

## **Hourly increase may help push for 'living wage'**

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A group pushing a "living wage" in Birmingham hopes a higher federal minimum wage will boost its efforts to ensure some workers earn enough pay for necessities such as food, housing, child care and utility bills.

The Alabama Appleseed Center for Law & Justice and Birmingham City Councilwoman Carol Reynolds are backing a measure that would require contractors doing business with Alabama's largest city to pay workers more than \$9 an hour for those with benefits and more than \$11 an hour without benefits.

"A living wage is long overdue to help our working poor," Reynolds said.

The living wage proposal, now being studied by the city's legal department, is similar to ones on the books in more than 100 cities and counties nationally, according to the Living Wage Resource Center.

San Francisco requires companies getting city contracts or leasing at its airport to pay workers at least \$9 an hour. Chicago's City Council last July required large retailers to pay at least \$9.25 an hour in 2007. Miami last year passed a living wage ordinance requiring city employees and companies holding city contracts over \$100,000 a year to pay workers \$10.58 an hour with insurance or \$11.83 without it.

Advocates say more than the \$7.25 proposed as the new federal minimum wage is needed to make sure workers don't have to rely on other forms of assistance.

"Even if you are making \$7 an hour and have two children, you have to depend on other resources to get by," said Felicia McCleery, employment program coordinator for Pathways, a downtown agency that assists homeless women.

A full-time worker making the current minimum of \$5.15 an hour earns \$10,712 a year, slightly above the 2007 federal poverty guideline of \$10,210 for a single-person household. At \$7.25 an hour, that same worker would earn \$15,080 a year.

The poverty level for a single person with two children, however, is \$17,170 annually in the 48 contiguous states and the District of Columbia.

To get by without needing federal assistance such as food stamps, child care and transportation subsidies, a worker would need to earn more, said Shay Farley of Alabama Appleseed. The Montgomery-based agency recently commissioned a study that concluded in Alabama a single parent with one child would need take-home pay of \$1,638 a month, \$19,660 annually, to meet basic needs.

That represents the minimum required to cover monthly food expenses of \$273, housing of \$463, child care of \$276, health care of \$224, transportation of \$264 and clothing and miscellaneous needs of \$139.

Business groups oppose the living wage proposal.

Rosemary Elebash, Alabama state director of the National Federation of Independent Businesses, said most of the trade group's membership is already paying workers wages higher than the current federal minimum. Her group, she said, doesn't want to see an effort to set a state-mandated minimum or a city living wage.

"We don't want a separate Alabama or municipality minimum wage," Elebash said. "That would add too much paperwork, and dealing with government issues is a hassle as it is now."