

Catholic Courier

DIOCESE OF ROCHESTER, NEW YORK

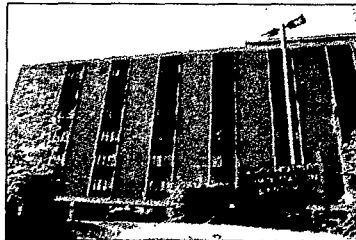
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Working for a living wage

Tara Northrup, an Elmira resident, wants an answer to a simple question:

“How am I supposed to support four kids on \$5.15 an hour?”

Fortunately, Northrup makes \$6.64 an hour at her new job, but a few months ago she was working full time in a store and only earning minimum wage. And in her new, higher-paying job, her employer can only offer her 30 hours a week, which makes her ineligible for health-insurance benefits, she said.

Northrup said she and her four children, who range in age from 6 to 11, live in a three-bedroom apartment, and the family receives no form of public assistance. She added that she gets \$200 a month in child support, but pays \$525 in rent alone. Although it doesn't happen every month, she noted that she has had to resort to visiting local food pantries to feed her family.

Northrup is a supporter of the “living wage” movement, which she learned about through a friend at Catholic Charities of the Southern Tier in Elmira. The nationwide movement by religion and labor advocates encourages municipalities to hire only contractors that pay a certain minimum wage. One such ordinance was passed in Rochester in 2001, and a living-wage resolution recently passed in Ithaca. However, Elmira's City Council withdrew a living-wage proposal this April after area businesses expressed strong opposition to it.

The living wage is defined by its advocates as equivalent to a single wage earner in a family of four making enough money to meet the federal government's poverty line, currently \$18,400 for a family of four and \$15,260 for a family of three. Living-wage campaigners have floated proposals for wages ranging from \$7.34 per hour to as much as \$12 an hour. Most living-wage ordinances distinguish between companies that offer health benefits and those that do not. Companies that do not provide any health benefits are required to pay a higher minimum wage to employees.

Ending poverty is the goal of the living-wage movement, which has gained the support of Catholic social-justice activists

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Alex Ingavo, foreman for Falcone Concrete, works with Bergman Associates to replace curbs on Pembroke Street in Rochester. Bergmann is covered by Rochester's living wage law, which mandates a minimum wage for contractors with the city government.

Story by Rob Cullivan • Photo by Karin von Voigtlander

