



Posted on Fri, Feb. 16, 2007

Committee advances minimum wage rise

By Jack Brammer
HERALD-LEADER FRANKFORT BUREAU

FRANKFORT - Cara Prince, 41, of Louisville, is a single mother of three who tries to get by on \$6 an hour as a temporary worker.

The Medicaid recipient has worked for the last 17 years at or about the minimum wage, which is now \$5.15 an hour. She told lawmakers that more "certainly would help."

A majority of members of the House Labor and Industry Committee sided with her yesterday, approving a bill that would raise the minimum wage in Kentucky.

House Bill 305, sponsored by Rep. J.R. Gray, D-Benton, would increase the current minimum wage to \$5.85 in mid-July. It would jump to \$6.55 on July 1, 2008, and to \$7.25 on July 1, 2009.

The Rev. Nancy Jo Kemper, executive director of the Kentucky Council of Churches, said the last increase in the minimum wage was in 1997. "This is a clear issue on how we are going to treat our neighbors," she said.

But Jan Gould, with the Kentucky Retail Federation, said Kentucky lawmakers should wait until they see what the U.S. Congress does on the minimum wage.

Fourteen members of the House committee voted in favor of Gray's bill. Two -- Republicans Myron Dossett of Pembroke and Adam Koenig of Erlanger -- voted no. Rep. Bill Farmer, R-Lexington, did not vote.

As originally proposed, Gray's bill would have immediately raised the minimum wage to \$7 an hour, with annual increases based on inflation. And it would have required the minimum wage to be paid to workers who make most of their salary in tips.

In the new bill, the current "tip minimum wage," at \$2.13 an hour for workers such as waiters and waitresses, would stay the same.

Gray said he preferred his original bill but had to make compromises to try to get it approved in the Democratic-controlled House and the Republican-led Senate.

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