

Viewpoint



The Perils of Politicizing Poverty

The vast majority of New Mexicans want the state to raise the minimum wage, according to the polls. Somehow that didn't translate into reality when our Legislature took on the issue in this year's 30-day session. Sadly, like many other human causes, the issue of how little we can pay our state's poorest workers has become a political one.

In various other states across the country raising the minimum wage has been handled as a bipartisan issue. It's about people, after all, and whether or

not we want folks who work 40 hours a week to earn enough money to live above grinding, will-I-make-the-rent-next-month poverty. In Florida and Nevada, for example, a ballot initiative to raise the minimum wage was passed overwhelmingly in November 2004 by voters of all stripes. In Florida, 72 percent of voters approved an indexed raise so their minimum wage will automatically increase to keep pace with inflation. In Nevada, raising the minimum wage meant changing the state constitution—something 68 percent of the voters favored. New York state had a significantly more contentious process, but in the end, their minimum wage increase had bipartisan support. The legislation was carried by the Democratic-led Assembly but also won in the Republican-led Senate. Despite being vetoed by Governor George Pataki, a conservative, both houses of the New York Legislature voted to override him. In Michigan, the Republican-led Senate voted unanimously to raise the minimum wage. In the House, 24 Republicans joined 49 Democrats to pass the wage bill by a 73-34 vote.

Despite the very human nature of raising the minimum wage, neither Governor Bill Richardson's nor House Speaker Ben Lujan's bills had bipartisan support. Both House and Senate votes were largely split along party lines. In the end, the compromise bill died in the Senate without being put to a vote. It seems as though New Mexico has become so politicized we're now unable to come together on middle-of-the-road issues. We've put partisan quibbles before human needs.

This isn't the first time we've watched our state legislators retreat to their red and blue corners over an issue that has broad bipartisan support elsewhere. Consider Gov. Richardson's pre-K program from the 2005 session. Getting kids ready for kindergarten with a pre-K program isn't just a priority of our Democratic governor. Florida's very conservative Republican Governor Jeb Bush is a big supporter of such programs as well. Governor Richardson's pre-K bill did pass, but again, the vote fell pretty much along party lines.

(Continued on page 2)

Like the minimum wage bill, a pre-K program can make a tremendous difference in New Mexico. With quality pre-K, more kids will succeed in the first grade. Early success in school translates to staying in school longer, which leads to lower drop-out rates.

State by state

The bulk of Americans—83 percent, according to a recent Gallup poll—believe Congress should raise the minimum wage, even though Americans have an inflated idea of how much the wage actually pays. In that same poll, when respondents were asked what they thought the minimum hourly wage was, the median response was \$6 an hour. In reality, it's only \$5.15 an hour. Perhaps respondents intuitively knew that if the minimum wage had been adjusted for inflation it would be closer to \$7.50 an hour.

While our congressmen and women have voted to give themselves a cost-of-living raise every year for the past six years to protect their own pockets from inflation, they're unwilling to act on the minimum wage, making it essential for the states to do so. In all, 19 states and 130 municipalities across the nation have raised the minimum wage above the federal level. Legislation and ballot initiatives to raise the minimum wage are currently being considered in other states and communities, including our neighbors in Arizona and Colorado.

America was once the world's beacon of a singular, all-encompassing promise—a moral undercurrent, you might say—that, with hard work and persistence, anyone could attain the comfort and prosperity of which their parents only dreamt. Over the past two centuries, it is this promise that's called hundreds of thousands of immigrants to leave their homelands for a better life. It's a promise, a moral value, we believed transcended race, color and religious affiliation. But no more.

A new class of poor has sprung up in America over the last several decades—the working poor. The folks who do all manner of work—much of it backbreaking, all of it essential—upon which middle- and upper-income Americans rely. These are not the stereotypical burger-flipping teens or

lettuce-picking migrants. Most minimum wage earners work in service industries, cleaning our hotel rooms, caring for our infirm and elderly, and processing the food we eat. The vast majority of minimum wage earners are over the age of 20, most are women, and federal budget cuts to programs like childcare assistance will mean for too many of them the difference between the self-esteem of working and the crushing dependence of welfare.

The communities that have raised the minimum wage understand that it is good for local economies. That it fosters growth, encourages spending and enlarges the tax base.

It's time for New Mexico to join the rest of the nation. It's time we put party politics aside and brought our working poor—and their families and children—out of the subsistent existence that is minimum wage.



Looking Back on the Legislature: Who's for Kids and Who's Just Kidding?

The legislative session is always a busy time for us, as we focus much of our work in public policy at the state level. Although NM VOICES supported (or in some cases opposed) more than 100 pieces of legislation during the 2006 session, we kept in mind several priorities:

- ✓ A meaningful increase in the state minimum wage.
- ✓ Creation of a new Working Families Tax Credit.
- ✓ Fully funding Medicaid and expanding enrollment.
- ✓ Increased funding for school-based health centers.
- ✓ Increased funding for childcare assistance and other quality initiatives.
- ✓ Funding for need-based college scholarships.
- ✓ Funding to study the cost of several models of universal health care.
- ✓ Funding for adult basic education programs.
- ✓ Start-up funding for an immigrant center in Albuquerque's Southeast Heights.

Victories

Even with so many important priorities on the table, we helped ensure several victories.

- ✓ Medicaid funding was increased enough to maintain current levels of services and expand enrollment of more young children and pregnant women. Our thanks to the major sponsors Sen. Dede Feldman and Rep. Jim Trujillo.
- ✓ \$49 million for need-based college scholarships, thanks to major sponsors Rep. Rick Miera and Senators Cynthia Nava and Michael Sanchez.

- ✓ \$3 million for new school-based health centers, thanks to major sponsor Sen. Joseph Fidel.
- ✓ \$10,000 to begin planning for an immigrant center in Albuquerque. Our thanks to major sponsor Sen. Shannon Robinson and to Governor Bill Richardson for his support.
- ✓ \$1 million in new funding for the Housing Trust Fund, thanks to major sponsor House Speaker Ben Lujan.
- ✓ \$1.5 million in funding for Family Opportunity Accounts, thanks to major sponsors Representatives Ben Lujan and Patty Lundstrom.
- ✓ \$5 million in new funding for the Family, Infant and Toddler Program, thanks to major sponsors Rep. Rhonda King and Sen. Linda Lopez.
- ✓ \$3 million for domestic violence program expansion. The major sponsors included Representatives Mimi Stewart and Danice Picraux, and Senators Mary Jane Garcia and Sue Wilson-Beffort.
- ✓ A strong coalition of human rights groups were able to defeat a number of anti-immigrant laws and memorials sponsored by Sen. Rod Adair and Representatives Richard Cheney and Dan Foley.
- ✓ \$75,000 was earmarked for webcasting future sessions.

Defeats and Disappointments

We also saw some defeats—or, as eternal optimists like to say, we walked away with opportunities for next year.

- ✓ Childcare assistance was funded at \$2.7 million, a fraction of the \$18 million advocates felt was necessary to restore eligibility to those living at 200 percent of the Federal Poverty Level, as well as fund several quality improvement initiatives. Many thanks to our perennial champions of childcare programs, Sen. Linda Lopez and Rep. Rhonda King.

- ✓ Legislation to restore some progressivity to our personal income tax system by requiring those who itemize deductions to add back onto their state tax forms the state and local taxes paid (which are deductible on the federal tax form). This legislation would have made an additional \$60 million in revenues available, enough to fully fund the Working Families Tax Credit, Child Care Assistance and Pre-K programs, but it failed in the Senate Corporations and Transportation Committee. Our thanks to Sen. Jerry Ortiz y Pino for his avid sponsorship of this tax legislation.
- ✓ Legislation that would have helped New Mexico businesses failed in the House Business and Industry Committee. This bill would have required large multi-state corporations to pay their fair share of New Mexico corporate taxes and would have lowered corporate taxes benefitting thousands of New Mexico businesses. This seemed like a no-brainer, but most members of the Business and Industry Committee sided with the big out-of-state corporations by a vote of 9-4 to kill the legislation. Thanks to Rep. Peter Wirth, our legislative champion for supporting New Mexico-based businesses.
- ✓ A measure that is popular with voters—the use of paper ballots—did pass, but it was not fully funded. So we’re allowed to have paper ballots. We just can’t afford to buy them.

The Good That Died Young

As always, especially in a 30-day session, some issues simply don’t get addressed because the clock runs out before a bill has reached the floor of one chamber or another for a vote. Unfortunately, this happened with several important bills.

- ✓ Efforts by the governor and legislative leadership to increase the state’s minimum wage got the pink slip when the Senate failed to vote on the measure in the closing minutes of the session. House Speaker Lujan introduced legislation that was supported by the statewide Coalition for a Fair Wage, but lacked bipartisan support (see related story). It would have increased the minimum wage from \$5.15 an hour to \$7.50 an hour, indexed it to rise annually with inflation, and allowed cities and counties to enact a higher minimum wage if they chose to do so. Senate President Pro Tem Ben Altimirano and Senate Majority Leader Michael Sanchez also introduced legislation to raise the minimum wage to \$7.50 an hour. A compromise House and Senate bill passed the House but failed to get a vote in the Senate as time ran out.
- ✓ The Working Families Tax Credit, introduced by House Speaker Lujan and supported by Governor Bill Richardson, also passed the House and failed to get a vote in the Senate on the last day of the session. This would have allowed low-income working families to get a refundable tax credit on their state taxes worth 7.5 percent of their federal Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC). The federal EITC is known to be the best anti-poverty initiative ever created and we applaud the governor and the speaker for pushing hard to pass this initiative in New Mexico.
- ✓ Under current law, persons applying for unemployment insurance (UI) benefits must wait a week to receive those benefits. Eliminating this one-week waiting period was a top priority for Rep. Stewart, who has championed reforming New Mexico’s UI system. While the House passed the legislation, once again, the clock ran out in the Senate and it failed to get a final vote.
- ✓ In the midst of a scandal involving two past state treasurers, you’d think legislation that dealt with campaign finance reform, corruption, and clean and open government would get quick, decisive action—particularly with mid-term elections on the way and voter confidence in government sagging. Not so, as little meaningful legislation passed.
- ✓ Adult basic education needed only half-a-million dollars to make a significant difference for a lot of adults stuck in low wage jobs who are motivated and capable of moving into better paying positions but lack a GED or the necessary training. Moving New Mexico toward a higher-wage economy requires that our current workforce be better educated. The request by Sen. Clint Harden for funding adult basic education was left out of the final budget.

- ✓ Several pieces of legislation to limit the predatory lending practices of payday lenders and car title lenders were also stalled in the Senate and failed to get a vote. It's shameful that year after year the New Mexico Legislature fails to protect consumers from legalized loan sharks. While the Senate generally fails to act at all, the House repeatedly passes weak legislation that's preferred by the lenders themselves. The governor intervened this year and proposed his own legislation, which also failed. Meanwhile, Attorney General Patsy Madrid has issued her own regulations limiting the amount of interest payday and car title lenders can charge to the same annual percentage rate (54 percent) that pawn shop dealers can charge. Lenders are challenging the regulations in court, but we applaud her courage to take on the lenders and be proactive in protecting consumers when the Legislature has failed to.
- ✓ Lottery scholarships for Native American students who attend Native-run colleges located in New Mexico died in committee.

The Bad

Along with the good legislation—that is, the legislation that does the greatest good for the greatest number of people who, coincidentally, need it the most—there is invariably bad legislation. That's the legislation that benefits the fewest number of people—the people who, coincidentally, need it the least.

- ✓ Several amendments were tacked onto the minimum wage bill that would have effectively encouraged employers to completely disregard it. Senators Mary Kay Papen and Tim Jennings both wanted to allow employers to pay a lower 'training' wage during an employee's first year on the job. Sen. Papen also wanted to put a cap on Santa Fe's minimum wage (even though she represents a district in Las Cruces) and prohibit any New Mexico city from increasing pay above the state minimum.

The Ugly...

And then there is the ugly legislation. Those are the punitive bills intended not necessarily to protect New

Mexicans so much as to allow lawmakers to tell us we're better protected.

- ✓ A joint memorial was introduced to proclaim that Mexico isn't doing its share to keep undocumented workers from crossing the border into New Mexico. Now there's international diplomacy at work.
- ✓ Bills that would restrict an immigrant's ability to get a New Mexico driver's license were introduced in both the House and Senate. One would have required that non-U.S. born Americans provide a Social Security number and evidence of citizenship or legal residency status before they could be licensed to drive a car.
- ✓ An even more draconian bill would have required undocumented workers be fingerprinted and submitted to a background check before getting a driver's license. There's no better way to give state workers the impression that they have the authority to act like federal immigration officers than to have them treat immigrants like criminals.

And the Very Strange

- ✓ The honor for strangest legislation goes to Sen. William Sharer who wanted to amend the minimum wage bill to allow certain employers to deduct the cost of toilet paper from their employees' pay. What's almost as bizarre as the amendment itself was the fact that it failed by a 7-34 vote, meaning seven legislators thought toilet paper was as good as a paycheck!

Ignored Again

Lawmakers run screaming from some issues, simply because dealing with them is considered political suicide. This year was no exception, as the Legislature completely avoided the most pressing issue facing families and businesses.

- ✓ Real and significant health care reform remains absent. While New Mexico has the second highest rate of uninsured children in the nation,

legislators passed much heralded legislation in the governor's Year of the Child that will enroll as few as 5,000 of the tens of thousands of uninsured children. We'll enroll a few thousand adults through the efforts of the highly touted Insure New Mexico Task Force, while thousands more will lose their health insurance because, as costs continue to skyrocket, the coverage employers can afford to offer continues to plummet.

- ✓ One noteworthy attempt by Sen. Feldman and Rep. Picraux would have paid for a cost analysis of several models of universal health care for New Mexicans. The Legislature included money for the study in the budget and, even though we all worked with the governor's office to get the funding, the governor vetoed it in the end. It's bad enough that, year after year, the Legislature fails to tackle the health-care crisis that's crippling business and bankrupting families. This year, at least, they took a step toward studying the various solutions on the table. Too bad they—and all New Mexicans living on an insurance plan called 'hope'—were told to wait another year.

What the Feds Have to Do with It

Of course, what happens in New Mexico's Capitol represents only a portion of what affects our state's most vulnerable residents. What our Legislature does can either complement or exacerbate what's going on in our nation's Capitol. Unfortunately, the budget New Mexico's Legislature passed did nothing to mitigate many of the cuts made to social services in the federal budget.

- ✓ Medicaid, State Children's Health Insurance Program (SCHIP), childcare assistance, and food stamps are just some of the programs being slashed in Washington.
- ✓ Congress also made guaranteed student loans more difficult to obtain, continued to underfund the No Child Left Behind Act and cut funding for adult basic education programs.

Looking Ahead

While we've got another nine months or so until our lawmakers convene again, we do have elections in November during which at least one of these issues can be readdressed. Our cities and counties across the state can pass meaningful increases in the minimum wage that are indexed to inflation by getting initiatives on the ballot. Albuquerque will certainly face the issue again, this time hammered out by the City Council.

We must also press our lawmakers to work on real health-care reform so New Mexico's children can be healthy and their families can provide for them.

NM Voices' Publications

- Kids Count Data Book 2005
- The State of Working New Mexico 2005
- Personal Income Tax Cuts ≠ Economic Growth
- Who's Minding the Store? New Mexico's Income Tax Cut: Poor Performance, Wrong Choice
- The Condition of African American Children in New Mexico
- Social Security: What it Means to New Mexico
- Minority/Majority: A Profile of New Mexico's Children 2003 (A Kids Count Special Report)
- The Bare Bones Budget Report
- The Economic Impact of Increasing Food Stamp Utilization

For a listing of the Policy Brief Series, visit www.nmvoices.org or call (505) 244-9505 ext. 10.

Complimentary copies of all reports and policy briefs are available to NMVC supporters. Visit us online at www.nmvoices.org to make a donation.

Events



Activist, Author to Speak at Youth Spirit Awards

She spent seven long months on trial because she believed in helping others. But in the end, poet/activist/lecturer **Demetria Martinez** was acquitted of federal conspiracy charges in connection with the Sanctuary Movement in the 1980s. Bringing her passion for social justice and community activism, Martinez will deliver the key note address at this year's **Amy Biehl Youth Spirit Awards** ceremony on April 28.

Martinez works with Enlace Comunitario, an immigrants' rights group that serves Spanish-speaking victims of domestic violence and co-teaches a workshop on writing for social change. Her most recent book, a collection of essays, is *Confessions of a Berlitz Tape Chicana: Collected Columns* (Univ. of Oklahoma Press).

The Youth Spirit Award was inspired by the work of Amy Biehl, a graduate of Santa Fe High School who was killed at the age of 26 while in South Africa on a Fulbright Scholarship conducting voter registration for the country's first all-race election that ended the policy of apartheid.

Like Amy Biehl and Demetria Martinez, many of New Mexico's youth make important contributions to improve their communities—contributions that too often go unrecognized. This year, 39 teens and young adults from around the state have been nominated for the Amy Biehl Youth Spirit Award, given annually by New Mexico VOICES for Children to recognize significant community service by youth ages 13–26. All nominees will be recognized at the event. Three honorees and a winner will be announced, each receiving \$1,000 and an award sculpture.

The event is Friday, April 28, 11:30am to 1:30pm, at the Marriott, 2101 Louisiana Blvd. NE, in Albuquerque. Tickets are \$38 and include lunch. Table sponsorships are still available. For sponsorship information or to RSVP call Stephanie Gabriel at 505-244-9505 ext. 33, email sgabriel@nmvoices.com or visit www.nmvoices.org.

Looking at Life Through Color-Blind Glasses



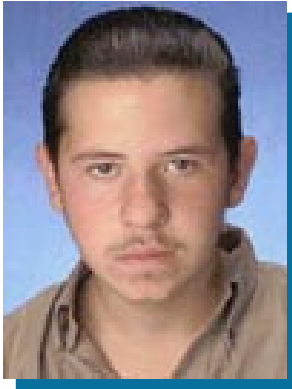
If nothing else, the vivid images of desperate Americans displaced by Hurricane Katrina reminded us that, despite our great progress, this country has not totally shaken racial inequality. Of course, injustices against Americans of color do not begin and end with the poor of New Orleans. Nationwide, children of color are twice as likely to be placed in the juvenile justice system as white kids. Native American youth are three times more likely to end up in the child welfare system. Like it or not, too many of our children still suffer from an ingrained legacy of racial disparity despite the work their parents' generation did to end legalized discrimination.

To address how issues of race impact society's youngest members, New Mexico VOICES for Children, the Annie E. Casey Foundation, Albuquerque Human Rights Office and New Mexico Human Rights Coalition are presenting **Race Matters**, a conference to raise awareness of the impact race has on juvenile justice, child welfare, teen suicide, and teen pregnancy.

Join us for this essential conversation and be part of developing policy recommendations for our state.

The Race Matters conference is Tuesday, May 16, 8am to 3:30pm at the UNM Continuing Education Conference Center on Indian School NE in Albuquerque. Tickets are \$65 and include lunch. Continuing education credits (CEUs) are available. Register online at www.nmvoices.org or call 505-244-9505 ext. 10. Register now – space is limited!

In Memorium



When Sean Cordova's young life ended tragically and violently, his mother, Janet Stoumbos, decided to turn her grief into action. Janet wants young people to know that there are alternatives to the kind of violence that took 19-year-old Sean this past February. She's graciously donated the proceeds from Sean's **Memorial Fund** to New Mexico VOICES for Children. She made the decision in part because of NM VOICES' Youth Link project, which has a violence prevention component.

Youth Link provides New Mexico teens the opportunity to develop leadership and advocacy skills and have an impact on public policy. As New Mexico develops strategies and solutions to meet its social and economic needs it's important that our youth have a voice. Our mission is to develop youth into active, aware and concerned citizens who are engaged in the political process.

Sean was a sweet and loving son, brother and friend, and a life-long resident of Albuquerque. If you'd like to honor Sean, his family's loss, and their commitment to ending youth violence, contact NM VOICES at 505-244-9505 or 2340 Alamo SE, Suite 120, Albuquerque, NM 87106.

Leave a Legacy

Supporting causes that support our children has never been hard, but we've made it even easier with our newly established New Mexico VOICES for Children **Leave a Legacy Endowment Fund**. Set up through the Albuquerque Community Fund (ACF), Leave a Legacy offers a number of ways to build charitable donations to VOICES into your will or trust. The Endowment Fund allows you to set up gifts of cash, property, valuables (such as art or jewelry), bequests, insurance, annuities and charitable reminder trusts. Contact the ACF at 505-883-6240 or NM VOICES at 505-244-9505 ext. 21. For more information about either organization, visit www.albuquerquefoundation.org or www.nmvoices.org.

Please consider making your contributions to NM VOICES a permanent part of your legacy. Your support allows us to continue our important work to create opportunities and advocate policies that help move our families—and their children—out of poverty.

New Mexico Kids Count

Don't forget—bound copies of the 2005 KIDSCOUNT report is available to VOICES supporters for *free*. If you're not yet a supporter, joining up will get you access to all of our publications. To support New Mexico VOICES for Children call 505-244-9505 or visit www.nmvoices.org.

