

## 'Living wage' rises in Victoria making life here less affordable

[Sarah Petrescu](#) / Times Colonist

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Single parent Sara Wood: "If you have to give up dinner so the kids can eat, then that's what you do." Photograph By BRUCE STOTESBURY, Times Colonist

The "living wage" in Victoria continues to rise as singles and families struggle to make ends meet and find affordable housing and decent-paying jobs, an annual report released today says.

To meet basic needs, two full-time working parents with young children living in the capital region need to earn \$18.93 an hour, not including savings or debt costs, says the report from the Community Social Planning Council, First Call B.C. and the Metro Vancouver Living Wage for Families Campaign.

"We see it edging up, which reflects the real cost of living here," said Rupert Downing, the planning council's executive director.

The living wage in Vancouver has also increased to \$20.10 from 19.62, and to \$17.02 from \$16.37 in the Fraser Valley.

"The living wage gives us an indication of why there's rising household debt," Downing said. It takes a toll on families with children, he said, noting increases in the costs of such necessities as food and clothing. Child-care costs are up by 3.5 per cent. Nearly 7,000 children in the region live in two-parent homes with incomes less than the living wage.

Single-parent families face a worse situation.

“If you have to give up dinner so the kids can eat, then that’s what you do,” said Sara Wood, 31, at the Single Parent Resource Centre where she volunteers. The single mother of three children under 12 struggled for years in minimum wage jobs, working at A&W, as a cleaner at Mayfair Shopping Centre and in retail.

“It was impossible,” she said. She now supports her family of four on less than \$2,000 a month in income assistance, child support and subsidies — the equivalent of about \$13 an hour for a 37.5-hour week. Wood said she’d like to attend school but can’t risk not having an income and going into debt.

She has noticed the cost of food go up significantly in Victoria and said skipping meals is something many single parents do.

“I do it. Definitely,” said Stephanie Holt, who also volunteers at the centre. The 34-year-old single mom has an eight-year-old son with autism. She said they have sacrificed to afford therapy and a wheat- and dairy-free diet that helps him function.

Holt was on the B.C. Housing list for three years but did not get placed until she and her son ended up in a shelter and contacted her local MP.

She has faced having her electricity cut off as rates increased, received expired food bank donations and doesn’t consider going out with friends.

“What do you say to people: ‘Sorry, I can’t go. I’m broke?’ ” said Holt, who works as a cleaner and plans to attend Camosun College in the fall.

Both women said the centre and other single-parent resources have been a lifeline.

While the average hourly wage for British Columbians older than 15 in March was \$24.51, the number did not necessarily reflect the jobs available.

“It’s a challenge. There are jobs — a variety across the board,” said Frank Bourre, CEO of Chemistry Consulting Group, which manages Work B.C. employment centres and GT Hiring Solutions.

He said with a government hiring freeze and moderate construction, a lot of the jobs on the market are retail and don’t pay much higher than minimum wage, which is \$10.25 an hour.

Jobs in the hotel sector and places that are unionized pay more, typically closer to \$20, he said. There’s growth in the medical and technology sectors, he said.

“The living wage does seem accurate. Costs are high here, especially in housing,” he said.

To read the report, go to [communitycouncil.ca/](http://communitycouncil.ca/)

[initiatives/livingwage](http://communitycouncil.ca/initiatives/livingwage)

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