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Beshear pushes wage increase

By Tom Loftus
tloftus@courier-journal.com
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tloftus@courier-journal.com
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FRANKFORT, Ky. — Democratic gubernatorial candidate Steve Beshear urged the General Assembly yesterday to raise Kentucky's minimum wage rather than wait to see if Congress will reach a final decision.

The national minimum wage of \$5.15 an hour -- which also is the minimum in Kentucky -- has not been increased in a decade. Several bills before the legislature would raise it by varying amounts.

Beshear said a full-time worker earning the minimum wage makes only about \$10,700 a year -- almost \$6,000 below the federal poverty level for a family of three.

The U.S. House voted last month to raise the minimum wage to \$7.25 an hour by 2009. And yesterday the Senate approved the same increase. But the Senate bill also contains differences that will have to be resolved.

"It would be great if the United States Congress finally did something about the minimum wage, but we ought not sit around and wait for the kindness of strangers if it doesn't," Beshear said before the Senate vote.

Raising the minimum wage is a priority of state House Democrats, led by Speaker Jody Richards, who also is running in the May 22 Democratic primary for governor. The issue's prospects in the Republican-controlled Senate are uncertain.

Beshear acknowledged that his position on the issue is not different from that of other Democrats. "I'm not looking for an advantage in a political race. I'm advocating something that needs to be done for the working people in this state."

Reporter Tom Loftus can be reached at (502) 875-5136.

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