

Heather Pipino
Minimum Wage Hearing Testimony
Livable Wages AND Paid Sick Days
March 20, 2014

Twelve years ago, I was 30 years old, and I testified to a similar committee in a similar hearing about the need for Guaranteed Paid Sick Days for all workers. At that time, we were also fighting for an increase to Vermont's minimum wage with an attached COLA. At that time, I had worked for 15 years in the retail, food service, and office administration industries — in businesses large and small — and I was struggling. For the first 15-20 years of my work life, I never made a livable wage. In many of these jobs, I never had access to paid sick leave. I was college educated and buried under tremendous debt. I was a single mom struggling to make ends meet. Out of pride, I resisted going on public assistance, though WIC was a godsend and I received heating assistance and the EITC. I avoided food stamps and put my groceries on credit cards. I started going to the food shelf and soup kitchens only at the bitter end.

After testifying for many years to you, and other people that filled your shoes, I reached the breaking point. In 2007, I ended up filing for bankruptcy. I was 36 years old and bankruptcy was my only choice.

It is unconscionable that decades later, I am still here, at this table, testifying to you about the need for livable wages and paid sick leave. It is shameful that we are still having this conversation. I am particularly heart-stricken by the lack of resolve by our leadership on paid time off when people are sick, and the ways in which the issues of minimum wages and paid sick days are being pitted against each other, as if both were not the basic, decent, and right thing to do. As if both were not essential.

I worked. I worked hard for decades. And yet I was expected to scramble to cover my shifts while sick or faced losing a day's pay that I could not afford to lose. This was the greatest indignity. My personal situation would have vastly improved if this country, this state, or our society valued our people and workforce enough to provide a day's pay if one is sick or needed to take care of loved ones.

The sky will not fall when, this year, Vermont chooses to do both — raise the minimum wage and says yes to earned sick leave. It is past time for both. We demand both. The time is now. You have a duty to represent those of us who have struggled, who are currently struggling, and whose voices you have been ignoring for decades.

Heather Pipino
Barre, VT
(802) 595-1671