with local quotes from insurance brokers, landlords, grocery stores, and more.

"For childcare we contacted all of the regulated childcare providers in Saint John and priced out what the costs would be for the children of our imaginary family, so those numbers are very Saint John-specific," Hicks said.

She said the final number will be for self-advocacy but also for informational purposes.

"There are organizations in this city that strive to offer their employees a living wage but in order for companies to do that they have to actually know what the living wage is," she said.

Hicks said based on the estimated living wage, it is clear there are gaps for people making minimum wage.

"If our living wage is higher than the minimum, which I am certain it is going to be, you have to wonder how people are meeting their basic needs on minimum wage. If our calculations come to about \$17 per hour, which is about the calculation in Halifax, you have to wonder where the other \$6 per hour is coming from," she said.

"People are met daily with the tough decision of what they are going to pay for and what they can't afford to pay for. The toss-up between healthcare and food is one that happens quite regularly," said Hicks. "In our fact sheet we included a national statistic that one in 10 Canadians can't afford to take their medications as prescribed. We have to assume that for that person, something like food probably takes priority over their medication."