

[Many local households struggling financially, study says](#)



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## Nearly one-third of county families barely making ends meet, according to United Way's ALICE analysis

Almost a third of Ozaukee County households struggle to make ends meet, according to a recent statewide study conducted by 43 United Way agencies across Wisconsin.

"These are people who are working but they are barely making ends meet," said Barbara Bates-Nelson, executive director of the United Way of Northern Ozaukee.

"These people are working but they're strapped. If that one emergency hits, it could put them over the edge."

The so-called ALICE study — it stands for asset limited, income constrained, employed — is intended to cast a light on the state's pool of residents who work at relatively low paying jobs, have little or no savings and are one emergency from falling into poverty.

The Ozaukee County communities with the highest number of households that fall within the ALICE or poverty levels are Thiensville with 44%, Saukville with 40%, Port Washington with 38% and Grafton with 35%, according to the study.

The study found that of Ozaukee County's 34,913 households, 1,746, or 5%, are under the federal poverty level and 9,078 are under the ALICE threshold.

"We all know ALICE," Bates-Nelson said. "ALICE is the recent college graduate unable to afford to live on his or her own, the young family strapped by child-care costs and the mid-career professional now underemployed.

"I think we would all agree that Ozaukee County is a great place to live and work but ... every day families are struggling to make ends meet and are forced to make choices or delay planning for the future, which puts the wider community at risk."

Ozaukee County is one of Wisconsin's wealthiest counties, and that is reflected in the study, which shows that 42% of families statewide, or 960,131, are struggling to support themselves. That's triple the number expected, the study states.

The study, Bates-Nelson added, tells a more complete story than just one that looks at the poverty rate.

"When you think poverty, I think most people think of people who aren't working," she said. "These are people who are working, and they're working hard but they're barely making ends meet.

"When you put it in terms like that, it's just like, 'Wow.' It's kind of staggering to people."

The study measures the number of households that don't earn enough to afford a basic household budget of housing, child care, food, transportation and health care.

The study determines that basic budget based on the cost of living in each county. For Ozaukee County, that is \$50,000 for households with members younger than 65 and \$40,000 for those older.

Most of the households are renters, the study states, yet fewer than half of the state's rental units are considered affordable.

Most Ozaukee County residents have high housing costs, the study states, spending more than 30% of their income on housing. Because ALICE households earn more than the federal poverty rate, they often don't qualify for government assistance programs, and nonprofit agencies often provide resources to help fill the gaps.

And those nonprofit agencies often rely on United Way for part of their funding. Last year, 12,000 individuals participated in United Way-funded programs, Bates-Nelson said.

"This mirrors what we're hearing from the nonprofit community," she said.

"Our focus is to provide a basic foundation in education, financial stability and health, key elements that will improve the lives of both ALICE households and those in poverty for the long-term benefit of the wider community."

Bates-Nelson cited the United Way of Northern Ozaukee's homeless prevention program, which helps people on a short-term basis get through emergency situations.

Most of those who use the program aren't repeat customers but those who need a hand once, she said, adding the program enables them to get back on their feet and become self-sufficient again.

Last year, she said, the homeless prevention program helped 180 people who were in danger of losing their homes. As a result of the help they received, 83% are still in their homes today, Bates-Nelson said.

Another important issue United Way is focusing on is transportation, Bates-Nelson said, noting that if someone can't afford a basic car repair they have few options to get to work.

One of the most critical things about the study is that it illustrates the number of people who are forced to make decisions that have long-term effect — health care or electricity, medications or food — Bates-Nelson said.

"If you're picking and choosing where you're going to spend your money, chances are you're putting off those preventive-type measures, like annual visits to the doctor that can catch problems before they become major health issues," she said.

"You can only put off some of those things for so long."

United Way of Northern Ozaukee, along with its counterparts in Waukesha and Washington counties, conducted a similar study three years ago, and Bates-Nelson said that was an eye-opener because it showed that many people are struggling.

However, she said, it is difficult to compare the two studies because they differ in scope and detail.

"This was much more extensive," she said.

"The exciting thing is that this study has been done statewide and, to some extent, nationwide," Bates-Nelson said, noting similar studies have been done in 14 states. "It's gaining momentum as a valuable piece of information to look at basic needs."

There are no easy solutions to the issues in the Alice study, Bates-Nelson said.

"There are a number of issues here," she said. "We're looking to raise awareness and we're looking for people to get involved in this. We're trying to solve big, lasting problems."

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