

## Wages in state too low, experts agree

By Ryan McNeill  
The Oklahoman

A panel of experts agreed Thursday that Oklahoma's wages are too low, but clashed on whether a living wage law is the answer.

About 100 people attended a Citizens League of Central Oklahoma forum at Citychurch, where economists and labor leaders talked about possible solutions to poverty. Several state and local officials attended, including state Corporation Commissioner Bob Anthony, Ward 7 Councilwoman Willa Johnson and newly elected state Rep. Richard Morrisette, D-Oklahoma City.

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### MAJOR PUBLIC ASSISTANCE PROGRAMS IN OKLAHOMA

**Program:** Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF)  
**Contact:** DHS  
**Purpose:** Provides cash help to very low income children and parents.  
**Average monthly recipients:** 34,209  
**Annual state cost:** \$222.9 million  
**Eligibility threshold for family of three:** \$292 net monthly income

**Program:** Food Stamps  
**Contact:** DHS  
**Purpose:** Provides vouchers for purchase of food.  
**Average monthly recipients:** 406,001  
**Annual state cost:** \$391.8 million  
**Eligibility threshold for family of three:** Gross income of up to \$20,371. The

Panelists discussed the effectiveness of a living wage law, which is being used in more than 100 cities, counties, school boards and universities, according to the Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now. The group has backed living wage campaigns in a handful of cities.

Under a living wage law, most often passed by city governments, the political body is barred from giving contracts to vendors that don't pay their employees what's considered a living wage. It also can apply to groups or businesses that get tax credits, government grants or other subsidies.

Supporters who push the laws say public dollars shouldn't subsidize poverty.

"It's about an honest day's wage for an honest day's work," said David Gray, president of the Oklahoma City Federation of Classified Employees.

A living wage law would help in a multi-pronged effort to fight poverty that includes state and local government, said Monica Barczak of the Community Action Project of Tulsa County, a group working to help the poor become economically self-sufficient.

threshold is lower if the family includes an individual who is elderly or disabled.

**Program:** National School Lunch & Breakfast Programs

**Contact:** 521-3327

**Purpose:** Provides free or reduced-cost meals to low-income children.

**Average monthly recipients:** 332,699 (2003-04)

**Annual state cost:** N/A

**Eligibility threshold for family of three:**

Free meals if gross income is less than \$20,371; Reduced-price meals if income is between \$20,371 and \$28,990

**Program:** Women, Infants and Children (WIC)

**Contact:** (888) 655-2942 or 271-4676.

**Average monthly recipients:** 111,688

**Annual state cost:** \$50.5 million

**Eligibility threshold for family of three:**

Pregnant and post-partum mothers plus children under age 5 up to \$28,990 income.

**Program:** Medicaid

**Contact:** DHS

**Purpose:** Provides health care for low-income children and some parents, seniors and disabled.

**Average monthly recipients:** 517,275

**Annual state cost:** \$2,711 million

**Eligibility threshold for family of three:**

Parents are eligible with up to \$5,798 income; Pregnant women and children, up to \$28,990.

**Program:** Child Care Subsidy

**Contact:** DHS

**Purpose:** Pays all or some of child care expenses.

**Average monthly recipients:** 46,868

**Annual state cost:** \$171.6 million

**Eligibility threshold for family of three:**

Up to \$23,400 with one child in care.

**Program:** Section 8 Rental Assistance

**Contact:** (800) 256-1489 ext. 1010

**Purpose:** Provides rent subsidies.

**Average monthly recipients:** 22,465 families (federal fiscal year 2003)

**Annual state cost:** \$107.9 million (FY 2003)

**Eligibility threshold for family of three:**

\$23,450 (Oklahoma City)

**Program:** Unemployment insurance

**Contact:** 525-1500 or (800) 555-1554

**Purpose:** Provides temporary and partial wage replacement to involuntarily unemployed workers

**Average monthly recipients:** 26,743

(average number of continuing claims per week)

**Annual state cost:** \$255.1 million

**Eligibility threshold for family of three:**

Eligibility not related to income

Source: The Social Safety Net: A Handbook of Major Social Assistance Programs for Oklahomans, 2nd Edition, November 2004.

Barczak said it would send a message to other employers if local governments enacted such an ordinance.

But critics say such laws do nothing to improve the situation of most people and sometimes have unintended consequences, including layoffs and companies opening shop just outside city boundaries to avoid the laws.

"We shouldn't be messing with employer and worker relationships," said Mike Seney, senior vice president of operations for The State Chamber of Oklahoma.

Businesses that want to thrive will work with employees to pay good wages and benefits, Seney said.

An economist at the forum compared living wage jobs to "feel-good measures" that don't work.

"I would rather see someone employed at a lower wage than unemployed with higher wages," said Larkin Warner, professor emeritus at Oklahoma State University.

Warner said blacks and Hispanics would suffer the most under such laws.

Gray, who said the presence of the working poor in today's society is unacceptable, called arguments from Seney and Warner a "red herring."

He said arguments that living wage laws would drive up taxpayer costs for vendor contracts and increase unemployment are unfounded.