

Minimum wage hike takes effect



By Leah Hope

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Nearly 650,000 Illinois workers are getting a raise this week. Governor Rod Blagojevich pushed for the wage hike of \$1.70 an hour.

In Illinois the minimum wage will be \$7.50. That is among the highest wages of all the states. Only Connecticut, Vermont, Oregon and Washington are higher. So, the bump is good, but is it good enough?

Chicago employers are writing bigger checks. As of Sunday, those making minimum wage will get at least \$7.50 an hour. In Illinois, it had been \$6.50. This increase may be hopeful for employers.

"For many, the question is, does this mean I'll have access to more employees, better pool of labor, because people who haven't been looking hard will come out?" said John Challenger, labor analyst.

While it may be a 13 percent increase sounds good, some say it doesn't make up for keep up with the cost of living. Leonard Roberts supports two teens and work for a collections agency.

"I have to shop at Salvation Army and shop in bulk. Eat oatmeal. Buy a big bag of rice just to make it. Can't make it off \$7.50," said Roberts.

As a bike messenger, Nina Swimm gets a percentage of every delivery. She says she has had her share of minimum wage jobs.

"You have to work two of them to pay rent and feed yourself. That is not right; not to mention, nobody has healthcare and if you get sick, and can't do the jobs, you are not going to pay the rent or feed yourself," Swimm said.

At the Chicago Jobs Council, they advocate for improvements in employment policy. The organization supports Illinois' efforts to be top minimum wage payers but says a much greater need exists.

"Better paying jobs in today's economy require higher levels of skill and we have lots of folks in Illinois who need to update their skills or reinforce their skills in order to be eligible for these better jobs," said Rose Karasti, Chicago Jobs Council.

Illinois' minimum wage will continue to go up:

- \$7.55 in 2008
- \$8.00 in 2009
- And \$8.25 in 2010.

However, the same concern remains: will those increases keep up with the cost of living in the coming years?