



Is there enough incentive to get off welfare in Tennessee?

By: Kristin Farley- November 19, 2013

Should welfare benefits equal more than a minimum wage job? A recent study shows benefits outpay most entry level jobs.

Minimum wage jobs pay about \$15,000 a year, so at face value, this study by the Cato Institute is disheartening to many.

The cash value of potential benefits in Hawaii equals more than \$49,000. Second highest is Washington, D.C. where the benefit equals around \$43,000.

The lowest state, Mississippi, is at just under \$17,000 and Tennessee falls right behind with the second lowest potential package at around \$17,400.

6 News asked one local woman if there is enough incentive to get off the system. She says she is struggling to do just that.

"It's a lot easier, but I don't want my kids to see easier. You have to work for it if you want it, and it's really worth it. It's going to take some work," said Kristy Downs.

The 35-year-old is a mother of two and just moved into a new place with the help of some government assistance. She says this is one step of many to get her family back on their feet after months of living in their car.

"My biggest things are my kids. My kids are living in car with me. It made me feel like I let them down," she said.

Downs says at the beginning of 2013, her hours were cut at work, and that started a downward spiral.

"I had two jobs: third shift at McDonalds and lunchtime at Wendy's. Kids at school, and I still couldn't do it. It was just not possible," she said.

A case worker at Knoxville-Knox County Community Action Committee, who is also a good friend, now drives her to work and helped turn her life around.

Downs now says working for a company like Prestige Cleaners is breathing new hope and enthusiasm into her family.

"This company offers benefits, insurance, retirement plan, life insurance. This is something other companies did not offer me because I wasn't a manager," Downs said.

With these benefits, Downs says she hopes to soon be self-sufficient, but she admits this path is harder and that for many, it can be a struggle knowing there is often more assistance available for just staying home.

"You are almost weighing the options: should I keep working, or not keep working."

CAC executive director Barbara Kelly says Downs' drive is more indicative of the true face of welfare in the Knoxville area and admits there is often a misconception about how the system works.

"We don't write checks to people, 'Here is some money for you to pay your utility bill,'" she said.

Kelley broke down some of the state numbers, saying there are approximately 125,000 welfare recipients in Tennessee.

Fifty-five percent are children or seniors, and another 41 percent are people who work, but are not earning above the poverty level. The average cash benefit is about \$164 a month.

Kelley says these are hardly the numbers that people expect, but she says a few bad apples often blur reality.

"I don't come across very many people who would not be willing to work for that. In fact, many people that I deal with on a day-to-day basis work harder than I have ever worked and have less to show for it," said Kelley.

Downs hopes one day, sooner rather than later, she will have more to show for it, and while she still has some assistance, she says she does believe in some level of expectation. Therefore, she has set a goal for herself.

"Within a year if I haven't done something, I should have gotten the help anyway."

The Cato study on welfare was based on seven eligible benefits in each state. 6 News was told in our area it is very rare for people to get all seven benefits because of qualifying factors and waiting lists for some programs.