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KENNEDY URGES LAWMAKERS TO PUT PARTISANSHIP ASIDE AND RAISE THE MINIMUM WAGE

IT'S LONG PAST TIME FOR A VOTE

(AS PREPARED FOR DELIVERY ON THE SENATE FLOOR)

We've now spent one full week debating whether to raise the minimum wage by \$2.10 per hour. We've debated amendment after amendment, and it's long past time for a vote. I thank our majority leader, Senator Reid, for filing for cloture on this important bill so that tomorrow we can finally move forward and take action to raise the minimum wage.

During the week since this bill came to the floor, each of us in this room has earned almost \$3,200. That's what a minimum wage worker earns in about four months of hard labor. During those four months, a minimum wage fast food worker has probably served thousands of meals. A minimum wage hotel maid has cleaned over a thousand hotel rooms. A minimum wage child care worker may have taught a child to count or taught them their letters. We haven't been nearly so productive in the United States Senate. We've been generously compensated, yet we haven't managed to pass even this one simple bill to raise the federal minimum wage.

The Senate can act quickly when it wants to. The last three minimum wage increases in 1996, 1989, and 1977 each took only two or three days to pass.

And we've also proven that we can respond quickly in a crisis.

We put partisanship aside, we stop listening to the lobbyists and the special interests, and we do what's right for the American people. While I don't think it should take a crisis to get this body to respond to the will of the people, we cannot ignore that the problem of poverty has reached crisis proportions in this country.

Over 37 million Americans are living in poverty in the United States today - an increase of more than 5.4 million since President Bush took office. These numbers aren't an aberration - they have been consistently, alarmingly high for several years. And families living in poverty are increasingly likely to be working families. Since the late 1970s, the number of full-time workers in poverty has more than doubled - from 1.3 million then to 2.9 million today. An unacceptably low minimum wage is a key part of the problem.

Minimum wage families struggle each day just to meet basic needs.

* A minimum wage worker can't afford adequate housing anywhere in the country.

* A minimum wage worker must work for more than a day just to fill a tank of gas.

* Energy costs consume almost half of a minimum wage worker's paycheck, leaving precious little left for food, clothing, and other necessities of life.

This crisis is dramatically affecting America's children. Children are more likely to live in poverty than any other age group. More than 13 million children are struggling with poverty today, up more than a million under Bush's watch. These children are struggling in school, struggling with poor health, and struggling with behavioral problems. They're facing tremendous challenges that will affect their entire future, and - unless we do something about it soon - we could see a large part of the next generation caught in a trap of poverty that they can't escape.

We've spent the last week doing a lot of talking. We've talked about education. We've talked about health care. We've talked about tax policy and immigration policy. The time for talking is done.

It's time to take action to address the crisis of poverty in our country. It's time to vote to raise the minimum wage.

Raising the minimum wage is a quick and effective step we can take to bring parents and children out of poverty. Almost 13 million Americans would benefit from the Fair Minimum Wage Act, including the parents of more than 6 million children.

* Almost 80% of those who would benefit from the Fair Minimum Wage Act are adults over the age of 20.

* Nearly half of those adults are the sole breadwinners for their families.

* Almost 40% of the benefits of a minimum wage increase would go to American families struggling to get by on less than \$17,000 per year.

Historical evidence from states and localities across the country shows that increasing in the minimum wage decreases poverty and decreases reliance on public assistance. When they instituted a citywide minimum wage in Santa Fe, New Mexico, for example, the number of citizens

living in poverty declined, and welfare caseloads declined significantly - faster than in other areas of the state.

Similarly, a study by the Political Economy Research Institute in my home state of Massachusetts showed that wage increases in Boston, New Haven, and Hartford decreased poverty significantly among the affected workers. In Boston, for example, among those workers affected by the law severe poverty decreased by 22% and poverty decreased by 17%.

Obviously, raising the minimum wage is only the first step we need to take to address the crisis of poverty in this nation. Several of my colleagues have discussed the need to improve the Earned Income Tax Credit. I fully support improvements, and look forward to the opportunity to discuss them in this body. I also think we need to do more to improve the quality of the education and the health care that our nation's poorest children are receiving, and I am eager to pursue those initiatives as well.

But the issue before this body today is raising the minimum wage. It's a simple step that we can take now - today - to improve the lives of struggling working families across the country.

A recent study by the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities shows that this increase - combined with other federal income support programs already in place - will lift a family of four over the poverty line. It would give minimum wage families an additional \$4,400 a year to spend on essentials like gas, food, utilities, and medications - enough to make a real difference in their lives.

Poverty in our national has reached crisis proportions. Americans across the country have realized this, and they are calling on us to do what's right and raise the minimum wage. The cities have listened, and have passed living wage ordinances. The states have listened, and have raised state minimum wages. The House of Representatives has listened and passed a bill to raise the federal minimum wage in only a few short hours.

Everyone seems to hear the voice of the American people except the United States Senate. But it's time for that to change.

Sixty-five years ago this week, the United States Supreme Court upheld the law that established a federal minimum wage.

The Court said the law was intended to establish "the minimum standards of living necessary for health and general well-being" And yet we in the Senate are refusing to take action that would make the Act's promise a reality for millions of American workers. It is time to complete our work.

We have a crisis we can't ignore, and the time to act is now. Let's vote to increase the minimum wage. No more delays, no more procedural games, no more filibustering by amendment. Minimum wage workers deserve a raise, and they shouldn't have to wait a minute more.