

Andy Sebranek - Minimum Wage/Tipped Minimum Wage Testimony

My name is Andy, I'm a tipped worker, and I support raising Vermont's minimum wage. With more than one in ten of all workers in the service and hospitality industries, it is important that tipped workers are also represented in the debate for raising the minimum wage. I've worked in restaurants as a server for years, and many of my closest friends and loved ones also work in the service industry. I have a deep respect for the work ethic required of those who choose this line of work. But to make a living wage based on tips is inconsistent, and often means odd hours, more tables per server, few breaks, and a lack of benefits. It is a demanding job that takes a particular dedication and skill that can only be obtained after years of experience. Serving is quickly being recognized as a skilled craft, as it should be. A minimum wage increase for tipped workers, and for all Vermonters, would show that their hard work is valued.

I grew up in the Midwest, in a single-parent household, among a loving network of other working class folk. I am the first in my family to graduate from a university. Navigating the waters of life after college is twice as difficult for anyone not already buttressed by others who have done it before. As I find my way through the ever-changing job market, I have chosen the service industry as a way of supporting myself. I enjoy this work, and have chosen it over other occupations. A common misconception is that increasing the minimum wage would only benefit teens who work part-time for extra spending money. In fact, the majority of those who would benefit are college-educated adults like me - some older, others with families - whose tip-based job is their main source of income. Women represent 70% of all servers and bartenders, therefore, advocating for tipped workers becomes a women's issue. When seeking solutions that will bridge the wealth gap for women, raising the minimum wage is one of the most sincere steps forward.

Paying a livable wage would encourage more like me to seek work here in Vermont. The service industry has grown over 85% since 1990, more than most other sectors. However, as the number of tipped workers continues to grow, they remain in the bottom quarter of all wage earners. Much of the tourism that sustains our communities is made through ever-expanding food and beverage businesses. It is a big draw for tourists to check out Vermont's award-winning restaurants and breweries. The Summer and Fall see a huge spike in business, and tipped workers become highly sought after. A raise in the minimum wage would entice more young people to seek such work, and create more incentive to stay in Vermont.

I love what I do. I find my work worthwhile and satisfying. But unlike other types of employment, relying on tips to meet a livable wage can be very inconsistent. It is difficult to predict if there will be enough on my paycheck each week. Close to every 1 out of 6 tipped workers and their families live in poverty, often requiring the help of public-support programs. Tipped workers make up 46% of the share of workers who require federal assistance. While it is great that these options are available, they are not meant to be in place as permanent fixtures of one's income. Raising the minimum wage would help relieve the burden on these assistance programs, further strengthening Vermont's economy.

In short, raising the minimum wage would improve job quality and quality of life for many Vermonters. It would be the right step forward for women, helping to bridge the wealth gap. It would provide incentive to participate and climb up in Vermont's thriving local food and small business economy. And most of all, paying a fair wage for tipped workers, and for all workers in Vermont, can only increase the health and wellbeing of our communities.

<https://www.epi.org/publication/waiting-for-change-tipped-minimum-wage/>