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W.Va. poverty rate rises, Census report shows

Mountain Staters second poorest in America

By Lori Kersey

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CHARLESTON, W.Va. -- Slightly more West Virginians fell below the poverty line last year than the year before, according to a report released Thursday from the U.S. Census Bureau.

The state's poverty rate was 18.6 percent in 2011, up from 18.1 percent the year before, according to the Census Bureau's 2011 American Community Survey.

West Virginia is the second-poorest state in the nation, according to an assessment of the census data by 24 / 7 Wall Street. The state's median household income in 2011 was

\$38,482 -- lower than every state except Mississippi's \$36,919.

West Virginia ranked 10th highest for poverty in the nation, according to an analysis of the report by the West Virginia Center on Budget and Policy, a left-leaning economic think tank. The center released a statement outlining highlights of the report.

West Virginia's child poverty rate was 25.8 percent last year, compared to 25.5 percent the year before. The state ranked 12th highest in the nation for child poverty.

The poverty level for black West Virginians was 34.8 percent, up from 29.1 percent in 2010 and 16.2 percent higher than the overall state average.

The poverty rate for state residents over age 65 was 9.4 percent last year, down from 9.9 percent in 2010.

The poverty rate among state residents who have a bachelor's degree or higher was 4.1 percent. For those who only have a high school diploma, the poverty rate was 15.4 percent.

The report showed that 14.9 percent of West Virginians ages 18-64 -- 272,287 residents -- did not have health insurance last year. That number was up 0.3 percent from 2010.

Ted Boettner, executive director of the West Virginia Center for Budget and Policy, said the state should expand Medicaid under the Affordable Care Act to combat poverty in the state.

"The expansion of Medicaid to over 120,000 West Virginians will be the biggest step that we've taken to help struggling families in West Virginia in the last 40 to 50 years," Boettner said. "It's huge."

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Having access to health care through Medicaid, he said, will allow poor residents to be more productive members of the work force.

Under the Affordable Care Act, states have the option to expand Medicaid to cover those making 138 percent of the federal poverty line.

The federal government would pay the entire cost for the new Medicaid recipients for the first three years, before phasing the federal funds down to a 90 percent of the cost.

Gov. Earl Ray Tomblin has not said whether he supports expanding Medicaid or not.

Boettner said the decision to expand should be a "no-brainer."

"We don't have the money to not do it," Boettner said. "We will save dramatically. It's a great deal for West Virginia."

By Boettner's estimations, expanding Medicaid will bring \$3.7 billion in new federal health-care funding to West Virginia over the next six years. West Virginia's share would be about 4 percent, he said.

It also would cut down on uncompensated care, which will benefit hospitals and insurance companies, Boettner said. Having Medicaid coverage would allow residents to spend their money elsewhere, further helping the economy, he said.

In addition to expanding Medicaid, Boettner said, the state should consider raising the minimum wage and forming a task force to tackle poverty issues.

Reach Lori Kersey at lori.kersey@wvgazette.com or 304-348-1240.

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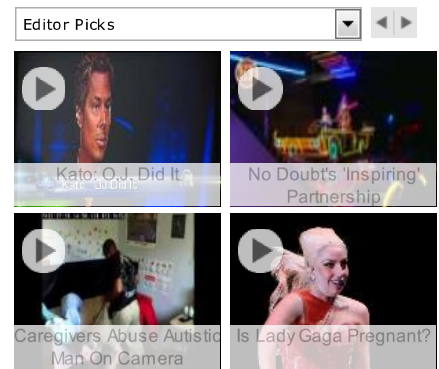
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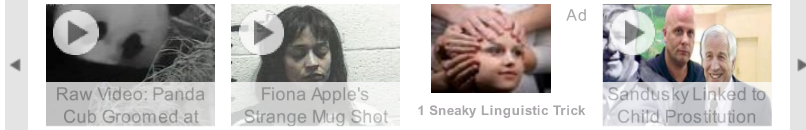
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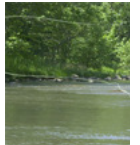
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