

Bishops, Catholic Charities call for minimum wage increase

WASHINGTON (CNS) - The U.S. bishops and Catholic Charities USA have called for an increase in the federal minimum wage.

“The minimum wage needs to be raised not just for the goods and services a person can buy but for the self-esteem and self-worth it affords,” said Bishop Nicholas DiMarzio of Brooklyn, N.Y., chairman of the U.S. bishops’ Committee on Domestic Policy, in a Jan. 8 letter to members of Congress.

In a Jan. 9 statement Catholic Charities USA joined in the call for increasing the minimum wage, as it prepared to unveil a plan Jan. 10 called the Campaign to Reduce Poverty in America, with a specific target for reducing the poverty rate over time.

The House was expected to vote Jan. 10 on a bill to raise the minimum wage from \$5.15 an hour to \$7.25 an hour by 2009.

“As pastors, bishops see the tragic human and social consequences on individuals, their families and society when workers cannot support themselves and their families by their own labor,” Bishop DiMarzio said in his letter.

At \$5.15 an hour, a person working full time would make \$10,700 a year, “nearly \$6,000 below the poverty level for a family of three,” he said.

“Raising the minimum wage is only one step needed to address the larger, more pressing problem of poverty in America. In our shelters and soup kitchens, in our parishes and schools, we see working families who can’t make ends meet. We serve

too many families where men and women work full time and still live in destitution,” he added.

“Our nation needs a persistent and determined effort to overcome poverty,” Bishop DiMarzio told the members of Congress. “We hope you will work together across partisan and ideological lines to shape a comprehensive strategy and common commitment to lift all of our brothers and sisters out of poverty.”

In its statement Catholic Charities said the minimum wage should be indexed to account for inflation. The last time the minimum wage was hiked was 1997. The current \$5.15 minimum wage is equivalent to only \$3.95 in 1995 dollars, lower than the \$4.25 minimum wage level before the 1997 increase.

“Over the last several years, our agencies have been coping with steady double-digit increases each year in requests for emergency assistance because low-wage workers simply cannot earn enough to cover rent, child care, food, utilities and clothing for their families,” said Father Larry Snyder, Catholic Charities USA’s president.

“Many people served by Catholic Charities agencies are poor despite full-time employment at the bottom of the labor market: cleaning houses and office buildings, harvesting and preparing food, and watching over children of working parents,” he said in the statement. “People who work full time should not live in poverty; they should be able to support themselves and their families.”