



Guest opinion: Boost state minimum wage

By Mike Owen, executive director of the Iowa Policy Project

Election Night 2014 established why Gov. Terry Branstad should push for an increase in the state minimum wage.

At first blush, this might not seem obvious. It was a big Republican night, and support of the minimum wage is not a marquee issue for Republicans.

But that night turned the focus for the minimum wage to state capitols — particularly in Iowa. Here, a minimum-wage critic won a U.S. Senate seat with the retirement of one of the nation's most high-profile and ardent supporters of a minimum-wage increase, Tom Harkin. The comfortable Republican majorities in the U.S. House and Senate make a national minimum wage increase highly unlikely.

In Iowa's State Capitol, the power structure remains effectively as it was: Republican governor, narrowly Democratic Senate, slightly stronger Republican majority in the House. A minimum wage proposal didn't move in 2014.

So why now, and why here?

The "now" is easy, on both the merits and the politics. On Jan. 1, we will have gone seven years at \$7.25. It comes nowhere close to a family supporting income, and it has not kept pace for almost seven years.

Families depending on minimum-wage income have not seen lower costs of food, fuel, housing, clothing and health care in those years. Passing it now would mean:

- Fewer Iowans in severe poverty.
- A boost to local and state economies as families have more to spend.

- A fiscal benefit to the state as less financial support is needed for extremely low-income working families.
- More resources available to support stronger work-support programs to put low-wage workers on a path to the middle class.

A governor who has promised a 25 percent increase in Iowans' incomes isn't likely to get there without boosting the incomes of the 300,000-plus Iowans (1 in 10) who would benefit from an increase to \$10.10.

Politically, it's also a winner, as our neighbors have shown. On Election Night, voters in two neighboring "red" states — Nebraska and South Dakota — demanded higher minimum wages.

An increase also would be popular in Iowa, where only one neighbor — Wisconsin — is stuck at \$7.25. As the *Gazette's* James Q. Lynch reported in October, 53 percent support an increase to \$10.10 an hour. No politician in either party will be disadvantaged in 2016 having supported a minimum wage increase — if, of course, a vote is permitted.

In the past, Gov. Branstad has made it clear the issue was not his priority but he does not appear to have ruled it out.

No longer is waiting for the feds to act an option; it's not going to happen any time soon. And Iowans' patience eventually wears thin. Recall that Iowa stopped waiting in 2007 and passed a \$7.25 minimum that took effect almost 19 months ahead of the federal \$7.25.

The time is right for Governor Branstad to lead us forward. It's the right thing to do, and the ball is in his court.

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