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National/International News
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Father Patrick Delahanty, associate director of the Catholic Conference of Kentucky

Raising the minimum wage in state called 'moral issue'

Joseph Duerr
Record Editor

Catholic Conference of Kentucky is part of coalition to work for passage of a bill in 2007 legislature

FRANKFORT, Ky. — State Rep. J.R. Gray of Benton, Ky., recalled seeing a bumper sticker that described homelessness, poverty and health care as moral issues. And he believes the minimum wage should be added to the list.

"This right here is a moral issue we must deal with," Gray said about increasing the minimum wage in Kentucky. Many people, he noted, are "not making enough money an hour in order to support their families."

Gray spoke at a press conference last week at the state Capitol in which a diverse coalition of organizations — called Kentucky Raise the Wage Coalition — announced support for legislation to increase the minimum wage in the 2007 Kentucky General Assembly, which convenes in January. The Catholic Conference of Kentucky, the public policy arm of the state's Roman Catholic bishops, and the Kentucky Council of Churches are among the 18 members of the coalition.

Gray has prefiled a bill for the upcoming legislative session that would raise the state minimum wage from \$5.15 to \$7 an hour. The measure also contains a cost-of-living adjustment that would increase the minimum wage annually according to the Consumer Price Index.

In addition, the bill would change the tip-credit law by requiring employers to pay \$7 an hour to workers who receive tips. Currently, employers can pay these workers \$2.13 an hour if they also make enough in tips to bring their total compensation to \$5.15 an hour.

Gray acknowledged that changing the tip-credit law "will meet with quite a bit of opposition from some folks," but said "I've always had a problem" with this provision. He said he believes that workers who receive tips should also be paid the minimum wage and that their tips should be in addition to their wage rate.

Several other bills to increase the minimum wage also have been pre-filed in the 2007 General Assembly. One compassion proposal filed by a group of House and Senate members would raise the minimum wage in three stages to \$7.25 on July 1, 2009.

Kentucky's minimum wage has been the same as the federal rate of \$5.15 an hour since 1997. But 29 states and the District of Columbia have raised their minimum wage rates above \$5.15, including six states in which voters approved increases in the Nov. 7 elections. Kentucky is one of 21 states where the rate has been unchanged.

Those who spoke at the Nov. 16 press conference said a change is needed in Kentucky.

"It's clearly an idea whose time has come," said House Speaker Jodie Richards of Bowling Green. "People recognize that \$5.15 an hour is abominably low. Nobody can live on that."

Raising the minimum wage is "the right thing to do," said Speaker Pro-Tem Rep. Larry Clark of Louisville.

Both Richards and Clark said legislation to increase the minimum wage would be included in the House Democrats family agenda in the 2007 General Assembly.

A press release issued Nov. 16 by 14 Senate Democrats said they also supported raising the minimum wage.

Several members of the Kentucky Raise the Wage Coalition mentioned why they are backing an increase in the minimum wage.

Educators know firsthand the effects of poverty on school children, said Frances Steenbergen, president of the Kentucky Education Association.

"It is very difficult for us as school employees ... to see those students struggle" and to know that the only hot meal they may get is at school because their parents work at wages that are not sufficient "to get by on," she said. Raising the minimum wage is "going to benefit not only the children but it will benefit the community as well," she added.

Debra Miller of Kentucky Youth Advocates, another coalition member, presented statistics showing that 275,000 Kentucky workers would benefit from raising the minimum wage to \$7 an hour and having an annual adjustment for inflation. This number includes 102,000 who are married and 66,000 who are parents, she said.

Miller also said 117,000 Kentucky children live in households where workers would see their wages increased if the proposed legislation passes.

"It really is a beginning step to eliminate child poverty in our state," she added. "It's not the only thing we need to do, but this is a great first step."

Two Louisville women said raising the minimum wage would help them better provide for their families.

Crystal Blackburn, a 27-year-old single mother with a son, said she is paid less than \$7 an hour as a full-time child-care worker and doesn't earn "enough to make ends meet."

"Low-wage work makes you feel bitter and unappreciated," she said. "It gives people a sense of hopelessness, and they get discouraged. People just give up."


Cara Prince, a 41-year-old mother who has a daughter, said she makes about \$6 an hour as a temporary worker. "I work hard, but with wages this low I've really struggled," she said.


By raising the minimum wage to \$7 an hour with an annual cost-of-living adjustment, she said, "we could pay a couple of more bills and not worry about my LG&E (service) getting shut off."

"I wish people could walk in our shoes for a little while," Prince said. "I wish people would have to make low wages just for one month to see how we struggle."

Father Patrick Delahanty, associate director of the Catholic Conference of Kentucky, said "hard work deserves fair pay, and that's not what is happening." He said the Kentucky Raise the Wage Coalition "wants to impress upon people that hard work does deserve fair pay."

Other members of the coalition include the AFL-CIO, Kentucky Domestic Violence Association, Homeless and Housing Coalition of Kentucky, Kentuckians for the Commonwealth, Kentucky Jobs with Justice and the Jefferson County Teachers Association.

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