

WASHINGTON -- The nation's financial picture has been grim for months, but don't worry about lawmakers on Capitol Hill.

They just got a \$4,700 raise.

The 2009 annual salary for rank-and-file senators and representatives is \$174,000, up from last year's \$169,300.

The legislative pay hike comes as major U.S. employers shed jobs by the tens of thousands. Many worker salaries have been frozen or cut. Their benefits often have been slashed.

Families are pinching pennies and watching retirement accounts evaporate.

Shortly after taking office, President Barack Obama froze the salaries of top White House staff, citing the country's financial hardships.

Those in Congress, meanwhile, are getting bigger paychecks as they debate an \$819 billion effort to jumpstart the economy, extend unemployment benefits and increase food stamps.

No one voted for the pay increase they just received. They didn't have to.

Congress gets an automatic salary bump every year unless it votes specifically to block it. In this decade, Congress has allowed the pay increase to go through for every year except 2007. The percentage increase is tied to private-sector wages and cannot be more than increases granted to general federal employees. Under this bipartisan system, lawmakers are protected from ever having to vote to raise their own pay. The system, adopted in 1989, allows members of Congress to prevent a challenger from using a pay-raise vote against them at election time.

Omaha Mike McMahon thinks the whole thing stinks.

"I don't think they should be getting a raise if the people that vote for them are losing their jobs and taking pay cuts," said the 54-year-old McMahon. "That's kind of a slap in the face."

His days are spent trying to land a new job after being laid off last year from an area auto dealership.

McMahon said he was disappointed that his congressman, Lee Terry, would take a raise during such tough times. McMahon suggested that lawmakers donate their recent salary increase to local food shelters.

Terry, a Republican, has sought to require a yearly vote on the pay raises and spoke out against the 2008 increase, but he accepted the higher salary after it took effect. He said that he and his wife, Robyn, already donate thousands to charities throughout the year. Terry said that it might be too late to do anything about the raise Congress just received but that he would support giving up the increase that's coming for 2010.

"When the country's on hard times, I always feel the elected officials have to show leadership and empathy, and one way to do that is through a pay freeze," Terry said.

Taxpayers for Common Sense has called on lawmakers to freeze their pay and return the recent increase to the U.S. Treasury as a "shared sacrifice with their constituents."

"The rest of the country is really hurting, and people are certainly not even thinking about a raise -- they're hoping to keep their job," said Steve Ellis, the group's vice president.

Sen. Ben Nelson, D-Neb., said he will consider any proposal that comes up for a vote but defended lawmaker salaries. "I don't see anybody back here in Congress because of the pay,"

Nelson said.

With assets worth between \$7 million and \$18 million, Nelson is one of the wealthiest members of the Senate, but he said he also must keep in mind the effect of freezing salaries on others who aren't as well off.

"You have to worry about the people who are struggling, who have families, two residences to take care of -- you have to think about that," Nelson said.

Nebraska's new senator, Republican Mike Johanns, said he took a pay cut as a U.S. senator compared with his salary as U.S. secretary of agriculture.

"I didn't run because I was going to make money here," he said.

Of course, he would have lost the secretary's post with the change in administrations. And his Senate salary is also significantly more than he earned as Nebraska's governor, the post he held before being tapped as ag secretary.

Johanns said he favors Congress forgoing its next raise or even dropping back to the 2008 rate, in light of the country's economic woes. It might not make a big difference to the budget, he said, but it would send the right message to taxpayers.

"It's such a rotten time out there, I just think a salary increase over what it was last year is just so poorly received, and understandably so," Johanns said.

Critics have said it's hypocritical to oppose the automatic raise but then take the money. Some lawmakers who oppose the raises say they donate the extra money to charity.

Asked if he would take such a step, Johanns said he would welcome the opportunity to make a larger contribution to his church or a charity.

Sen. Chuck Grassley, R-Iowa, favors holding a vote on the raises every year and pointed out that he opposed creation of the automatic raise system as a House member. Grassley also said that it would be difficult to rescind the recent increase, but that Congress should give up the raise scheduled for 2010.

Rep. Steve King, R-Iowa, who is considered among the most conservative members of the House, said he's all for firing the people in Congress who have made bad decisions, but said he's reluctant to get into a debate on congressional salaries.

"I don't think that we're going to solve an economic problem by freezing or cutting the salaries of our employees or our own," King said.

Rep. Jeff Fortenberry, R-Neb., said he would support freezing congressional salaries.

"Standing in solidarity with the people of our country this year, if this arises, I would think it's appropriate to say no" to the increase, Fortenberry said.

He and his wife have five daughters and maintain residences in the Washington area and in Lincoln. He took issue with calling the automatic annual pay increase a "raise."

It's merely a cost-of-living adjustment that doesn't even keep pace with what general federal employees receive, he said.

"Without it, our salaries go down, with all of the corresponding difficulties that causes for someone with children," Fortenberry said. "There are a lot of people here who didn't amass wealth before coming to Congress, and we don't want to create a situation where it's a rich man's game."

A spokesman for Rep. Adrian Smith, R-Neb., said Congress should discuss the issue, given the tough economy.

The median household income for Nebraska and Iowa, based on a three-year average, is less than \$50,000, according to the U.S. Census Bureau.

It's true that many of those in Congress have to maintain two residences, Ellis said, but they

still make a pretty good living.

"At the end of the day, many of their constituents would be extremely happy to have that type of salary, certainly that type of job security," Ellis said.

ae Contact the writer: 202-662-7270, joe.morton@owh.com

