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Boost in minimum Ohio wage would aid 450,000, study says

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Nearly 450,000 Ohioans - including 297,000 women - would benefit from a state senator's proposal to raise the state's minimum wage to \$7.15 an hour by 2007, according to a study released yesterday.

The \$7.15 rate is \$2 more than the lowest allowed under federal law.

More than a third of Ohio households with members making less than \$7.15 an hour rely solely on that earner's wages, and nearly all of them have children, according to Policy Matters Ohio, which released the study yesterday to coincide with legislative testimony from state Sen. C.J. Prentiss.

The Cleveland Democrat, a founding board member of the Cleveland think tank that did the study, sponsored a bill to raise the state minimum wage to \$7.15 an hour beginning in 2007.

It also calls for subsequent annual cost-of-living increases. But prospects for passage are not considered strong.

Some local employers, and even employees, say some businesses would struggle if they have to pay all employees that rate.

A higher state minimum wage would take precedence over the wage set by federal law, said Amy Hanauer, executive director of Policy Matters.

Connie Stubbleski, owner of Connie's restaurant in Toledo, said she pays dishwashers and waitresses less than \$7.15 an hour. Her business was hurt by Toledo's smoking ban, and she's not prepared to increase wages, she said.

"I'm sure the employees would like it," Ms. Stubbleski said. "I'm not going to give anybody a raise."

Ohio is one of two states nationwide where the state minimum, at \$4.25 an hour, is less than the federal minimum of \$5.15 an hour.

But the federal minimum wage applies to all Ohio firms engaging in interstate commerce or grossing more than \$500,000 a year, so fewer than 92,000 Ohioans make less than the federal minimum, according to the Policy Matters study.

Legislators and activists have tried to raise Ohio's minimum wage for years. Grassroots organizers likely will try to place a minimum-wage amendment on the November ballot if the Senate bill sponsored by Ms. Prentiss does not pass, according to Policy Matters.

Voters in Florida and Nevada passed ballot measures increasing those states' minimum wage rates, but the Nevada measure requires a second approval. Momentum among such states bodes well for Ohio, Ms. Hanauer said.

A higher minimum wage also would affect employees now making \$7.15 to \$8.15 an hour, the Ohio study concluded, because employers probably would bump up those wages to maintain the separation from the lowest paid.

Many of Ohio's lowest-paid workers have restaurant or retail jobs, and others work in child care centers, libraries, and other businesses, the study said. More than 70 percent of Ohioans making less than \$7.15 an hour are at least 20 years old.

One full-time employee at a Woodville Mall store said she makes \$6 an hour, which helps supplement her Social Security checks and her husband's factory income.

Also at the mall, a full-time manager at a restaurant in the food court said she makes \$7.25 an hour after four years there, just \$1.25 an hour more than part-time employees.

Both women, who declined to be identified, said they believe their employers would pay more if they could afford to and said they understand their employers' situations.

"If this mall was more busy, it would help us a lot," said the restaurant manager, a single mother of two who has struggled to find work.

The Ohio Restaurant Association, meanwhile, is opposed to raising the minimum wage on grounds that it would hamper owners' ability to grow and to hire more employees, said Tom Withgott, the association's government affairs director.

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