

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
January 22, 2007

CONTACT: Laura Capps/Melissa Wagoner
(202) 224-2633

**KENNEDY DELIVERS MINIMUM WAGE FLOOR STATEMENT AS THE DEBATE
BEGINS ON THE SENATE FLOOR**

(AS PREPARED FOR DELIVERY)

If there's one thing you learn very quickly in public service, it's that the American people have a sensitive moral compass. They may disagree on many issues, but fundamentally, they believe in fairness. They believe in the golden rule. They believe that everyone has a right to be treated with dignity. One of the best things we can do as elected officials is to listen, because if we do, the people will tell us the right thing to do.

Americans spoke loud and clear in the election last November. They want a government that stands with them and their families as they look to the future. They want a government that is working for Main Street, not for Wall Street. They want a Congress that puts working families first. And they want a fair increase in the minimum wage.

Eighty-eight percent of the people in this country support an increase in the minimum wage. Eighty-eight percent. My brother Robert Kennedy used to say that "One-fifth of the people are against everything all the time." When there is an issue of fundamental fairness – an issue that speaks to fundamental human dignity – the American people speak with only one voice.

Despite this overwhelming public support – despite the fact that the vast majority of Americans have spoken with one voice on this issue year after year – Congress has refused to act to give minimum wage workers the raise they deserve. The minimum wage has been stuck at \$5.15 an hour for almost 10 years. A minimum wage worker who works 40 hours a week, 52 weeks a year still makes just \$10,700 a year—\$6,000 below the poverty line for a family of three. In fact, for more than forty years, we've let the minimum wage fall farther and farther behind the cost of living.

The purchasing power of the minimum wage today is more than \$4.00 below what it was at its peak in 1968. In this time of skyrocketing costs, millions of hardworking Americans are forced to make impossible choices—between paying the rent or buying food, between paying for gas or paying the doctor.

The American people know this isn't right. Employees who earn the minimum wage are being exploited, and that's wrong. It's wrong that the nation's productivity soars, but hardworking people cannot afford to put food on the table or heat their homes. People who work hard and play by the rules should be able to support themselves by their work.

Year after year, when Congress failed to act, more and more Americans took up the challenge themselves. They created a minimum wage movement that has now spread across the nation. Thousands of volunteers organized to support their hard-working neighbors who were struggling to survive on poverty wages.

They took the battle to the ballot box last November, and won minimum wage victories in six states – Arizona, Colorado, Missouri, Montana, Nevada, and Ohio. Voters went to the polls in droves to support these measures, and to vote for candidates who support fair wages. Red and blue states alike recognized that the federal minimum wage of \$5.15 an hour is simply too low. Fair wages for American working families is a bipartisan issue.

The people spoke, and Congress is listening. Two weeks ago, the House voted overwhelmingly to raise the minimum wage, with no strings attached. 82 House Republicans crossed party lines to support the bill. They put partisan politics aside, and acknowledged the fundamental truth that no one who works for a living should have to live in poverty.

I urge my Republican colleagues in the Senate to do the same. Put partisan politics aside. Don't load up this minimum wage bill with poison pills. Don't use procedural tactics to delay it. Listen to the voice of the American people.

Minimum wage workers deserve no less. They serve in many of the most difficult and important jobs in our society. They care for children in day care centers, and for the elderly in nursing homes. They clean office buildings, hotel rooms, and restaurants across the country. They are men and women of dignity, and they deserve a fair wage that respects the dignity of their work.

Raising the minimum wage to \$7.25 an hour, as our legislation proposes, will benefit almost 13 million Americans. It will help more than 6 million children whose parents will receive a raise.

This increase will give a family with one minimum wage earner another \$4,400 a year to spend on education, child care, rent, or food on the table. It will make a real difference in the lives of working families across the country, giving millions of hardworking people real security for their families and their future.

Raising the minimum wage will help workers like Gina Walter from Columbus, Ohio, a 44 year-old single mother who works at a retail job in a thrift store.

She got on a plane for the first time in her adult life to come to Washington and tell us what a higher minimum wage means to her.

She earns just over \$12,000 per year. She has no car, and no health insurance. She hasn't taken a vacation in six years. It takes her two full days of work just to pay her gas bill every month. She cuts her own hair because she can't afford to get a haircut. She goes to work every day and she works hard, trying to build a better life for her family.

A fair minimum wage ensures that people like Gina, who work hard and play by the rules, don't have to live in poverty. It will help her provide better opportunities for her daughter. It will help her pay her bill for food and gas. It may even help her finally take the vacation she so obviously deserves!

Unfortunately, we can't bring Gina and all the other workers like her onto the Senate floor to tell their stories. But that doesn't mean we shouldn't listen to them.

The American people have spoken. They are calling on us to do what's right. When you give the American people a chance, they will always stand up for fairness. It's time for the Senate to act on their example, and vote to raise the minimum wage.