

Donations may help solve pay vs. welfare conundrum

“PEOPLE see you having fun; Just a-lying in the sun; Tell them that you like it this way.

It's the work that we avoid; And we're all self-employed; We love to work at nothing all day.”

In Pennsylvania a family on welfare can receive a value of \$29,817 in help. That's more than many jobs actually pay here in Mercer County.

As Bachman-Turner Overdrive referred to in their hit song “Takin’ Care of Business” there are people who work at nothing all day and like it. While it could be a musical group like theirs, it also can refer to people who accept welfare funds rather than seek employment.

Unfortunately, while some people may prefer to live off welfare, there are others who simply can't afford to work for less money than they can receive as charity. At least not if they want to support their families.

That is one of the dilemmas of the United Way of Mercer County as the organization tries to fulfill its goal of “Lifting Families Out of Poverty.”

Front-page stories in Thursday's Herald explained that premise as the United Way planning committee recently heard about the hurdles people face as they try to come off welfare and get a job.

Hope Couch, who once worked in the industry that provides cash assistance to low-income families, told the group that jobs are still the way out of poverty.

A companion story showed that welfare benefits are actually higher than the pay of many entry-level jobs, which

creates a problem. The Cato Institute, a Washington, D.C.-based think tank, found that welfare benefits will continue to outpace the income that most entry-level employees earn.

While not all welfare recipients receive a full complement of cash assistance, food stamps, health care and assistance with housing, utilities and infant nutrition, in Pennsylvania a family on welfare can receive a value of \$29,817 in help.

That's more than many jobs actually pay here in Mercer County. In fact, in order to meet that amount, a full-time worker would have to receive \$13.73 an hour. Considering that a minimum wage job pays only \$7.25 an hour in this commonwealth, that's a big difference.

And to make matters worse, if a person accepts a lower paying job, it would still provide enough earnings that his or her family would lose some of the welfare benefits.

Currently, 1,547 people in Mercer County are receiving cash assistance, which is capped at \$393 a month. That is about 1.3 percent of the 114,000-plus county residents.

Along with that, 19,189 countians receive food stamps and 27,720 collect medical assistance.

It's the proverbial “Catch 22” for many people. While they want to work and come off welfare, they can't afford to do so if they lose medical benefits for the family.

And paying for child care is also an expensive proposition for some people if they accept a job, especially in single-parent homes.

Obviously, there are no easy answers. But the United Way of Mercer County is attempting to find ways to tackle the situation through assisting local charitable groups.

Every contribution to the United Way from businesses or industries could go a long way to helping that effort as the agency tries to lift families out of poverty.