

Minimum-wage increase may take time

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by Angie Welling

An increase in the state's minimum wage may be appropriate at some point but not necessarily this year, a group appointed by Gov. Jon Huntsman Jr. has concluded.

The governor's Minimum Wage Working Group on Wednesday released four recommendations on the issue, key among them being an in-depth study of the estimated 19,000 Utahns currently working at or below minimum wage.

The series of studies would identify who would benefit most from an increase beyond the current rate of \$5.15 per hour and likely improve the chances for future legislative success, group chairwoman Pamela Atkinson said.

"I'm not against increasing the minimum wage. It's just that I don't think we have sufficient information to get it through the Senate and the House," Atkinson said. "It's hard to go to legislators with inconclusive data."

The policy paper does not take a position on legislation now before the Utah Legislature to increase the state's minimum wage to \$7 per hour. Sponsoring Sen. Ed Mayne, D-West Valley City, said Wednesday it should not be seen as a conflict with his efforts to pass SB43 this year.

"I think these things just reinforce what we're saying," Mayne said. "What we're going to find out . . . it isn't teenagers (earning minimum wage). It's single heads of households. It's women. It's families that are working three or four jobs just to make ends

meet."

To delay passage of a bill that will help people in need now is "not acceptable," he said.

"In the real world, people are saying, 'Increase the minimum wage,'" Mayne said, pointing to a November Deseret Morning News poll showing that 77 percent of those surveyed either strongly or somewhat favored an increase in Utah's minimum wage. Twenty-one percent of the 400 Utahns questioned by Dan Jones & Associates opposed the measure.

Even though there is public pressure to act, Senate President John Valentine, R-Orem, said Wednesday he wants to see evidence action is needed. The strength of Utah's economy has helped drive up wages, he said, citing fast-food jobs in Utah County that are no longer minimum-wage jobs.

"They can't find enough people to fill the positions at minimum wage," the Senate leader said. "The robust economy is having the effect of raising (pay scales) above the minimum wage."

Fifteen states and Washington, D.C., have increased their minimum wage beyond the federal rate of \$5.15 per hour. It has been eight years since Utah increased its wage.

According to Wednesday's report, 6,000 Utah workers make \$5.15 per hour and another 13,000 are paid less than the minimum wage, likely in positions that earn wages plus tips.

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"We really need to find out, No. 1, the characteristics of these people, and No. 2, how many of them are earning minimum wage and accessing public assistance," Atkinson said.

The group's second recommendation is that the state health department examine its rolls of Medicaid and state Children's Health Insurance Program recipients to determine which companies have employees receiving public assistance. The information would allow the state to encourage the employers to provide health benefits to their employees, the report states.

"By doing this investigation, we are sending a message to those companies that Utah will no longer subsidize corporate earnings over the health of low-wage workers," the report states.

With the submission of its report, the Minimum Wage Working Group has completed the task it was asked to do by the governor, said Mike Mower, Huntsman deputy chief of staff. The governor's office will now examine the recommendations and decide how best to move forward, which could include continued efforts within Huntsman's administration or seeking the formation of a legislative task force to address the issue.

"We think this presented some very useful information and we're anxious to consider discussions on several topics that were raised in this report and not just increasing the minimum wage," Mower said.

The working group also recommended the adoption of a state "**self-sufficiency standard**," which would foster an understanding of the cost of basic necessities in the state and allow a comparison to wage rates, and encourages the governor's office to include the restoration of \$1 million in ongoing funds for adult education in its 2006-2007 budget.

"The poverty here is real, there's absolutely no doubt about it," Atkinson said. "If you can help them gradually take those steps out of poverty, you're going to fix many things."