

# JOCELYN P. ANTONIO, MPH

## Testimony on H-7769 and H-7771, Minimum Wages House Labor Committee March 18, 2026

Good afternoon, Chairperson Corvese and members of the House Labor Committee. My name is Jocelyn Antonio. I am a resident of Cumberland. I am providing this testimony in my personal capacity as a public health professional.

I strongly urge your **favorable consideration and support** for **H-7769 – An Act Relating to Labor and Labor Relations – Minimum Wages**, sponsored by Representative Furtado and co-sponsored by Representatives Kazarian, Stewart, Messier, Kislak, Cruz, Alzate, McGaw, Felix and Ajello and **H-7771 – An Act Relating to Labor and Labor Relations – Minimum Wages**, sponsored by Representative Sanchez and co-sponsored by Representatives Cruz and Felix.

H-7769 proposes to increase the state's minimum wage from \$16 to \$20 by January 1, 2027. H-7771 would increase the minimum wage to \$24 by January 1, 2027. These two pieces of legislation represent a critical step toward enhancing the well-being of Rhode Island's residents.

### Minimum Wage Increases as a Public Health Intervention

While the minimum wage is often perceived to be a purely economic issue, wages are one of the most significant predictors of health outcomes. Income shapes access to basic needs, such as stable housing, nutritious food, and timely medical care, which are the fundamental building blocks of health [1], [2]. Peer-reviewed research demonstrates that higher minimum wages correlate with improved health metrics across the lifespan:

- *Mental Health*: Financial strain is a primary driver of toxic stress. Increased wages are linked to significant reductions in depressive symptoms and suicides rates, particularly among non-college-educated adults [3].
- *Physical Health*: Higher income enables individuals to afford preventative care healthier food options while reducing exposure to chronic stressors. This lowers the incidence of hypertension and obesity [4]. Notably, a wage increase has been found to decrease the risk of premature death by 5% for low-income adults ages 24 to 44 [5].
- *Maternal and Child Health*: Economically stable mothers report less decreased depressive and anxiety symptoms, and prenatal care utilization [6], [7]. Furthermore, a \$1 increase in minimum wages is associated with a 2% reduction in violent behaviors in children and a decrease in child neglect, suggesting that wage increases function as an effective violence prevention strategy [8], [9]. Higher wages are also proven to decreases the risk of preterm births and low birthweight [5].

### Economic Stability and Healthcare Access

Economic stability is fundamental social determinant of health and is directly tied to health outcomes [2], [10], [11]. When individuals earn a living wage, this enables them to have access to nutritious foods, secure housing, good schools, access to quality health care and is intrinsically linked to health outcomes [1], [5], [11], [12].

Individuals with higher incomes are more likely to have access to healthcare services, whether through employer-provided insurance or the ability to afford out-of-pocket expenses. This access facilitates early detection and management of health conditions, reducing the burden of disease in the community [13].

From a public health perspective, policies that increase income are upstream intervention as it prevents illness before it occurs rather than treating an illness after the fact.

### **Advancing Health Equity**

Raising the minimum wage is also a matter of health equity.

Although Rhode Island's minimum wage increased \$16 per hour, this remains well below what is required to meet the state's standard of need, or the budget need to cover the costs of housing, food, transportation, healthcare, child care and other necessities [15]. In fact, a single adult needs to earn about \$23.47 and a two-parent family with 2 children needs \$25.75.

Low-wage workers in the Rhode Island are disproportionately adults, women, individuals from Black or Latino communities. Many work full time and still live within 200% of the poverty line, this bill could help address health disparities [15], [16].

Because of these disparities, inadequate wages directly contribute to inequitable health outcomes. By increasing the minimum wage, H-7796 and H-7771 would help reduce income inequality and, in turn, reduce preventable health disparities across populations [13].

### **Considerations**

Some research suggests that minimum wage increases may be associated with small reductions in employer-sponsored health insurance offerings. A study by the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health found that a \$1 increase in minimum wage was associated with a small decrease in the percentage of employers offering health insurance. However, the overall evidence indicates that the health gains from increased wages outweigh these potential drawbacks, especially if alternative healthcare access strategies are implemented [17].

### **Conclusion**

House Bill 7769 and House Bill 7771 present a valuable opportunity to improve public health in Rhode Island through economic empowerment. By increasing the minimum wage to \$20 per hour in 2027 or to \$24 per hour, the state can reduce financial strain, improve physical and mental health outcomes, and advance health equity. I strongly urge the committee to support this legislation for the betterment of our community's health and well-being.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

**Jocelyn P. Antonio, MPH**

[joantoni@bu.edu](mailto:joantoni@bu.edu)

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