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Minimum wage a hard way to live

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Metal hangers screech across the clothes rack, a constant rhythm created as Christine Yellowhair sorts dresses from evening gowns, tank tops from maternity clothes.

The ringing of the phone fills the silence before Marcia Williams' sales pitch; she hopes the next person will say yes to light bulbs or microfiber dusting towels.

The patter of rain on the truck's windshield worries Anthony Steg. If it fogs up the windows, he'll have to turn on the air-conditioning, meaning it'll take more gas to deliver tonight's pizzas.

These are the sounds of life at the minimum wage, where rent often eats up three-quarters of monthly take-home pay, where a phone is a luxury and any mishap, like a sick child, can start a chain reaction that leads from absenteeism at work to losing a job and overdue bills.

These are the kinds of people whom Rep. Steve Gallardo, D-Phoenix, wants to help. For the third straight year, he'll propose legislation to raise the minimum wage in Arizona, to \$7.10 an hour from \$5.15.

"This has always been an issue for many Democrats at the state Capitol," he said. "We're seeing more and more people that support a minimum-wage increase.

"We're done waiting."

He's familiar with the opposition; he expects it. That's why he's introducing a concurrent resolution to get the measure on the 2006 ballot. If that doesn't work, he pledged to launch an initiative drive to force it onto the ballot.

Fourteen states and the District of Columbia have statutes that set minimum wage higher than the federal standard of \$5.15, which has not been raised since 1997. Arizona is one of six states that does not have its own minimum-wage statute. Kansas and Ohio have lower wages.

Jack York, Arizona Department of Economic Security economist, estimates that as many as 300,000 Arizona workers would be affected.

Opponents such as Commerce Chairman Rep. Michele Reagan, R-Scottsdale, said such a bill would hurt small businesses and cause them to cut their workforces. Ninety-five percent of Arizonans work for small businesses, she said.

"We just can't go throw \$7 down their throats," she said.

Gallardo said he's not trying to burden small business but wants to raise awareness of what low-wage workers face in Arizona every day.

"It's a fairness issue," he said. "These people work very hard in our state, and here they are trying to raise a family on that."

Focused on survival

Marcia Williams stands on the curb, squinting in search of the headlights of the bus that will take her to her \$6-an-hour telemarketing job.

Many days she walks to save the \$1.25 bus fare.

"Let me tell you," Williams said, "This is one place I never thought I'd be."

Williams, 43, had a career as a nurse in California.

"I was so used to taking care of myself," she said.

A little more than two years ago, she left her nursing position and moved to the Valley to take care of her grandmother. For a while, she lived off her savings.

By the time her grandmother died, her savings was gone and her nursing license in California had lapsed.

She was broke. The \$200 fee to get an Arizona license might as well have been a million.

With twin 10-year-old boys and another son, 12, she had slipped into the low-wage earners daily predicament: Where will we sleep? What will we eat? Survival.

"I was a nurse for 18 years. I don't want to be on assistance," she said.

She has worked steadily, mostly at telemarketing jobs. Still, she often couldn't afford to make rent. The family has moved at least six times during the past two years.

They are on Phoenix's waiting list for subsidized housing. But the city is still trying to find homes for 2002 applicants. Williams applied in November 2003.

She hopes she won't need the assistance by the time her name works its way to the top of the list.

"I'm going to get my (nursing) license," she tells her boys. "Be patient. . . . Better times are coming."

Right now, they live with a friend. The boys have one of the two bedrooms; Williams sleeps in the living room.

They don't have a phone or car. Despite that, things are looking up.

Williams has been working with the non-profit Arizona Women's Education & Employment Inc., which helps unemployed and underemployed women living in poverty build skills to find work.

Mai Gabil, her case manager, is helping her get registered as a nurse. On this day, she has good news. She found the money to pay for Williams' license.

"Thank God, thank God," she said.

'Other side of the coin'

Anthony Steg's medical equipment-repair business started to decline with the economy after the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks. Much of the equipment that he worked on was for elective surgery. The 35-year-old lived off his savings until it was gone.

"Before that, I was more concerned about an image for myself," said Steg, who works two pizza-delivery jobs. "I had a brand-new sports car, and I loved it."

Now he knows what it's like to have to borrow money for food, to come home from work to find that his water or electricity has been shut off. He is used to living life on what he calls the "other side of the coin."

At his jobs, Steg is guaranteed the minimum wage of \$5.15 per hour. Tips hinge on how many deliveries he can make.

At first, one delivery would take 30 minutes. He has it whittled down to 12.

It comes down to this, he said: How hungry are you? How hard do you want to make money?

Steg is very hungry.

He is determined to climb out of his situation.

That means getting as many hours as he can at work, 12- to 14-hour days, seven days a week.

Until he can afford his own studio apartment, he lives with his brother and sister-in-law, paying them \$300 a month.

He has cut his expenses to almost nothing. When he is not working, he stays at home.

Everything he owns fills a bedroom in his brother's house. His last paycheck was \$380, take-home pay for 94 hours of work.

Steg knows he is luckier than most. Through Maricopa County's workforce-development program, he has enrolled in classes to become a certified nursing assistant.

He can keep a light heart, pasting a "poverty sucks" bumper sticker on his truck, because he knows this is only temporary.

"There's a lot of people that don't get a lot of credit," he said. "Single moms . . . when they go home they have kids. That's the area where I'm most fortunate, that I went through this by myself and don't have a family to support."

He has also learned what it means to be invisible.

"You're just a guy delivering pizza. . . . Nobody cares as long as you get their food to the door," he said.

There are no extras

Christine Yellowhair is another member of the invisible workforce.

The 23-year-old sorts clothes in a back room of a west Phoenix used-clothing store, where she makes \$6.63 an hour. On this, she supports her three children and her grandmother.

She started her day at 4:30 a.m. to scramble eggs for her youngest, 1-year-old Tommy. By 5:15 a.m. she was trying to get Alexis, 4, to wake up by squirting water on her face with a spray bottle. By 5:30, she made sure Robert, 10, was in the shower so he could catch the school bus by 6:40 a.m.

Tommy and Alexis go to day care. Then, Yellowhair had a half-hour before she left on the bus for work.

Every day is the same.

The family lives way below the poverty line. If it wasn't for Homeward Bound, a non-profit agency that assists families, a great deal of her wages would go to rent.

Instead, she rents a two-bedroom apartment for \$395 a month and pays \$60 a month for subsidized child care.

Still, that's more than half of her take-home pay.

She makes \$430 every two weeks. She takes any overtime she can get, which can mean an extra \$20.

It's gone before she knows it. Her phone bill is \$50 a month. There are family heirlooms that she is trying to keep. That means she pays \$82 a month for storage.

One trip to the grocery store eats away her monthly allotment of \$156 in food stamps.

Then she needs bus fare for work and fare for the taxi she takes to the grocery store.

She gets a 50 percent discount from her employer, Savers. But she still tries to buy new clothes for her oldest son. This year, she used four of her five vacation days to make extra money setting up America Online counter displays. She is paid \$2 for each one.

There are no extras.

What drives Yellowhair's daily routine is her grandmother and her kids. They have only each other.

"They depend on me," Yellowhair said. "It's a scary feeling."

'Every nickel counts'

Rep. Gallardo said bumping minimum wage to \$7.10 would still leave many workers beneath the national average for poverty.

For single mothers like Yellowhair and Williams, a raise could help with the grocery bill. For low-wage workers similar to Steg, the raise could mean one job instead of two.

"They're still going to struggle," Gallardo said. "But every nickel counts."

Reach the reporter at (602) 444-8126. News assistant Matt Dempsey contributed to this story.

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