



New Laws Show State Concerns

Several to Raise Minimum Wage, Address Immigration Issues

By Robert Tanner
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Advertisement

For hundreds of thousands of minimum-wage workers around the country, the new year brings a raise. Musicians worried about copycats get some protection in Illinois. And California takes steps to reduce the power-plant pollution that is believed to contribute to global warming.

Jan. 1 brings new laws in many states, offering both a glimpse of what is on the voters' minds and a preview of some of the issues Washington might take up. Many states take action long before Congress does.

Effective Monday, seven states -- Arizona, California, Delaware, Massachusetts, New York, North Carolina and Pennsylvania -- will raise their minimum wage. The federal minimum is \$5.15 an hour. The new wages go as high as \$7.50 an hour.

"We've made Massachusetts the best state to live in for struggling working families," said Carl Nilsson, an activist for poor people, citing the higher minimum wage and an earlier state law that requires health insurance for all.

In Illinois, copycat musical groups that misrepresent themselves as the original artists will face fines of up to \$50,000. The new law requires live acts to make it clear in their advertising that they are a salute or a tribute to the real thing.

"From now on when the public goes to a rock-and-roll show in the area, they can be sure the artist is the original, and not some rip-off band," said Mary Wilson, formerly of the Supremes.

California passed a law that seeks to force coal-burning plants in Western states to install cleaner technology if they want to sell power in the nation's most populous state.

States also dealt with immigration (nurses from other countries must have English-language proficiency to practice in South Carolina), eminent domain (Illinois requires local governments to pay more and meet a higher legal threshold before seizing private property) and campaign finance (North Carolina and Pennsylvania set stricter rules).

Alaska will provide school systems with training to help prevent bullying, and South Carolina will require districts to adopt policies barring harassment, intimidation or bullying.

"We were getting too many complaints from parents that their children were being bullied and intimidated,"



said state Rep. Robert E. Walker (R). They were "fearing to go to school."

Wisconsin took steps to guard against wrongful convictions by requiring law enforcement agencies to record all interrogations of felony suspects, with either video or audio.

Alabama and West Virginia cut taxes on the poorest, and North Carolina lowered taxes on the highest earners. New York and Oklahoma dropped the "marriage penalty," which imposed higher taxes on married couples than on single people. South Dakota and Texas raised taxes on cigarettes.

Georgia increased from 13 to 29 the number of screening tests performed on newborns to detect life-threatening metabolic and genetic disorders. Massachusetts's new health-care law hits a new milestone, allowing those earning up to 300 percent of the federal poverty level to buy into subsidized plans. (Those at or below the poverty level are already eligible for virtually free health care).

In Indiana, a new license plate featuring the American flag and the words "In God We Trust" will be available at no extra charge.

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