

Guest Editorial
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When Less is Less

Working poor is more than an abstract concept when you must decide whether your child has an adequate coat or gets to eat today. A single parent earning the minimum wage at a full-time job makes less than the federal poverty level for a family of two. Indeed, the minimum wage is less than the minimum needed to survive.

Reluctance to raise the minimum wage stems from a fear that raising wages will increase the cost of living for everyone and, in the end, hurt workers by forcing employers to cut jobs. Real world experience shows this is not true. Studies following the increases in the federal minimum wage in the early and mid 1990s showed no measurable loss in the number of jobs. On the other hand, raising the minimum wage can raise the quality of life for everyone. It reduces the impact of the indigent on healthcare systems, a financial burden absorbed by those with insurance, and lowers the demand on social services and law enforcement, a financial burden absorbed by all taxpayers. Low-wages are a root cause of poverty and poverty takes a toll on communities in innumerable ways, starting with high rates of high-school dropouts, domestic violence and teen pregnancy.

It's a common misperception that only teenagers and others who don't need to support families earn the minimum wage but supporters of raising the minimum wage say 10 percent of those whose wages would increase are single mothers, 72 percent are adults, and almost half work full time.

Raising the minimum wage is also a question of fairness. In a world where corporate executives can take their companies into bankruptcy and still collect millions of dollars in bonuses, it is astonishing that a hard-working adult must juggle basic necessities. On a lesser level, that disparity exists within state government. New Mexico has school superintendents making more than \$100,000 a year while teaching assistants make less than \$15,000. Judges earn substantially more than law enforcement and correctional officers, the other half of the justice equation. Some difference is justified but these disparities should not be taken for granted. Recognizing that some state employees are not earning amounts commensurate with their skills or the services they provide, the Legislature this year will consider pay raises for state police, motor transportation, and probation and parole officers and teaching assistants, as well as the continuing implementation of the pay ladder for teachers and across-the-board increases for all state employees. In many cases, New Mexico government pay is so low, agencies have trouble filling positions.

New Mexico should not wait for the federal government to raise the minimum wage, something it has not done in eight years. It must take steps now to improve the lives of New Mexico's working poor for the benefit of all New Mexicans.

Senator Campos has been a member of the Senate Finance Committee for nine years. The senator for parts of Guadalupe, Mora, San Miguel, Santa Fe and Tarrant counties, Campos is also a member of the Information Technology Oversight Committee, Legislative Ethics Committee, Legislative Council and Legislative Finance Committee.