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Anti-poverty groups push for local living wage



The Ontario government is reviewing the minimum wage. (Ted Rhodes/Postmedia News)

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Grace Macaluso

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Local anti-poverty groups will be launching a campaign in November calling for a living wage amid a Statistics Canada report showing that minimum wage earners are no better off today than they were in the

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Adam Vasey, director of Pathway to Potential, said a coalition comprising businesses and community groups will call on Windsor and Essex County employers to adopt a living wage policy.

“When you look at the minimum wage debate, it revolves around how much business is willing to compensate the lowest-paid employee,” Vasey said. “We’re talking about a living wage that enables earners to afford the basic necessities like food, clothing and shelter.”

The percentage of Windsor CMA residents living below the low-income cutoff has risen from 13.4 per cent in 2006 to 16.8 per cent in 2011, according to the Census household survey. For an individual the low-income cut-off is \$15,864 per year and for a family of four it’s \$29,996.

Vasey said a living wage would exceed the Ontario minimum wage, which rose to \$11 an hour June 1 from \$10.25. Further hikes to the minimum wage will be tied to the rate of inflation.

In 2011, New Westminster, B.C., became the first Canadian jurisdiction to enact a policy requiring all firms contracted or subcontracted by the city to pay their employees a living wage, which is pegged at \$20.10 an hour.

While Vasey would not disclose the living wage rate being sought for Windsor and Essex County, he said it would be in the range of \$14 an hour.

Vasey said the push for greater income equality is validated by the StatsCan study showing that the average minimum wage in 2013 of \$10.14 was almost identical to the 1975 minimum wage in constant dollars.

“Even the new Ontario minimum wage of \$11 an hour still falls 18 per cent below the poverty line,” he said.

While labour productivity in Ontario has increased 120 per cent since 1965, the real minimum wage has grown only 44 per cent during that period,” he said. “It’s clear workers are getting paid less for the value of their labour; they’re not seeing their fair share of the economic gains we’ve made as a province.”

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Businesses, however, would not be able to absorb any further sudden wage hikes, and support the “balanced” approach of the Ontario government, said Matt Marchand, CEO of the Windsor-Essex Regional Chamber of Commerce, which represents between 850 and 900 members, employing 30,000 workers.

“A minimum wage tied to inflation is predictable and fair; business needs to know what kind of hikes are coming.”

Employers face “significant cost pressures, such as power rates,” said Marchand. “We have higher costs than other jurisdictions and want to make sure we maintain employment opportunities for people.”

All-candidates meeting on “Shared Prosperity: The Municipal Role in Reducing Poverty.”

To keep the issue of poverty reduction alive during the Oct. 27 municipal election campaign, Pathway to Potential is holding all-candidates meetings in Windsor and Essex County.

In the county, the meeting will be held Tuesday, Aug. 19, from 5:30 to 7:30 p.m. at Essex Arena, 60 Fairview Ave., W., Essex.

In Windsor, it will be held, Thursday, Aug. 21, from 5:30 to 7:30 p.m., at the Windsor Star News Café, 300 Ouellette Ave.

For more information, email info@pathwaytopotential.ca.

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