

Their view

Minimum wage should be a fair wage

By Ella Alvarez Nelson
and Terry Miller

The hardworking families of Las Cruces deserve better than \$5.15 an hour. They also deserve better than the mischaracterizations and disregard for the facts that filled your Feb. 3 editorial.

First, who are the working New Mexicans who will be impacted by an increase from the current \$5.15 to the proposed \$7.50 per hour? Well, contrary to your editorial's claim, they are not "entry level workers without education or vocational skills". No, the vast majority, 80 percent, are adults, many working full time or more than full time to support their families. That's a fact, according to New Mexico Voices for Children. In addition, a study conducted in Albuquerque by Dr. Robert Pollin from the Political Economy Research Institute found that workers in Albuquerque earning less than \$7.50 an hour had been in the work force for an average

of 12.8 years and were still earning less than \$7.50 an hour.

We have a low-wage economy in New Mexico. Our economy produces too many low-wage jobs. Regardless how well-educated you become, you will still be in a low-wage job sector. One of the broadly recognized problems in New Mexico is that there are too few options available for people who want a well-paying job. This is a particularly acute problem in rural areas.

It is also a problem in Las Cruces. For example, Annette West, a contributor to the Sun-News, presented in the Feb. 6 business section a chart using HUD's 2005 information which states that in order to rent a studio apartment in Las Cruces, a person must earn \$8.04 an hour and work 40 hours a week. A two-bedroom apartment requires an hourly wage of \$9.67, working 40 hours a week. So let's not claim, as the editorial does, that the "market" will solve all our problems. The market is producing

jobs that do not enable too many of our working parents the ability to support their families at even a subsistence level. It takes a combined hourly wage of \$17, or \$8.50 an hour per working adult, to live at a subsistence level in Las Cruces, according to a study done by the Economic Policy Institute. Subsistence level is defined as providing the bare necessities of life.

In response to the editorial statement that increasing the minimum wage will result in the loss of state benefits, according to New Mexico Voices for Children, a family of two workers earning \$31,000 per year would still qualify for food stamps, child care and children's Medicaid.

When the market — the economy — fails to provide economic opportunity to those ready, willing and able to work hard, then it is the market that is failing. And it is the responsibility of our leaders — policymakers — to fix, through policy, what cannot be fixed through the market.

Is it responsible to include so many simplistic and speculative claims about what employers "might" do in response to an increased minimum wage as stated in the Feb. 3 editorial? According to research done by the Economic Policy Institute, employers only raise their prices about .2 percent, which is equivalent to 20 cents for every hundred dollar purchase. New Mexicans must believe that's a small price to pay to expand opportunity and reduce poverty in our state.

Fourteen states and Washington, D.C., have already raised their minimum wage. A study of the data conducted by an economist with New Mexico Voices for Children shows that job growth has held steady in all but three of these states: Massachusetts, Connecticut and Illinois.

The executive director of New Mexico's Economic Development Department isn't worried about the impact of increasing our minimum wage — he is supporting an increase to \$7.50, as is the head of New Mexico's

Department of Labor. The Sun-News should not be worried either. Job growth in Santa Fe has accelerated to nearly 3 percent per year since its minimum wage was increased. This is an economic success story, not "a problem."

When debating an issue of such tremendous importance to New Mexico's working families, we have a special responsibility to stick to the facts. It is the particular responsibility of the media to report facts and not mislead the public about the impacts of public policy. There is no place in this debate for fear-mongering. Our working families and our children deserve better. It's time for a change in New Mexico.

No one who works full time should live in poverty.

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