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OP-ED
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Higher minimum wage in S.J. will help families

By Poncho Guevara
and Kathleen Krenek

On Tuesday, the San Jose City Council could dramatically change the lives of thousands of workers in San Jose with one vote — to increase the minimum wage in the city to \$10 an hour.

Workers like a client of both of ours whom we'll call Olivia.

A single mother of two boys, a second-grader and a college freshman, Olivia works full-time at a fast-food restaurant making \$8 an hour. She is a wonderful mom who has been raising her children on her own after escaping an abusive relationship five years ago — which is the reason we can't use her name. She works hard and makes her children's education her first priority.

Olivia's biweekly paycheck comes to \$575. She rents a studio apartment (\$800), purchases bus

passes for herself and her 8-year-old (\$115), pays for utilities (\$41) and maintains a subsidized phone line (\$9). This leaves about \$185 in a typical month to feed, clothe, and educate her sons.

An emergency root canal last fall nearly left them homeless. The payment plan eats up nearly a third of that \$185.

A \$2 increase in the minimum wage could translate into \$340 more each month. We asked Olivia what she would do with the extra income, and without hesitation she said, "Food, more food, better food!"

Sacred Heart Community Service saw 57,000 children and adults last year in need of assistance with food, clothing, utilities and other critical needs. Next Door Solutions to Domestic Violence provided support to 10,000 individuals.

Most are parents who are

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working hard, sometimes two or three jobs, yet they cannot make ends meet. These are parents making impossible choices between food and housing, utilities and health care — and unimaginable choices between staying in a violent relationship and homelessness. Too many are forced to stay in the former.

Last year a group of San Jose State students asked a critical question: If working parents like Olivia are doing everything society demands of them as employees and as parents, why do they live in poverty?

They identified a policy alternative and tested the argument that forcing businesses to pay their employees \$10 an

hour would cause them to cut jobs or move to other communities. A Cornell University study on the effect of San Francisco's similar 2004 minimum wage increase concluded that "the policy increased worker pay and compressed wage inequality, but did not create any detectable employment loss among affected (businesses)."

The SJSU students developed a coalition with community organizations and faith communities that mobilized 36,000 people to sign petitions in five weeks for a ballot proposition to raise the minimum wage in San Jose.

More than an academic exercise, this is personal for these students. Many grew up in families like Olivia's. Some are low-wage working moms. They experience spiraling education costs, cuts to the public safety net, the slashing of child care subsidies and the

proliferation of low-wage jobs. They know the mathematics of surviving in Silicon Valley.

Olivia had refused to let her older son work. "School is his job," she said. "I feel blessed that my son is in college, and I have high hopes for him."

But last week he decided to leave school to help support his family — in a minimum wage job.

The City Council can do the right thing and pass this increase Tuesday instead of sending it on to the ballot. It will be a historic day for so many families in our community.

Families like Olivia's.

Poncho Guevara is executive director of Sacred Heart Community Service, and Kathleen Krenek is executive director of Next Door Solutions to Domestic Violence. They wrote this for this newspaper.

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