

## **Mary's Story**

Most days, around 8 a.m. in a small two-bedroom apartment, she begins her day. She prepares breakfast for her two-year-old son and readies herself for work. But for this single mother, her daily routine also includes worrying about paying rent, daycare, and what she'll do when she takes maternity leave in three months to give birth to her second child and is bringing in no income from her \$7,200 a year job.

She requested that her name not be used. Instead, she will be referred to as Mary.

Mary lives in McPherson. She also lives in poverty.

Mary had been a struggling single mother ever since the birth of her son but had found stability when she and her boyfriend began living together. With two incomes, the struggle to care and provide for her son and herself wasn't as hard.

Then she got married.

"Things really started to fall apart of us after we got married and separated and we went back to being a one-income family being paid once a month and when that ended I worked for the school district and when that ended I was back at my old job that doesn't really pay," Mary said.

While Mary had always used some government aid even while with her husband, lived with her, she turned to it for greater help after he left, which can made for a tumultuous existence.

Last month, when her employer was slow in filing paperwork needed for her to receive assistance from the Kansas Department of Social and Rehabilitative Services (SRS), SRS cut her assistance entirely.

"I didn't have any help paying for daycare, I didn't have any food stamps for a month. I just got my assistance back yesterday (July 3)," Mary said.

Without food stamps, feeding her toddler was suddenly a struggle and Mary turned to the food bank. Accessing the food bank presented its own challenges, however.

"You have to get a referral from SRS and SRS doesn't mind you having someone else pickup the referral for you but the food bank doesn't like someone else taking the referral in and filing it for you. They'll let you do it once," Mary said. "So the position I was in was, do I take time off of work and lose out on the money I'm suppose to be making to put food in my house or do I go without and stay at work."

Mary decided to have someone file the referral for her.

"Hopefully I will never have to do that again because next time they won't let someone do that for me and I would have to go myself and I work a lot," Mary said.

Mary, who makes \$600 a month and must split her income between rent and car payments among other expenses, is grateful for the relief that her food stamps – which are part of her SRS assistance - provide.

“If I have food stamps, I know my son’s going to eat. I know there’s going to be food on the table,” Mary said.

Mary first began receiving help from SRS when was 21 and pregnant with her son. And while SRS provides relief and assistance which has helps her and her employer – while paying low wages, according to Mary – is very supportive and flexible with her situation, she has a hard time seeing how she will break free from her need for help.

“I’m 25 now and I should have a career. I should have something that could really provide for my family,” Mary said.

Mary did attend college at Fort Hays State University for a semester before becoming pregnant but was forced to drop out due to financial difficulty which arose because her mother had not been in a position to help file for financial aid.

Later, Mary did return to college for another semester through Hutchinson Community College. Because her college consisted of mostly general education classes, she has not been able to obtain any training or education which would make her more appealing to employers.

The chances of Mary returning to college are slim. To return to school Mary would have to find a job with minimal hours and maximum pay and find someone to care for her child other than a daycare provider.

SRS provides support for daycare needed because a parent is working but does not provide any daycare support for a parent who is absent for school.

Even if she was able to return to school, her focus would have to be on attaining education in a field that would provide the most for her children. Mary said she would like to work with children and become a teacher, but she also said that teaching doesn’t pay well enough to sustain a single-parent family.

“And maybe that’s silly on my part, but when I plan my future, especially because of my first marriage, I just kind of plan on being a single parent. I don’t want to have to count on another income that may or may not be there,” Mary said.

Mary is inspired, though, by her sister, who has two kids, two jobs and is also a student.

“She’s stressed as far as she can go and she is absolutely my hero because I keep telling myself: If she can do it, then I can do it,” Mary said.

Several factors keep Mary from following her sister, though. Mary’s sister is able to let her children’s father take them for periods of time, something which Mary does not have.

Mary’s child has never seen his father.

Because her sister has two children of her own, she would have a hard time finding time to look after Mary’s. Mary’s mother also lives out of town and Mary can’t afford the gas to drive there.

With any dream of attending college a distant one, Mary has settled into a life of hard questions and daily struggle.

“Emotionally, some days are better than others. But there is a constant worry, ‘Well, am I going to get paid? Am I going to have the money to pay rent? Am I going to have the money to make my car payment?’” Mary said. “Those are the big worries on my everyday. And I hate it. I hate being stressed about it, thinking about it. It just takes a lot out of me to worry about it everyday.”

Recently, Mary had to switch daycare providers because the one her son was costing her \$200 a month, even after SRS picked up the rest of the bill.

“She was worth the money, but it got to the point, with the second baby coming, that I couldn’t do it anymore,” Mary said.

Mary started taking her son to a friend who had cared for him earlier in his life – from the time he had been two months old to shortly after he turned one. When SRS cut off her assistance last month, her friend decided, in part, to let Mary to continue using her for daycare because of the Women, Infant, Children (WIC) assistance Mary received.

“I was using my WIC to give her milk and cheese and eggs – the stuff that they need. That was paying for my daycare, because I didn’t have money,” Mary said.

Although Mary’s assistance was reinstated, she has been able to retain her payment system with her friend.

“She’s still going to let me do that which is really great,” Mary said. “But from here on out, my family fee is only going to be \$18, which is amazing. I only have to pay \$18 a month for daycare.

But when I make \$600, and that’s my car and my rent, there isn’t \$18 left so she is still going to let me pay her with milk and eggs and cheese and I don’t know if that’s legal, but that’s how I’ve done it and that’s how it’s being done because she knows as well as I do, sometimes the money’s just not there.”

Mary is able to use her WIC aid as payment because she said she receives more eggs, cheese and milk than she can use.

Mary’s successful daycare situation is eclipsed by the looming birth of her second child, which presents new problems.

Mary worries what will happen if her new child is a girl.

“If this baby is a girl, they’ll (the apartment complex) want to give me a three-bedroom apartment because opposite sex children can’t share a bedroom here. That’s four hundred dollars a month. I can barely pay rent here (in my current apartment),” Mary said.

In the long term, Mary worries about what kind of life she can give her children.

“He’s going to eventually want to play sports and it’s sad when I think about it. I think long term about it, financially. He’s eventually going to want to do all these other things kids are doing and am I going to be able to afford to let him do that?” Mary said.

She even worries whether she'll have enough money to buy her son a birthday present when he turns three in August.

"I just keep telling myself, 'It has to get better,' but as far as really believing it, not really," Mary said.

When asked if she had any hope for the future, Mary teared up.

"No, not really."