

Idaho group calling for minimum wage hike

Coalition seeks \$9.80 minimum by 2017

William L. Spence/Lewiston Tribune

A grass-roots group of religious and human rights activists is hoping Idaho will join 19 other states next year and raise its minimum wage above the federal standard.

The Raise Idaho coalition is circulating a ballot initiative calling for a 35 percent increase in Idaho's minimum wage over the next three years, from \$7.25 today to \$8.10 in 2015, \$8.95 in 2016 and \$9.80 by 2017.

If approved by voters, the measure would also require automatic cost-of-living increases in the minimum wage, beginning in 2019.

"This is about human dignity," said Raise Idaho spokeswoman Anne Nesse of Coeur d'Alene. "We think it's a basic human right for someone to be able to earn enough (to pay for) nutritional food, shelter and transportation."

In a conference call with reporters Monday, Idaho Congressman Raul Labrador opposed raising the minimum wage, saying it would lead to "an explosion of unemployment," particularly among teenagers.

Labrador suggested people should improve their lot in life by acquiring new skills and taking on additional responsibilities, rather than demanding wage increases. Nesse responded by saying Labrador "isn't paying attention to what's happening across the state."

Citing statistics from the Alliance for a Just Society's 2013 job gap study, she noted there's an average of 10 applicants for every living-wage job opening in the state.

"We have to apply for these (minimum-wage) jobs, because that's what's available," Nesse said.

The average age of a minimum-wage worker is 27 - and given the rising cost of tuition and the fact that training opportunities aren't available in many parts of the state, she said, going to college or technical school to acquire new skills isn't an option for many of them.

The ballot initiative doesn't apply to seasonal workers or to people younger than 18. The \$9.80 target is slightly more than \$20,000 per year for a full-time employee.

"Even at that level, someone would probably still have to share a dwelling with another worker," said Nesse, who unsuccessfully ran for the Idaho Legislature on this issue last year.

Almost 54,000 valid signatures from registered voters are needed to qualify the measure for the 2014 general election ballot. The deadline for submitting signatures is May 1, although the coalition is hoping to finish the process by April 15.

In his State of the Union address earlier this year, President Barack Obama proposed raising the federal minimum wage to \$9 per hour. Several states have already taken matters into their own hands, however, most often through the initiative process.

Washington voters, for example, approved Initiative 688 in 1998. It raised the minimum wage and indexed it to inflation. Since then, the state minimum has jumped 78 percent, to \$9.19 per hour; it's scheduled to increase to \$9.32 per hour Jan. 1.

New York, Connecticut and New Jersey all approved minimum-wage increases this year, as did California, which now has the highest minimum wage in the country at \$10 per hour.

Voters in SeaTac, Wash., narrowly approved an increase to \$15 per hour for about 7,000 airport and hospitality industry workers in November. According to the National Employment Law Project, groups in Massachusetts, Alaska and South Dakota are also trying to qualify minimum-wage initiatives for the 2014 ballot, and state lawmakers in Maryland, Illinois, Minnesota and Hawaii may consider the issue as well.

Besides just the basic dignity of allowing individuals to support themselves, Nesse said, raising the minimum wage benefits the economy by reducing employee turnover, increasing the amount of disposable income available, and reducing depression and other negative health effects.

A number of academic studies support such claims, but there's just as much research in the other direction.

A recent University of Chicago poll, for example, asked about 40 prominent economists whether raising the minimum wage to \$9 an hour would make it harder for low-skilled workers to find employment. A third of them agreed, a third disagreed and 24 percent weren't sure.

"The economics profession is quite divided on this issue," said Steven Peterson, an economics professor at the University of Idaho. "The research in this field is very mixed, and a lot of it is fighting over statistical techniques."

In general, he said, prevailing wages in the rural parts of Idaho and Washington are lower than the state averages, so boosting the minimum wage would have greater affect in those areas.

Raising the minimum wage also allows poor working families to support themselves better, Peterson said, but it tends to hurt unskilled workers.

"For teens and young adults, that group is just learning how to work, and you really don't want to mess with their wages," he said. "The group you want to help is the working poor, and there might be better ways to assist them - for example, with the earned income tax credit or helping

them with their health care costs. I support the Medicaid expansion; if we covered health care costs for all minimum-wage workers, that alone would solve a lot of the problem."

Idaho's Republican-dominated Legislature hasn't embraced that opportunity, though, so the Raise Idaho initiative is being targeted to voters interested in aiding the working poor.

"If we don't get it on the ballot, we're left with the situation we have now," Nesse said.

For more information on the Raise Idaho coalition and to download copies of the initiative, visit www.RaiseIdaho.org.

Spence may be contacted at bspence@lmtribune.com or (208) 791-9168.