

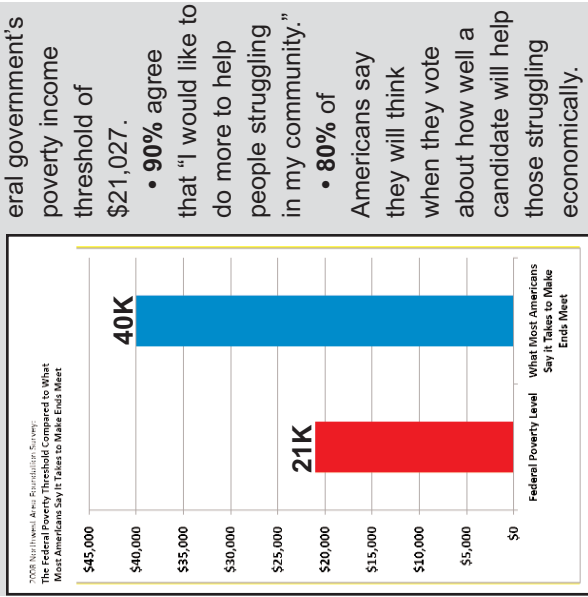
If Now's Not the Time, When Is?

A Living Wage Lobbying Guide

Survey: Americans Worry About Poverty Next Door

The Northwest Area Foundation, a leading poverty reduction organization, commissioned a survey among 4,011 Americans in February 2008 to explore public perception of poverty in the community. Among the survey findings:

- 36% of respondents say they worry all or most of the time that their family income will not be enough to meet bills and expenses.
- 70% of those polled say a family of four living in their own community would need \$40,000 or more to make ends meet, far beyond the federal government's



The NEA national Salary Campaign aims at a professional, competitive salary—from entry-level through end-of-career pay—for every public education employee.

The rock-bottom foundation of NEA's salary goals: a *living wage* for the lowest-paid educators, from education support professionals (ESPs) to “contingent” higher education faculty hired without job security or health benefits.

There's nothing complex about a living wage. It's what it takes to cover basic needs such as food, housing, clothing, transportation, and health and child care. It's what it takes to survive in dignity, on one job alone, without government or family assistance.

There's never a “wrong” time to push for a living wage. Wait for just the “right” budget situation, political alignment, or administration team to appear, and you could be left staring at your watch.

No Better Time Than the Present

An American president has given you the green light. “*It seems to me,*” said President Franklin D. Roosevelt in June 1933, “*that no business which depends for existence on paying less than*



Photo: NYSUT

When lobbying for a living wage, never assume that anyone knows about the complexity of work in a public education institution or how little you actually make.

living wages to its workers has any right to continue in this country...and by living wages I mean more than a bare subsistence level—I mean the wages of decent living.”

If Roosevelt could call for a living wage in the midst of the Great Depression, there's no reason a politician can't support the concept today, when

the prices working Americans pay for everything, from food to fuel, are skyrocketing and many houses are being foreclosed.

Start lobbying!

Living wage activists from coast to coast advise you to contact politicians at every level about the critical need for livable pay, remembering that this isn't an "NEA issue" alone.

In a recent survey of 4,011 people, a leading poverty reduction organization, the Northwest Area Foundation (www.nwaf.org), discovered widespread fears about the economy and purchasing power (*see findings in box on front page*).

A whopping 80 percent of those polled said they'll think, when voting next, how well a candidate will help those struggling make ends meet.

Tips for Getting Started

Living wage lobbying—of any education decision maker—has the most impact when it's done by a prepared, outspoken educator, backed by strong NEA state and local affiliates that organize members and reach out for allies in the community.

And it all starts with member initiative. Here are tips from living wage activists across the country on transforming yourself from a *low-wage worker* to a *living wage lobbyist*:

✓ Affirm that you're worth it. Low-paid educators love working with or around students, but too many employers literally bank on this fact. Stop—just stop—thinking that deplorable

pay “comes with the job” in public education.

Analyze and document how complex and valuable your work has become, and then seek respect for it—starting with respectable pay.

✓ Research what it takes to survive in your

allies. More often than not, they just don't know what you do for a living or how little you earn.

✓ Deliver your best arguments. When addressing decision makers, connect poverty pay to a bigger picture.

Some good points to make: Taxes should not subsidize low-wage public employers. Poor pay drives educator turnover, eroding workplace efficiency and “institutional memory.” And when education institutions—huge local employers—pay more, their employees spend more, driving the local economy and economic development.

✓ Get every candidate and politician on record about poverty pay. Research their stands on a living wage. Role-play with colleagues the objections you're likely to hear from politicians, along with effective responses. Ask political hopefuls and elected officials what they think of public

employees earning poverty pay. And then urge them to publicly support a livable wage, either now or within a reasonable time frame.

✓ Trust in your neighbors to care. In the Northwest Area Foundation survey, 75 percent of respondents said the number of people struggling to get by could be reduced “some” or by “a lot.” And 90 percent said they would “like to do more to help” those struggling in their community.

The time is right to speak up. Reach out to neighbors in your living wage battle, while supporting their *right* to economic justice.

“Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services, and the right to security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age or other lack of livelihood in circumstances beyond his control.”

—Article 25, Section 1,

Universal Declaration of Human Rights, adopted by the United Nations General Assembly, December 10, 1948

area. There are a variety of ways to look up a living wage for your region. For starters, look at the Economic Policy Institute's Basic Family Budget Calculator at www.epi.org.

✓ Tell your story. Realize that your economic woes are not your fault, and question why anyone should have to hold more than one job (or rely on public or family assistance) to survive.

List your monthly expenses, the valuable work you do, and what you can't afford because of your income—be it quality time with your family, a trouble-free car, or even a real vacation.

Then, with Association help, prepare to tell your story to decision makers and community