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Contact: Raj Nayak, NELP, (312) 399-9904
Jon Shure, NJPP, (609) 393-1145 x. 11

Sen. John Edwards Joins NELP and NJPP in Calling to Raise New Jersey's Minimum Wage

NEWARK – Today, Senator John Edwards joined with the National Employment Law Project (NELP), New Jersey Policy Perspective (NJPP), and allies from the Raise the Wage Campaign to call on the New Jersey Legislature to raise the state's minimum wage to at least \$8.50 per hour, establish stronger protections for tipped workers, and increase both automatically each year to keep up with the cost of living. Prior to speaking, Senator Edwards participated in a roundtable discussion with over a dozen low-wage workers who shared their stories with him.

"Families across the country are struggling – especially when the basics like gas and food are getting more and more expensive every day," said Senator Edwards. "The best way to help families is to make their work pay – and I support the efforts to make sure that we raise the minimum wage in New Jersey. Governor Corzine has shown real leadership on this issue, and I encourage lawmakers to step in soon to help give hard-working families a hand."

When state lawmakers last raised the minimum wage in 2005, they created a Minimum Wage Advisory Commission. Last December it recommended that the minimum wage should be increased substantially with automatic cost-of-living adjustments each year in the future. The Commission called the current \$7.15 wage insufficient to support a family in New Jersey and found that the minimum wage's purchasing power has dropped even since October 2006, when the current state minimum wage took effect.

But as Jon Shure, president of New Jersey Policy Perspective, observed, "The Legislature has gone home and nothing happened. Unfortunately, the cost of living doesn't take a vacation. Working people don't get time off from the struggle to get by in New Jersey."

"New Jersey is also one of just two states that provide no minimum wage at all for tipped workers," said Raj Nayak, an attorney at the National Employment Law Project. "As we raise the minimum wage, we need to close this unfair loophole, which leaves thousands of New Jersey's workers in poverty."

If it implemented the Advisory Commission's recommendations, New Jersey would be the eleventh state in the nation to provide automatic annual cost-of-living increases – a key reform that prevents the minimum wage from eroding each year. It would also have one of the highest minimum wages in the country. "New Jersey has the opportunity to be a national leader, helping build momentum for finally restoring the federal minimum wage to its historic level," explained Paul Sonn, legal co-director of the National Employment Law Project.

NELP and NJPP are helping lead New Jersey's Raise the Wage Campaign, a growing coalition of over 20 advocacy groups, community organizations, and worker centers. Senator Edwards attended the event in his capacity as chair of the Half in Ten Campaign, which seeks to reduce poverty in the United States by 50 percent within 10 years.

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