

Democratic members of Congress called on Republican leadership Wednesday to increase the federal minimum wage before the end of the year.

The request is not likely to be granted, but Maryland Democrats are more optimistic about their efforts to override Gov. Robert Ehrlich's veto of a \$1 increase in the state.

U.S. Rep. Steny Hoyer, D-Md., said Democrats want to increase the federal minimum wage to \$7.25. The current federal minimum wage of \$5.15 has not risen since 1997.

"The real value of the minimum wage is the lowest it has been in a century," Hoyer said.

Maryland Democratic Party Chairman Terry Lierman said the likelihood of Congress giving minimum wage workers a raise before year's end is "probably slim," but he was upbeat about Democrats in the Maryland General Assembly garnering enough votes to override Ehrlich's veto.

"I'm very optimistic," Lierman said. "I think the entire legislature, as well as activist groups around the state, have been working this very hard."

The Maryland Senate and House of Delegates approved an increase to \$6.15 in the spring with one and two votes more than is required to override a veto respectively.

About 26,000 Maryland workers made minimum wage or less last year, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics.

"Given our close proximity to Pennsylvania, Virginia and West Virginia, all of which still follow the federal wage rate, the state of Maryland would be at a competitive disadvantage when competing to attract and retain businesses," Ehrlich wrote in his veto message.

The U.S. Department of Labor lists 16 states with minimum wages higher than the federal minimum.

Ehrlich and many Republicans also claimed businesses, particularly small ones, would suffer from the larger payroll and have to either pass the cost on to consumers or fire workers.

General Assembly members will vote on overturning the minimum wage veto when they reconvene for their 90-day session Jan. 11. Other possible veto overrides include bills that would require Wal-Mart to increase the health care coverage it offers workers, allow early voting and permit unmarried couples to make medical decisions for each other.

MINIMUM WAGE BY STATE

- Washington state: \$7.35 (highest)
- Maryland and Virginia: \$5.15 (same as federal minimum wage)
- District: \$6.60
- Kansas: \$2.65 (lowest)