

# Tuning in to Idaho's marginalized workers

Marty Trillhaase/Lewiston Tribune

In a different political era, Idaho legislators quit talking about poverty in the abstract and experienced it first-hand.

Then, it was Sen. Cecil Ingram, R-Boise, and 30 of his fellow lawmakers who tried living on food stamps. For Ingram, it was an eye-opener. He found it nearly impossible to stretch the stipend across the month.

The epiphany influenced his approach to social programs from then on.

Which brings us to the minimum wage. In Idaho, it's \$7.25 an hour, unchanged since 2007. Lawmakers could do more. They don't have to wait on President Obama's plan to boost the wage to \$9 an hour. Nineteen states exceed the federal floor. At \$9.19 an hour, Washington's rate is highest.

Just for the sake of argument, what would happen if today's generation of Idaho lawmakers followed Ingram's example? If they tried to live on \$7.25 an hour, what would they discover?

Someone who works a 40-hour week at minimum wage earns \$15,080 a year, \$500 short of the poverty line for a two-person household and less than half what's needed for a living wage.

Bank accounts, paying for education and saving for retirement are beyond their grasp.

Getting to work requires a car. But a minimum wage won't support a reliable one. So when the water pump breaks or the starter motor quits, it becomes a crisis.

Minimum-wage jobs usually don't make allowances for staying home with sick children. They don't pay enough to support day care. Those not able to score one of the limited government day care subsidies turn to friends and family to watch the kids.

There's no money for health care. Doctor visits are put off. Prescriptions aren't filled. And problems - diabetes, high blood pressure or that suspicious lump - go neglected.

Housing's no cinch. Landlords often want a credit history plus a deposit check. Getting by on minimum wage could mean accepting a cramped, substandard apartment. Moving in with friends. Living week-to-week in a motel where no deposit is required. Or living out of a car.

If someone of Ingram's curiosity were willing to look, he'd find one of every 20 Idaho workers - 7,000 men and 12,000 women - earn the minimum wage. That's the 28th highest rate in the country.

Most are adults. Nationally, 84 percent of minimum wage earners are at least 20 years old.

Nearly half are working full time.

On average, someone who earns the minimum wage is a breadwinner - paying 46 percent of the household bills.

Many are women raising one or two children on their own.

He'd learn that the minimum wage has lost nearly 30 percent of its buying power since the early 1970s - in spite of congressional promises in the 1990s to reward people who left welfare to work.

In Idaho, he'd find the proportion of minimum-wage workers is nearly double what it was before the recession hit. In a state where per capita incomes are second to the bottom and median earnings are dead last, these are the poorest of the poor.

He'd learn that while Idaho business profits have recovered to pre-recession levels, wages lag behind.

He'd ask why a minimum wage boost didn't hurt the economy in the 1990s - or why a pencil-sharpening outfit such as Walmart left the minimum-wage basement of Lewiston for the balcony of Clarkston.

And he might - just might - notice that helping a few of Idaho's marginalized workers would be good for the people in the middle and at the top of the pyramid.

Of course, it requires leaving the cocoon of Capitol hearings and lunches with business lobbyists.

But is that too much to ask?- M.T.