

COMMENTARY

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State deals a blow to working families

By SCOTT K. WILDERMAN

I was truly saddened to hear that the minimum wage bill, debated at the state Capitol and in the streets for so long, will not become law.

The modest increases proposed in the bill would have provided many of the state's low-income families a better chance at surviving in this desolate economy. Unfortunately, they are now pushed farther to the edge, and we've widened an already cavernous income gap between the wealthy and the poor. Truth be told, nearly everyone that I talk to is struggling to make ends meet. The high cost of gas, electricity, food, health care and housing has impacted the daily economics of everyone's existence.

But for minimum-wage earners, these higher costs translate into the grim reality of absolute poverty. Take, for example, the fact that filling the average car today with gas costs nearly \$65; for a minimum-wage earner, this is roughly 25 percent of their take-home pay!

Some people may say that these workers should go get a second job and that it is not the responsibility of the state to take care of them. To that I can only reply that many of these poor families are already working two jobs and they are competing with the middle class family that is also taking on

additional work to help make ends meet. Higher-skilled middle-income workers also need the security that a second income can bring.

Not to mention the fact that parents working a second job aren't there to read to their kids at night, to help with their homework, to help them learn to ride a bike, and to be there as parents need to be to give their kids the love and care they need to thrive in the world.

As for the state footing the bill to help out low-income workers, the truth is that they will in one way or another! Food banks, shelters and clinics — most extremely underfunded by the state, and operating anyway on volunteer manpower and private donations — are at their brink. People are desperate and need help, and this translates into high rates of usage in state-funded programs and social services. Eventually, when all social services fail and some people are forced to turn to crime, it will translate into even higher incarceration rates, where we pay more than \$30,000 per year to keep someone locked up, rather than collecting the payroll taxes and other contributions of a functioning and productive citizen.

To me this is truly a basic economics lesson. If people earn more, they will spend more. This is one reason a higher minimum wage is ultimately going to be good for even the businesses whose

payroll costs will increase. Henry Ford knew that people needed to make enough money to buy the cars he was selling. That a rising tide lifted everyone's boats. Does anyone actually think that a low-wage worker is going to take their 35 cents more an hour and put it toward a Disney vacation? No, they will spend that 35 cents on goods and services in their city or town, most likely in the same store where they are employed.

The working families of Connecticut aren't looking for help with their hands out. They want a fair chance to earn a living wage at a meaningful job. They want the dignity and self-respect that comes from supporting themselves and their families with their own intelligence, ingenuity and hard work.

When a worker needs to hold three jobs to pay for a meager apartment, there's something wrong with the system. All the hard work and personal accountability in the world can't correct this structural flaw. It's up to all of us to do what we can to provide a society where people who want to work and are willing to work can provide a decent life for their families.

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