



Rhode Island Working Families Party

February 24th, 2021

Chair Williams and members of the committee,

Rhode Island Working Families supports Rep. Bennett's bill, H5130, creating a pathway to a \$15 an hour minimum wage.

This chamber has worked hard to increase the minimum wage, but even with the minimum wage at \$11.50, our current wage floor is woefully insufficient. At an \$11.50 minimum wage, an individual working full time and never taking a single day off could still not make \$24,000 per year. That simply isn't enough. I think if each of us in this room were honest with ourselves, we know that that is not enough. We know we couldn't feed and clothe ourselves with dignity and much less take care of children on that pay.

Pre-pandemic, more than 87,000 workers in Rhode Island were earning less than \$15 an hour. That means even working full-time they struggled to meet their basic needs, like rent and food, much less saving for emergencies. Low-wage workers' plight has only become more severe throughout the pandemic, while their essential work has become more dangerous. Raising the minimum wage to \$15 an hour would benefit as many as 131,000 Rhode Island workers (including many that make just over \$15 an hour). That's 1 in 4 working people in Rhode Island.

Moreover, the pandemic and resulting economic crisis have highlighted pre-existing racial, gender, and economic inequality in our communities. Raising the minimum wage to \$15 an hour is a necessary step toward a Rhode Island where everyone can thrive—Black, white, brown, native and newcomer. It would give a raise to nearly one third of female workers—especially important in Rhode Island, where the typical minimum wage worker is a woman in her thirties with some college education, often raising children. It would raise wages for more than a third of Black workers, and nearly half of Latinx workers. And increasing the minimum wage to \$15 an hour would go a long way in eliminating the pay gap between women and men. In fact, for workers in lower-wage jobs these measures almost completely eliminate the gap in pay between women and men.

We think raising the minimum wage substantially and consistently will be helpful for our local economy too, especially as we try to build a recovery from this pandemic. When women and men performing low wage work make more than poverty wages, they will spend their extra earnings in the community and at local businesses. Raising the minimum wage will certainly change our economy, but for the better.

Those of you who have been on this committee know that many of us have been advocating for a \$15 an hour minimum wage for a long time. The \$15 minimum wage is no longer bold nor is it controversial. When we started advocating for \$15 it was a popular idea—68% of Rhode Islanders supported it in 2017. Now as one of their first acts the Biden administration is calling for a federal \$15 minimum wage, including for tipped workers, and it will likely get unanimous Democratic support. It is long past time we ensure Rhode Island workers have this basic protection.

We urge you to support H5130.

Thank you,

Georgia Hollister Isman
Rhode Island Working Families