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Our wealth isn't shared by all

In Maryland, nation's richest state, many struggle to survive

Maryland has been called "America in miniature" -- with coastal areas, rivers, mountains and plains, it is in a sense a microcosm of the larger United States of America.

Economically, that may also hold true. According to a report released recently by the Maryland Budget and Tax Policy Institute and the Progressive Maryland Education Fund, Maryland's median household income has increased to \$68,080 -- the highest in the nation. And the state's rate of unemployment --4.4 percent -- remains lower than the national average of 4.7 percent.

But that can be misleading. It doesn't mean everyone in Maryland is comfortable in these tight economic times. The high median household income figure is driven mostly by growth among the incomes of affluent and upper middle class Marylanders. The report also shows that Maryland's working class residents face rising unemployment, poverty rates and health care costs. And an increasing number of state residents are uninsured or underinsured, which explains why this wealthy state's infant mortality rate and overall mortality rate are both higher than the national average.

A state revenue shortfall of \$432 million this year does not bode well for low-income residents. But there are ways to make things better, and Maryland is looking at its options.

On the one hand, the report indicates more stringent tax enforcement and elimination of tax breaks for the wealthy could produce additional needed revenue. And efforts to promote adult education aimed at moving entry-level workers into middle-level positions by increasing their skills and knowledge can help everyone, opening up entry-level jobs for other workers.

Maryland's greatest concentration of wealth is not located on the Lower Shore, where it is not particularly evident that our state would be ranked as wealthiest in the nation. But greater educational opportunities --both young people and working adults -- could help to turn that statistic around and allow more Maryland residents to share in the wealth and standard of living our state has to offer. This can be accomplished not through redistribution of income but rather by opening up opportunities -- both educational and occupational --for more of our residents.

The report recommends aiming for expanded child care facilities and college scholarships as well as raising the minimum wage and expanding health care. Some are more difficult than others to accomplish. Efforts by Comptroller Peter Franchot to more strictly enforce existing tax collections, including an examination of vendors that win state or federal contracts to make sure they do not owe additional taxes to either government, can help bridge the revenue gap and thereby free up funds to help enable more Marylanders to share in the benefits of living in the nation's wealthiest state.
