

Minimum wage may increase

Legislation would make most businesses fulfill the national criteria for base salary rates.

By **BRIAN CARLSON**
Staff Reporter

A legislative bill that would increase the state minimum wage to conform with new federal standards was advanced to the floor of the Legislature Monday.

LB569, sponsored by Sen. Don Wesely of Lincoln, would require employers with four or more employees to pay employees \$5.15 per hour beginning Sept. 1, 1997.

The legislation follows last year's passage by Congress of a federal minimum wage increase. The two-step increase raised the minimum wage to \$4.75 per hour effective Oct. 1, 1996, and will raise it to \$5.15 per hour beginning Sept. 1, 1997.

Wesely said the state legislation was necessary because the federal minimum wage does not cover all Nebraska employees.

Employees who fall under the Fair Labor Standards Act, employers grossing more than \$500,000 annually and employers engaged in interstate commerce are bound by the federal law. State law expands the minimum wage to cover all employers with four or more employees.

Gordon Peterson, representing the Nebraska Association of Trial Attorneys, said an increase in the minimum wage for all workers was needed to prevent dangerous economic gaps in society.

"There have been several studies that show a shrinking of the middle class and growing numbers of the pov-

erty class," he said. "That is a very negative, potentially long-term prospect for this country."

Kris Morrissey, director of policy for Voices for Children, said the government had a responsibility to fight the negative effects of childhood poverty.

Although Head Start and government welfare programs provide some assistance to poor families and children, Morrissey said, an increase in the minimum wage was the most important step in curbing poverty.

"Most agree, the best way to temper poverty in children is to raise the parents' wages," Morrissey said.

Members of the Legislature's Business and Labor Committee unanimously voted to place the measure on general file for consideration by the entire legislative body.

The committee took no action on LB860, a separate bill sponsored by Wesely which would create the Nebraska Commission on Jobs and Wages. The proposed commission, to be composed of business and labor leaders appointed by the governor, would be responsible for investigating the state's labor conditions in relation to national rankings.

Legislature

According to Nebraska Department of Labor information provided by Wesely in his testimony, an estimated 110,000 Nebraskans hold jobs paying \$5.00 per hour or less. Nebraska's average wage places it in the bottom 10 percent of all states.

The average wage in Nebraska is 23 percent below the national average. Although the state's cost of living is lower than the national average, the difference is less than 12 percent.

At \$5.15 per hour, a full-time minimum wage worker would earn \$10,300 annually. This figure is 15 percent below the national average of the 1970s after factoring out inflation.

The Nebraska Commission on Jobs and Wages would study wage factors such as worker skills and education, the state's low unemployment rate, work-place technology and state economic development policies.

"The goal is to join hands between business and labor and search for some common ground for improving wages in the state of Nebraska," Wesely said.

Colleges could get aid

From Staff Reports

Legislature

Nebraska's private nonprofit colleges and universities would get state money to provide student financial aid under a legislative bill heard Monday.

Sen. Daniel Lynch of Omaha introduced LB645 to the Legislature's Appropriations Committee. The bill would allocate \$605,000 in 1997-98, and \$1.1 million in 1998-99 for financial aid. The money would come from

Nebraska's General Fund.

Thomas O'Neill, president of the Association of Independent Colleges and Universities of Nebraska, said students should decide on a college based on where they have the best chance for academic success — not based on tuition costs.

No one spoke in opposition to the bill.

Phillips pleads innocent to charge

OMAHA (AP) — St. Louis Rams running back Lawrence Phillips pleaded innocent to a disorderly conduct charge stemming from a party at an Omaha hotel that police said got out of hand.

Phillips, 21, waived his arraignment and did not appear in Douglas County Court Monday but entered the plea to the misdemeanor charge through his attorney.

The former Nebraska I-back was arrested

for disorderly conduct last month when police responded to complaints of noise at a party in Phillips' hotel room at the Red Lion Inn. Police said Phillips was upset when officers arrived and had to be restrained by two men at the party.

Phillips also is scheduled to be in court in Lancaster County for a hearing to determine if he violated his probation for a September 1995 assault on his former girlfriend.

Law & Order

A look at crime on campus and in the community

ARSON

A child doused some items in an abandoned garage with gasoline and lit the building on fire with a cigarette lighter, destroying the garage and landing him in trouble with the law.

Lincoln Police Sgt. Ann Heermann said the 10-year-old child was arrested and referred to Youth Aid Sunday evening after police investigated a suspected arson.

The Lincoln Fire Department was called to the burning garage at 400 W. Saunders Ave. at 5:05 p.m. A witness said he saw two children running away from the garage after the fire started. The garage sits on a lot next to a demolished house.

Loss was reported to be \$5,000.

FIREARMS

An intoxicated man toting two Civil War-era guns was arrested after he fired them three times in a north Lincoln neighborhood.

Floyd Marit, 42, of Lincoln, was arrested near 47th and Colfax streets after police set up a perimeter and caught him running along some railroad tracks, Heermann said.

A witness told police he heard two gunshots and went outside to investigate. When he was outside, he heard a third shot and saw a man running north on 49th Street.

Marit was arrested and jailed for discharging a firearm in the city limits. He built the firearms from do-it-yourself kits.

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