

Living wage issue picking up steam

by Hal L. Millard in Vol. 14 / Iss. 44 on 05/28/2008

Living-wage proponents have long maintained that paying workers enough to meet their basic expenses in the local economy is ultimately good for businesses as well. Now, with the issue gaining traction here, a small but growing number of employers are taking the pledge and getting certified by Just Economics, a local nonprofit, says staffer Sarah Osmer.

Certifiable: A small but growing number of area businesses are gaining certification as living-wage employers, says Just Economics coordinator Sarah Osmer. Photo By Jonathan Welch

Launched in March, the free, voluntary program has certified 38 businesses, nonprofits, churches and other employers (see sidebar, "Certified"). For businesses, says Osmer, the biggest immediate payback is the ability to market themselves as a responsible and sustainable employer in a city filled with discriminating consumers. Employers needing time to reach the appropriate wage levels can get probationary certification that gives them two years, with benchmarks to be met along the way.

For a single individual in the Asheville/Buncombe area, the group says, the 2008 living wage is \$22,700 per year, or \$11.35 an hour for someone working 40 hours a week, 50 weeks a year. For full- and part-time workers with employer-provided health insurance, the wage dips to \$19,700 per year for a single individual, or \$9.85 an hour.

"That's just the bare minimum," notes Osmer.

In 2007, Just Economics calculated a local living wage based mainly on the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development's "fair market rent" for a one-bedroom apartment in the Asheville area. That base-line figure—\$10.86 an hour, or \$9.36 with health benefits—is updated annually to reflect the rising cost of living, using the Consumer Price Index for Urban Wage Earners and Clerical Workers.

The fledgling program, says Osmer, is going pretty well so far. "Our goal is to keep growing it at that rate and do some targeted work on specific industries or employers in Asheville to encourage them to sign. We want to recognize employers that are already doing the right thing, but ultimately the goal is to raise the wages for those who aren't making a living wage. ... The certification is also a way that we can get the issue out there and get people thinking about it—thinking about what workers are paid in the places they patronize."

Those targeted industries include the retail, food-and-beverage and tourism trades, she explains.

"As expenses go up for food and gas and housing, wages aren't keeping pace," says Osmer. And as manufacturing has receded as a major industry in the region, low-paying service-sector jobs have come to predominate—a situation that she says hurts not only individual workers but the general economy. Paralegal Steve Dunn agrees, saying that's a main reason he sought to leave his employer, attorney Christopher Craig of Craig Associates, certified through Just Economics.

"It's important because of the basic high cost of living in Asheville compared to what some of the jobs here pay, especially the service industry. So to be able to work for someone like this is very important," he says.

Just Economics' other main initiative is a leadership program called Voices for Economic Justice. Osmer says her group is raising money and putting together a curriculum in preparation for the program's launch later this year.

"This is a leadership program mainly for low-wage workers, and our goal is to have core leadership among those most affected by the economic injustices we're trying to change," she explains. "Our hope is

that through this leadership program, we'll be able to develop some leaders that will become more involved in our work and help shape the future of Just Economics.”

The nonprofit was formed in 1999 by a group of community activists, labor officials and people from various faith communities who came together to focus on economic-justice issues. But it didn't really take off, says Osmer—due to a shortage of funds and and general lack of awareness concerning the whole concept of a living wage.

“It kind of went into hibernation and was revived when a coalition of groups got together around the living-wage issue” two years ago, she says. That was when the Asheville-Buncombe Living Wage Campaign finally began to make inroads on the issue. In January 2007, the campaign's steering committee voted to become a project of Just Economics, with the goal of sustaining long-term economic-justice work locally and, eventually, across the region. Among the group's biggest successes to date has been persuading the Asheville City Council to approve a living-wage ordinance for city workers. A Council task force is also looking into the possibility of giving employers who pay a living wage priority in winning city contracts.

Meanwhile, the campaign is now a full-time endeavor. Osmer, the organization's first paid staffer, was hired last September; she works out of an office in the Fortune Building in West Asheville. And yes, says Osmer, she's paid a living wage and has health and other benefits, too.

Although the group is also concerned about such issues as the minimum wage, immigrant workers and unionization, living wages remain the central focus.

“Everyone is feeling the crunch now, especially with the poor economy,” notes Osmer. “Some people are seeing even more than they once did that what they earn really matters. ... It's just harder these days to find good-quality jobs. It's really a complicated issue, and there's a lot of need for us to be thinking creatively on how we can address it.”

Certified

Here's a list of local businesses, nonprofits and others that have been certified by Just Economics so far:

Affordable Bedding
Alpha Real Estate
American Speedy Printing
Andrea Bishop
Asheville-Buncombe Community Relations Council
Asheville Wine Market
blue
Blue Ridge X-Ray Co.
Carolina Mornings
Center for Participatory Change
Children First of Buncombe County
Circle of Mercy
Computer Mechanix
Craig Associates
Dotson-Smith Law Office
Farm and Sparrow
Fired Up!
First Congregational United Church of Christ
First Presbyterian Church
Jameson Construction
Josh Williams Enterprises
Julie Duriga CPA
Laurey's Catering
Literary Council of Buncombe County

Mike Beyer Auto and Truck Repair
Mountain Bizworks
OnTrack Financial Education & Counseling
Our Voice
Pisgah Legal Services
Precision International Foreign Car Service
St. Matthias Episcopal Church
Smokey Mountain Local 507
Teamsters Local 61
Think Green Building
Congregation Beth Ha-Tephila
Rags Reborn Eco Chic Boutique
Urban Paradise Gardening
West End Bakery

For more information on the living-wage campaign and Just Economics, contact Osmer at 301-7291 (e-mail: info@justeconomicswnc.org) or visit <http://www.justeconomicswnc.org>. The organization is membership-based; basic memberships start at \$10.