

Ann Zimmerman - \$15 minimum wage testimony

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Hello, my name is Ann Zimmerman. I live in Guilford, VT and work in Brattleboro, VT. Thank you for giving me the opportunity to testify about this important issue. Other folks here have done a lot of work crunching numbers and speaking to the facts and figures of raising the minimum wage to \$15 an hour. I would like to speak as a person who has had to survive as a single parent in the Brattleboro area, in Windham County, raising kids and paying rent as an hourly paid employee.

I currently work at Everyone's Books, which is an independent bookstore in downtown Brattleboro, where I've been employed for many years now. By speaking on this topic here today, I in no way wish to denigrate my employers, who are also my friends. They have been incredibly decent to me, especially during the years when my kids were young, offering the flexibility and understanding that parenting demands, and have definitely been on my team, being a pro-family and a kid-friendly place. There have certainly been advantages to keeping this job. But still, it is an hourly paid job with limited benefits. I am one of 4 employees, all of us middle or late-middle aged women, all but one of us are parents. I have been there the longest, but my most recently added co-worker has been there for about 4 years or so, and we've had very little turnover overall. I mention this because it's important that you understand we are adults, with college degrees and families, not kids or twenty-somethings, who may be moving on soon. I think this is true in many of Brattleboro's downtown shops. I also think it that contributes to the bookstore continuing to thrive in what can be a really difficult business. The owners depend on us.

Though for the last few years I have made \$15.50 per hour, I spent many, many years below that level. When I first started working in downtown Brattleboro, my kids were 2 and 6 respectively, and I made considerably below \$15. While my income was supplemented with child support, and I was eligible for food stamps, heating assistance, and medical coverage for my kids, it often felt like an exercise in alchemy just keeping a roof over our heads, our car on the road, the utilities on, and so on. There were definitely times when we were really, really close to not keeping our little ship afloat. I don't really know how to convey the stress of that if you've never done it. As a single head of household you don't necessarily feel like you can work a second job, because you are also trying to keep your kids from becoming statistics. You may or may not have family around who can help (I did not). You may want to see your kids' baseball games and performances, and in any case you are also their main form of transportation. I will tell you it involves a lot of sleepless nights, bargaining, and generally robbing Peter to pay Paul. Often I would crunch the numbers and think I had something figured out, but somehow I never factored in suddenly needing a new muffler to pass inspection, or the fact that kids are constantly getting invited to birthday parties where they're expected to bring a gift or going on field trips, or the million requests for potluck contributions that come home from school. There is also a lot of creativity involved. The low-income parents that I have known are tremendously resourceful individuals who have figured out amazing ways to make sure their kids generally got what they needed, if not what they wanted—things like maintaining a little cottage business at night to bring in extra money, for example, but going through your days with no sleep does not help you be your healthiest or best parenting self.

To be clear \$15 an hour is not a king's ransom, and it still takes careful planning to make things work from week to week and month to month. No one in Windham County is going to be living high on the hog on this wage. I will say that for me, passing that mark seemed to make a big difference in the amount of stress it took to maintain a household, between always being a little, or perhaps a lot, behind,

and being able to mostly keep current on everyday expenses. Thankfully, my kids are now mostly grown now, and it's not soccer cleats and bake sales and the gas to drive them around all the time that I have to think about. It's now more about college bills, but the day to day is certainly a lot easier.

Being paid a few more dollars an hour is the difference between only having barely enough to pay the rent and bills, or once in a while being able to purchase a movie ticket, a book, a sandwich at a coffee shop, and generally getting to feel like more of a participant in the local downtown. It definitely affects how you feel about your worth as a person, to be paid closer to a living wage. There's also issues like access to credit, for instance for a car loan which I got for the first time this summer, which made the fact that my car died unexpectedly a little less traumatic than it would have been, and has definitely been in the past.

I know that legislators are worried about people losing their benefits, such as their child care subsidy, and this is real. I depended for a number of years on that subsidy, and I don't think I could have worked without it, not having family in the area, even with all of the child care swapping that my friends and I did. Certainly no one making \$15 an hour can afford the cost of childcare, so I know it is really important to address the so-called benefits cliff at the same time.

But please let me also say that having been on both sides of that benefits cliff, it is still better to make more money. No one I ever knew wanted to make less so they could still have their food stamp benefit, or be told that their income needs to be kept lower so that they can still get WIC benefits. These programs will continue to be super important for lots of reasons, but legislators need to know that if people are working, especially if they are working full time and raising a family, they want to be paid adequately to meet their most basic needs.

Again, thank you for the opportunity to give a perspective that may otherwise be missing from this discussion, and I want to also thank my employers, Nancy and Rich, for allowing me the day to drive up here to speak, when I would otherwise be working, and also for just generally being aware that they do better when the people in their community are doing better.