



GUEST OPINION

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Spinning our wheels on the minimum wage

By Heather Gibney

On Iowa's low road, low-wage workers will never get ahead. They keep spinning their wheels at a \$7.25 minimum wage, digging deeper into the mud.

Deborah Thornton's recent guest opinion is just one example of the problem, combining a sketchy choice of data and poor conclusions into talking points designed to hold wage reform at bay.

Folks held down at \$7.25 can see firsthand how she gets some facts wrong and skews others.

- Iowans have not seen a minimum-wage increase since Jan. 1, 2008 — not 2009 as she suggests. Iowa was a year-and-a-half ahead of the feds. But that was 6 1/2 years ago — 6 1/2 years of price increases in gas, housing, utilities, groceries, clothes — and no increase in pay.
- Instead of limiting discussion to people at minimum wage, you need to look at all who would benefit from an increase. The number of workers in Iowa alone who would gain from an increase to \$10.10, as proposed: 306,000. That's about one-tenth of Iowa's population.
- Of those, don't be fooled by the old myth that this is about teen-agers. Almost 4 out of 5 workers — 78 percent — are age 20 or over. And 43 percent work full time, and 58 percent are women.
- These are not people without skills, often times. One-third of them have some college education.
- In many cases, they need to feed families; about 20 percent are parents.
- For the average worker affected, minimum wage accounts for 46 percent of their family income.

If you want to make a philosophical case against the minimum wage, go ahead, but it won't feed families. And, despite the scare tactics about effects on job numbers, good research by the Center for Economic and Policy Research has examined the most rigorous economic research over the last two decades on the impact of minimum wage increases on employment and found no effect.

Those who chant the loudest about market forces do not trust the market to be able to adjust. It does.

At a time when Congress is hobbled by stalemate, those who see value in a higher minimum wage have options. They can pass it at the state level — as Iowa did in 2007, well ahead of Congress. Already, 23 states and Washington, D.C., have a minimum wage above the federal.

We can keep spinning our wheels and leave the wage where it is. The longer we do, the messier it's going to get, and the more difficult it will be for hard-working folks at low incomes to catch up.

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