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Lawmakers stingy on work supports for struggling families

For Ohioans living on the edge of poverty, holding down a job can be difficult, especially when pay is too low for many to afford food, shelter and care for young children. Ohio's 2018-2019 state budget failed to make investments needed to support Ohio's vast number of workers in low-wage jobs.

Policy Matters Ohio examines state funding for preschool and public childcare as well as food and shelter in two new Budget Bites. Although 40 percent of Ohio households struggle to pay for necessities, lawmakers failed to provide support in the 2018-19 budget for growing needs identified by the state's food pantries and affordable housing advocates. Lawmakers provided \$20 million a year from a combination of state and federal resources for food banks and pantries across the state. Legislators denied a request by the Ohio Association of Foodbanks for a \$10 million annual increase in funding.

In 2015 more than 33,500 Ohioans were homeless and 400,000 spent more than half their income on rent. Over the past 25 years, the Housing Trust Fund has helped 1.8 million people obtain affordable housing. Resources for the Fund mainly come from a share of non-state fees levied by County Recorders' offices, but between 2004 and 2015, collections fell by nearly \$30 million. Lawmakers rejected a request by a coalition of more than 300 nonprofits and companies for additional support for Fund in the 2018-2019 budget.

"The state needs to step up support for working poor families because the federal government, which long provided most of the funds to help people, clearly intends to cut such aid," said Policy Matters Senior Project Manager Wendy Patton. "We could soon see more people struggle to hold down a job because their first concern each day is food and shelter."

Ohio families with children face even more hurdles to employment. With 11 out of 13 of Ohio's fastest growing jobs paying less than \$34,000 a year, many working parents struggle to find affordable preschool or childcare for their kids. It is harder for Ohio parents to qualify for assistance than it is in 42 other states. A family of two making \$32,500 a year or less (200 percent of the poverty line) wouldn't qualify for state assistance in Ohio.

"When a parent works and still lives close to the poverty line, spending huge chunks of their paycheck on childcare or preschool just doesn't make sense," Patton said. "Public support for childcare and preschool is one of the smartest investments Ohio can make. It helps children develop and also gives parents the support they need to stay in the workforce."

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Policy Matters Ohio is a nonprofit, nonpartisan state policy research institute with offices in Cleveland and Columbus.