

Many earning poverty wages, forum hears

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KITCHENER

A number of working families in Waterloo Region do not earn a living wage, and employers as well as governments should take action, a forum in Kitchener was told yesterday.

"What is a living wage?" asked Chris Cowie of Opportunities 2000, a non-profit group dedicated to reducing poverty in the region through advocacy, education and collaboration with partners in the non-profit, public and private sectors. "Ideally, it's a wage that would support a family of three above the poverty line, in a modest lifestyle that should include benefits and access to paid time off."

Opportunities 2000 drafted a typical

budget for such a family, and, in Waterloo Region, the gross household income would have to be \$37,000 which, after deductions, would be \$29,688. The wage earner, or earners, would have to earn \$17.88 an hour based on a 40-hour week. Yet Ontario's minimum wage is \$6.85.

More than 17,000 adults over 20 in the region are considered to be working poor, according to Statistics Canada. Yet, the region's strong economy shows the average household income at \$55,000 — higher than the national average of \$50,000, says a report by Opportunities 2000.

Guest speaker Ron Saunders, a director of the Canadian Policy Research Network on working, said the working poor are especially vulnerable. They may have rights under provincial labour and employment standards laws,

but are often "afraid if they complain they'll lose their jobs," Saunders said.

Many companies pay benefits only to full-time staff, and choose to increase their part-time or contract staff to avoid paying benefits, Saunders said.

Low-paid employees have difficulty finding money for prescriptions and, without paid sick leave, their absenteeism goes up, productivity declines and staff turnover and morale become problems.

But many Canadian and U.S. cities and states are documenting the benefits of paying workers a living wage. Productivity increases, absenteeism decreases, staff morale soars and people are healthier.

For information on vulnerability in the labour market, visit www.cprn.org.
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