

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,

There is no dignity hidden deep amidst the anxiety and insecurity of working full-time and not knowing if it will be enough. The current minimum wage is an unlivable wage, and that's no mistake. A worker's pay tells them what they are worth and how they are valued: a low minimum wage sends a clear message to minimum wage workers that their skills, and their jobs, are not valued. Raising the minimum wage in Rhode Island to \$15/hr would more justly compensate workers for their labor, support Rhode Islander workers' dignity and right to live—not simply survive—and invest in the growth of our state economy.

There are serious misconceptions about who minimum wage workers are. People always talk about the teenager who flips burgers part-time; that teenager is the face of minimum wage. But this narrow example fails to acknowledge that tens of thousands of Rhode Islanders earn minimum wage. These people, our neighbors, span a wide variety of ages, family backgrounds, and industries.

Rhode Island's minimum wage workers are:

A single dad working as a custodian at your daughter's school. Wasn't he working there back when you went to Classical?

The Syrian refugee, whose family moved to the US mid-pandemic in June, who quickly picked up 60 hour work weeks assembling masks at Honeywell.

The young guy at Dunks—the one who has your coffee order memorized—who thanks you every time you tip well because he's saving up for college.

Your Guatemalan neighbor who moved next door two years ago. She's been working night shifts housekeeping at the hospital so she can take ESL classes during the day in order to help her kids with their homework.

The day care worker who takes care of your grandkids all day, and then goes straight to their waitressing gig to make sure they're not short on rent.

Rhode Island's minimum wage workers are diverse and varied. The narrative that all minimum wage workers are unskilled and uneducated is untrue, yet it's leveraged to perpetuate the idea that minimum wage workers are undeserving of fair wages. But more so, it's dishonest and dismissive of the hard work these tens of thousands of our neighbors perform every day. The pandemic brought to light just how essential our minimum wage workers are to the basic functioning of our communities. These friends, family members, and neighbors perform work that sustains our community, yet they still cannot sustain themselves.

Not only is Rhode Island's current minimum wage insufficient for supporting our basic survival, but it relegates workers to a cycle of poverty. A laborer working 60+ hours per week doesn't have time to get her GED or participate in a skills training program in order to get a higher paying job. A worker who lands a higher paying job across the state can't accept the offer because even though they've been saving up for a car for two years, they haven't been able to put enough money aside. Rhode Islanders should not need to perform miracles—two full-time jobs, overcrowded housing situations, 80-hour work weeks, sacrificed physical and mental health—all

for basic survival. Our community needs a fair minimum wage. And minimum wage workers need to be compensated for the integral work they do to support our community, with a compensation that allows them to thrive, not just scrape by.

We must raise the minimum wage, and pledge to continue to adjust it for inflation. We must agree to invest in each other for sustained growth for all members of the community, not just those on top. And this is where we start. Organizers and legislators in Rhode Island have been fighting for a \$15 minimum wage for years, and our neighbors in Massachusetts, Connecticut, and New Jersey have already passed a \$15 minimum wage. It is our turn. A system that requires people to live in absolute poverty or barely scrape by is deeply broken, and a consequence of policy decisions that deprioritize working people year after year. Take a minute to look around your neighborhood and your community, *our shared* community—doesn't every single one of us deserve a dignified wage? I implore you to vote yes on bills H-5130 and H-5263.

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