

Health Care for the Homeless Mobilizer

The National Health Care for the Homeless Council

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The 100-Day Plan to End Homelessness

(First in a Series)

The 110th Congress is scheduled to convene on January 4 (tomorrow) with an ambitious agenda for its first 100 days. Over the next three months, the National Council will publish a series of HCH Mobilizers outlining a set of measures Congress should adopt to make the experience of homelessness rare and brief for low-income Americans. The measures will move our country toward realization of the human rights to health care, housing, and livable wages, and thus toward the end of mass homelessness.

Item One: A Livable Wage

Keeping Up with the Congress

Since the 2006 elections, bipartisan leaders of both houses have vowed to increase the federal minimum wage within the first 100 days. For the country's lowest wage workers, including many experiencing homelessness, such a measure is long overdue. Over the past nine years and four months, the cost of living has grown by 26 percent while the value of the federal minimum wage has remained stagnant at \$5.15 per hour. Frustrated by the lack of federal leadership, twenty states and the District of Columbia already have enacted local wage floors higher than the federal standard. The National Council calls upon *Mobilizer* readers to lend their voices to expand the current wage debate in Washington: *minimum wage workers shouldn't be living in homeless shelters or on the streets.*

Minimum wage workers fill some of the most essential jobs in our society. They care for children in day care centers and for the elderly in nursing homes. They clean office buildings, schools, hotel rooms, and restaurants across the nation. Many are homeless.

One needn't look far back in history for evidence that the minimum wage didn't always bring with it the risk of homelessness. In 1967, at \$1.40 per hour, a full-time worker earning the minimum wage received enough to lift a family of three above the federal poverty level (National Coalition for the Homeless, 2006). In 1997, the Congress set the minimum wage at an already-inadequate \$5.15 per hour, and has left it there as inflation has corroded its value. This is the longest stretch of time without a cost-of-living allowance since the minimum wage was established in 1938.

Meanwhile, since 1989, members of Congress have been entitled (by their own action) to automatic annual cost-of-living pay raises.

Housing Remains *Out of Reach* for Minimum Wage Workers

According to the National Low Income Housing Coalition (*Out of Reach 2006* - www.nlihc.org), there is no community in the country where a full-time minimum wage worker can afford even a one-bedroom apartment at the fair market rent. The National Housing Wage for a two-bedroom rental unit is \$16.31 – over three times the current minimum wage. That means that a parent earning the minimum wage must work more than 125 hours per week in order to afford a home for her family. To afford the same two-bedroom market rate unit in San Francisco, she would have to earn \$29.54 an hour or work 229 hours per week (the impossible feat of 33 hours per day) at the minimum wage. In Boston, it's \$25.46 an hour or 198 hours per week. A minimum wage worker who labors 40 hours a week, 52 weeks a year, earns only \$10,700 a year – \$6,000 *below* the federal poverty line for a family of three.

A First Small Step

Three fundamental solutions to homelessness include the provision of quality and affordable health care, the availability of affordable housing, and the guarantee of livable incomes. Though a far cry from the comprehensive wage reform required to end homelessness, Congress plans to increase the minimum wage within the first 100 days of the new session – and we encourage such an increase. Senator Edward Kennedy (D-MA) has remarked that his first item of business as chair of the Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions Committee will be to increase the federal minimum wage to \$7.25 an hour, likely to be phased in over a 26 month period. Incoming House Speaker Nancy Pelosi also has listed a minimum wage increase among her top priorities.

This incremental step is warranted, but it is not enough. Earning \$7.25 an hour still does not allow a household to afford a home.

ACTION

- **Read the National HCH Council's 2006 Policy Statement on Fair Wages** at <http://www.nhchc.org/Advocacy/PolicyPapers/FairWages2006.pdf>
- **Call or write your Senator and Representative** regarding the importance of increasing the minimum wage and the further necessity of livable wages for all Americans. Find out who represents you at www.house.gov or www.senate.gov or call the Capital switchboard at 202-224-2131.
- **Discuss the difference between the “minimum wage” and a “livable” or “housing” wage** with your co-workers, partner organizations, and clients. Share with them your state and local data from the “Out of Reach 2006” report of the National Low-Income Housing Coalition (www.nlihc.org). Encourage their communication with their elected officials.
- **For more information** contact the National Council's Health Policy Organizer, Adrienne Breidenstine, at 443-703-1337.

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