

# Dozens gather for living wage conference

By **MARISSA BARNETT** The Daily News | Posted: Monday, September 26, 2016 11:00 pm

People gathered Monday night to hear from local advocates and leaders about increasing low-income workers' wages — an issue that's long sparked national debate and heated up in Galveston where service-related jobs dominate.

At the fourth annual Living Wage Conference held at St. Patrick's Church in Galveston, religious leaders, legal advocates and local political leaders shared information about the island's poorest populations.

While just 3 percent of Galveston workers earn the minimum wage — \$7.25 an hour or about \$14,500 annually — many live on wages that make it difficult to meet basic needs, advocates said.

"We see people at the churches every day who work 40 hours per week but are unable to pay for food, shelter and their basic needs," Rev. Freda Marie Brown of St. Vincent's House said.

Workers' wages are a hot-button issue in Galveston right now. Just last week, the Galveston Regional Chamber of Commerce joined other business organizations and trade groups in a lawsuit challenging the White House's new white-collar overtime rule, which would make millions of Americans eligible for overtime pay.

Under the new regulations, which go into effect in December and were issued by the labor department in May, most salaried workers earning up to \$47,476 a year must receive time-and-a-half overtime pay when they work more than 40 hours during a week, doubling the threshold. The previous cutoff for overtime pay was \$23,660.

Advocates and city leaders have for years been quietly discussing how to raise the wages of the island's lowest paid.

Councilman Craig Brown, who spoke at the conference, said the council soon plans to take up an ordinance that would force vendors to establish a higher wage in order to work with the city. The city could also decide to make wage standards a criteria when accepting bids, he said.

Because of recent changes at the state legislature, the city's hands are tied in how much it can do to raise wages, Brown said. For instance, it cannot establish a minimum wage for workers on the island or do anything to affect private industries, he said.



## Annual living wage conference

Ana Arredondo, with the U.S. Department of Labor's Wage and Hour Division, answers questions Monday, Sept. 26, 2016, about minimum wage and overtime laws during the fourth annual Living Wage Conference at St. Patrick Catholic Church in Galveston.

Twenty-nine states have established minimum wages higher than the federal wage, but Texas has not, he said.

Lower wages are driving some families out of Galveston, said Cindy Roberts-Gray, director of Third Coast Research and Development. Labor calculators have put a living wage for Galveston Island around \$17 per hour.

Low-income families with children find it most difficult to get by because of the expenses of raising kids, she said. As a result, Galveston's population has gradually declined, particularly the family-aged populations, she said.

"That is a great worry for a community," she said. "Families with children are what makes a community healthy."