

January 25, 2005

Testimony in support of SB 78

Mme. Chair, Members of the Committee:

My name is Eric Schiedermayer. I represent the Montana Catholic Conference, the voice for Montana's two Roman Catholic bishops in the state legislature, who in turn are the spiritual leaders of over 140,000 Montanans. I rise in strong support of this bill.

As Senator Harrington said, this issue has a strong moral dimension. Work is more than just a job; it is a reflection of our human dignity, and a way to contribute to the common good. Most importantly, it is the ordinary way people meet their material needs and community obligations. The Catholic Church stands as an advocate for those struggling to do this on the minimum wage.

Raising the minimum wage is not a "handout" program. Rather, it increases the incentive to work and helps people avoid the need for public assistance. Additionally, raising the minimum wage makes good fiscal sense. Because the working poor spend everything they earn, every penny of a minimum-wage increase goes back into the economy. We all know that this is the very best way to stimulate an economy. It also expands the tax base.

According to the U.S. Department of Labor, at a national level about 40 percent of the workers who would benefit from an increase in the minimum wage are the sole wage earners in their households. Most of those affected by the last minimum wage increase were adults aged 20 and over, and more than half of all teenagers earning the minimum wage are in households with below-average incomes.

An increase in the minimum wage would also disproportionately benefit women and minorities. This is a good thing.

In Catholic teaching, the principle of a living wage is integral to our understanding of human work. Wages must be adequate for workers to provide for themselves and their families in dignity. Because the minimum wage is not a living wage, the Catholic Church has supported increasing the minimum wage over the decades. It is well past time to do so again.

Respectfully submitted,

Eric Schiedermayer

Executive Director, Montana Catholic Conference