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You can live on \$15/hr in the Triangle, but it isn't easy

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Unionization movements among workers for Starbucks and Amazon; sick-outs among school bus drivers and protests by fast food workers; a record number of resignations across the country – all are linked to the fight for a "living wage." Many have been focused on raising starting salaries to \$15 per hour. So, WRAL News wanted to know whether that amount would truly be a "living wage" in the Triangle, where inflation combines with soaring real estate demand.

Tracy Harter makes \$15 per hour as a housekeeper at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

"I love my job, and I love the students," she said.

Her paycheck covers the cost of living for Harter and her dog, Little Man.

"I live by myself, so my needs are small," she said.

Harter drives a fuel-efficient car, paid for with settlement money from a car crash, and she gets her groceries from a food pantry where she volunteers. She buys clothes from thrift stores and garage sales and lives 45 minutes from campus in Granville County, where the rent is cheaper.

"I'm very frugal," she says, but she knows that stretching \$15 per hour isn't possible for everyone.

"I'm not like some of the housekeepers that are single parents. They're the only income for themselves and their children," she said.

When calculated using [a tool developed at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology](#), assuming a 40-hour work week and 52 weeks of pay per year, a resident of Orange County, home to UNC-Chapel Hill, would need to earn \$16.02 an hour to support him or herself. In Wake County, a single person would need \$16.32 an hour, or about \$34,000 a year. That's more than double the current minimum wage – \$7.25 – in North Carolina.

MIT uses federal data to pinpoint what wage is needed to cover the basics like food and housing.

"When you start thinking about everything from housing to food to childcare to energy, all those kinds of things add up, said Dr. Henry McKoy, director of entrepreneurship at North Carolina Central University.

McKoy, once the assistant secretary of commerce for North Carolina, says \$15 an hour in the Triangle isn't a living wage, pointing out that the wage-to-inflation ratio isn't balanced.

"You've had this situation where technology has been displacing folks. Folks' income hasn't been rising at the same rate as goods as services, and so that's problematic," McKoy says.

The rising cost of housing poses another problem. In Raleigh, the median rent for a two-bedroom apartment is over \$1,500, up 22 percent from last year. In Durham, it rose from around \$1,150 in 2020 to over \$1,400. In Cary, the median cost for two bedrooms is up 23 percent year-over-year, to more than \$1,600.

In April, Democratic lawmakers introduced a bill to raise North Carolina's minimum wage to \$15 an hour by 2023, but the measure went nowhere. The state and federal minimum wage has been stalled at \$7.25 for more than a decade.

Harter says that is not enough. Fifteen dollars, she says, "Without question, that should be the minimum wage." And even more is needed as the Triangle becomes more expensive.

