

Representative Anastasia Williams, Chair

House Committee on Labor

Wednesday, February 24, 2021

Support for H-5130 and H-5263, Relating to Minimum Wage

Chairwoman Williams and members of the House Committee on Labor,

My name is Julio E. Berroa, a Providence resident, and recent graduate of Rhode Island College. I immigrated to Rhode Island from the Dominican Republic at the age of 14. Today I am submitting this written testimony in support of bill H-5130, raising the minimum wage to \$15, and to share my story after having worked various minimum wages in Rhode Island, earning \$7.50, \$10.10, \$10.50, and \$11.50. As a full-time student at Rhode Island College, I was earning barely enough to pay for the art supplies and books I needed for my classes, in addition to other required school materials. At the time, I was working multiple, part-time jobs, clocking in on average 20 hours a week. I think it's important to mention that, like many students, I had no support from my parents, so everything I earned was budgeted to the penny.

Towards the end of my college career, I was lucky enough to find a part-time job that I was truly passionate about and that paid \$15 an hour, the most I had ever been paid up until that point. Even then, I still had to work another job to be able to sustain myself as I no longer lived in housing provided by the school or my parents. I was officially on my own, working two part-time jobs, one at \$15 and another at \$11.50, and making ends meet was still a challenge. I was getting charged overdraft fees from Citizens bank at least every 2 weeks. Now in 2021, I was offered my first ever full-time job, earning \$17.50 as a Research Assistant, and am now able to start a savings account, send my mom who lives in the Dominican Republic some money, and even buy myself some nice things from time to time, while also sharing financial responsibilities with my Partner. See how wages make a difference? If I had always had a \$15+ paying job, I wouldn't have had to make all of the difficult choices I did, like choosing between buying a book I would only read once or feeding myself, as well as figuring out how to get around the city when I didn't have enough for the bus fare. More often than not, I relied on friends for food. Poverty is a reflection of those who make it the system, and that is you.

Although raising the minimum wage to \$15 would improve the quality of life for thousands of people, including young people like me who are put in precarious financial situations due to a lack of family support, it should not stop at \$15. With the removal of state and

federal taxes and current price inflation, the take home pay is still insufficient to survive in 2021. We have to make sure that wages keep up with the cost of living every year, so I implore you to tie the minimum wage rate to inflation long-term. If not, then the minute \$15 goes into effect, it will already be out of date. Please take action now, so low wage workers don't have to continue coming back to ask for action on this issue year after year. And while you're at it, please ensure tipped workers and domestic workers are included in the increase as well—their labor matters just as much as anyone else's. Politicians who are making these decisions for folks who are struggling while working at minimum wage cannot understand the struggles we face. I implore you to take the necessary steps to ensure all Rhode islanders have access to an equitable, living wage. Raising the minimum wage to \$15 should be the start, not our end goal.

Julio E. Berroa
Providence, RI