



## **GUEST OPINION**

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### **Iowa View: Forget the employment numbers and focus on wage theft**

**By Mike Owen**

Set aside for a moment Beth Townsend's indefensible defense of using politics instead of math to count jobs in her role as director of Iowa Workforce Development. (Beyond job numbers: How IWD serves Iowans, Dec. 21.)

Consider, rather, how many other times you have seen the director's commentary on the pages of the Register or any Iowa newspaper discussing how her agency can encourage economic stability for Iowa's working families. Very few, I expect.

I'd like to see the director on those pages more often, to explain how she proposes to deal with a very real issue faced by many of those families: wage theft.

The biggest problem with the fake job count being promoted by IWD and the Branstad administration is not that anyone will believe it when shown the real numbers; it's that someone has to bother to point out the real numbers, which is a distraction from the work of the agency.

That work for Iowa Workforce Development, in part, is to make sure that people make the wages they are supposed to make, whether at the minimum wage or the median wage. Are they being paid overtime? Are they waiting tables and having their tips stolen by the boss? Are they being forced to work off the clock?

You don't hear much about these issues from the administration.

Our 2012 Iowa Policy Project report estimates wage theft to be a \$600 million problem in our state. In a separate report this fall, we showed results of a survey of low-wage workers in eastern Iowa that indicates the problem of wage theft to be shockingly commonplace, with a quarter of those surveyed reporting some form of wage theft within the past year.

The director of IWD could make a dent in this problem with a public campaign, maybe a speaking tour to various regions of the state, to raise visibility about requirements under the law for proper payment and payment practices. That at least would erase the excuse for inaction by some legislators who refuse to pass stronger laws to punish companies that cheat their workers.

The director could make a dent in the problem by demanding more staff — yes, this requires funding from the Legislature — to investigate wage theft claims and enforce the law. Enforcement is left to one or maybe two staff positions — a number that is hard to obtain from IWD. The small staff must cover some 1.3 million private-sector jobs in the state.

To help the director fulfill the agency's dedication to "helping Iowans find careers that lead to an improved quality of life," as she described it, she should take action and provide leadership to stop the theft of hundreds of millions of dollars from Iowa workers.

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