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## Struggles of single moms

### Women's foundation looks at improving self-sufficiency

Six months ago, Karen Tyson made a difficult decision: She and Chaunté, her 9-year-old daughter, walked out.

"There was domestic violence in the home, so I knew I needed to separate myself from that," she said. "I had to reestablish myself all over again."

Tyson, 44, left her husband - without her own car, job or place to live - and started her life over as a single mother, risking poverty in exchange for safety.

Now, as the sole head of her new household, she and her daughter live on the \$1,700 a month she receives in disability payments. Like 78 percent of the Rochester households with children that are headed by women, they're living below what it takes to make ends meet.

A recent report by the Women's Foundation of Genesee Valley that took a close look at what it means to be self-sufficient sheds new light on the situation in which Tyson and thousands of others in and around Rochester now live.

"I was down for about a month," recovering from surgeries to her wrists and knees. "When I was married, it was cool, but when you're not married you're (providing for) your whole house and it gets hard." she said. "It's a lot of pressure for one person."

### Struggle by the numbers

The Women's Foundation report, "Improving Self Sufficiency for Women and Girls," is a comprehensive study on the economic status of women in the seven-county Rochester region.

The study was conducted to help the foundation decide where and how to award grants across Monroe, Genesee, Ontario, Wayne, Orleans, Livingston and Yates counties.

Rather than relying only on federal poverty guidelines, the report measures families against a "self-sufficiency standard," which considers the income needed for a family to adequately meet major budget items such as childcare, healthcare, transportation and food.

In Monroe County, 50 percent of female-headed households live at or below the SSS, 27 percent live at or below poverty and 23 percent fall between the two. Those living above poverty, but fall short of means to live adequately, often find themselves with little or no help available.

The 2010 Federal Poverty Threshold is \$14,218 for a two-person family with a child younger than 18, in the contiguous U.S.

Tyson, who makes an annual income of roughly \$20,000, is unable to qualify for much government financial assistance programs, even though, according to the Self-Sufficiency standard, she would need to make at least \$32,324 to adequately take care of her family in Monroe County.

"The (Department of Social Services) told me I had too much income. How do they expect people to live like that?" said Tyson, who was able to later find an affordable home and transportation, but still struggled with costs for food and clothes expenses. "I couldn't even take my daughter to get something as simple as ice cream. I always had to tell her, 'I don't have enough money'...That's a hard thing for a mother."

The Women's Foundation, which has donated more than \$1 million to programs across the seven counties, is trying to lessen the numbers of impoverished women - one woman at a time.

Kathleen King, of the Women's Foundation, said the organization focused on providing grants to programs aimed at keeping girls in school, provided financial management guidance and promoted job skills and development for women.

"We focus on giving grants to programs that really help women become more economically self-sufficient," said King, a co-researcher for the study.

King said that the foundation strives to help women find financial stability, independent of public assistance. Though public assistance can be beneficial, King said there are many factors, such as education and equal gender pay, that must be addressed, before any drastic improvement in economic conditions for women can occur.

"Increasing minimum wage will help, but it's also about getting women in places where they can really get jobs that will really help support their families," she said. "The problem is so big that one organization (alone) will not be able to impact this without community (involvement)."

### **A choice to survive**

As thousands of women in Rochester strive to find financial freedom and remove themselves from being a member of the devastating statistics, some feel if they remain in the city, their circumstances will be much harder to overcome

Melissa Parrish - who holds a master's degree and a four-page résumé's worth of professional experience - can only survive if she lives in poverty.

Parrish is a single mother of her 12-year-old and 14-year-old sons, one of whom is autistic and requires significant attention. Due to her son's disability, she is unable to find a full-time job - with the flexibility to meet her sons's needs, or part-time income that meets her family's needs.

"A full-time job had me paying more in childcare than what the job salary was worth," said Parrish, 49, who works part time as a teaching assistant at \$9 an hour. "I did everything right. The way I'm living now, you would never know it."

Parrish has found herself in a cycle that - like thousands of other women in the city - juggles between staying below the poverty threshold to receive inadequate benefits or hover above it and still not be able to quite make ends meet.

"I don't have substance abuse problems, I don't have any of those issues," she said. "Yet I cannot get out of poverty, while I'm living in Rochester."

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