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Bill would raise minimum wage

Democrats, others seek change in state

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The Courier-Journal

FRANKFORT, Ky. -- Religious, labor and advocacy groups joined Democratic lawmakers yesterday to urge support of state legislation to increase the minimum wage from \$5.15 an hour to \$7.

"This right here is a moral issue we must deal with," said Rep. J.R. Gray, the Benton Democrat who filed a bill yesterday for the 2007 legislative session. "It's the right thing to do."

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Congress hasn't increased the federal minimum wage of \$5.15 an hour since 1997, but 29 states have done so, including Missouri, Illinois, Ohio and West Virginia, according to Kentucky Youth Advocates.

Last year, a bill to increase Kentucky's minimum wage died in the House, but a House leader said yesterday he would support Gray's legislation. The leader of

the Republican-controlled Senate did not directly address his intentions on the legislation.

The bill also would require employers to pay workers who receive tips \$7 an hour. Now employers may pay those workers \$2.13 an hour as long as their tips bring their total compensation to \$5.15 an hour.

It also would increase Kentucky's minimum wage to the federal level if a federal increase were to exceed the state's minimum.

"It really is a big step toward eliminating child poverty in our state," said Debra Miller, with Kentucky Youth Advocates, one of the members of the "Raise the Wage" coalition.

Cara Prince, 41, of Louisville, who was at yesterday's announcement, said the change would help her. A single mother who has worked at a series of low-paying, temporary or fast-food jobs, Prince said she can't pay basic household expenses for herself and her daughter, 12.

"I never know if we're going to have enough money at the end of the month," she said.

But the Kentucky Chamber of Commerce questioned the need for the law, saying yesterday that the state should instead help people get better jobs and leave the minimum wage to Congress.

"If we're serious about doing something for low-income workers in the state,

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then the proper policy response is, what can we do to remove the barriers?" said chamber spokesman Mike Ridenour.

Advocates who spoke yesterday at the event said as many as 275,000 Kentucky workers could benefit from the increase.

And about 117,000 children live in homes where adults would benefit from an increase, Miller said.

House Speaker Jody Richards, D-Bowling Green, pledged his support yesterday and said he believes the bill will pass the House, controlled by Democrats.

Richards said House Democrats plan to make the measure "part of our family agenda."

Senate Democrats also pledged their support. "Families can't live on the minimum wage," said Senate Democratic leader Ed Worley of Richmond.

But Senate President David Williams, R-Burkesville, said Democrats who are taking control of Congress have championed an increase in the minimum wage as a priority.

"Both people who agree and disagree that this policy will grow jobs can agree that this issue is best addressed at a national level," said Williams, whose party controls the state Senate.

Stacy Roof, CEO of the Kentucky Restaurant Association, said such legislation could have a major impact on the industry. Roof said many employers already pay more than minimum wage to attract good workers. "The marketplace decides wages," she said.

But Prince said she's never been able to earn more than \$6 an hour, not enough to survive.


"I wish everyone would have to make minimum wage for one month and they would see how we struggle," she said.

Other members of the coalition include the Catholic Conference of Kentucky, the Kentucky Council of Churches, the Kentucky Domestic Violence Association and the Kentucky Education Association.

The Rev. Patrick Delahanty, with the Catholic Conference, cited national polling that showed a majority of Americans of all parties support increasing minimum wage.

"This is legislation that the people want," he said.

Reporter Deborah Yetter can be reached at (502) 582-4228.

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