

I'm Ann Zimmerman from Guilford. I came up here to testify last fall before the joint study committee, and again in January before the Senate committee. The reason I'm here again, willing to leave work early and haul myself up here from the southern Vermont to testify, is my personal relationship to this issue as a person who's raised kids while working at an hourly wage job. It's really important to me that we begin to address how difficult it is to survive in our low-wage state. My remarks from those 2 sessions are part of the public record, so I don't want to repeat them verbatim. I hoped to just speak extemporaneously about my experience, but I didn't sleep much last night, so I didn't think I could. So I did make some notes. Honestly, when I am forced to recall the worst details of trying to survive as a single head of household with 2 kids, I experience something akin to PTSD. I am not prepared to share all of the gory details here, except to say that I lost a lot of sleep when my kids were growing up, contemplating how to keep us afloat from week to week and month to month. The stress of that for parents can be overwhelming, and the fact that many kids fall through the cracks doesn't surprise me in the least, having lived it.

I came to VT just after college and fell in love with it, and decided to make it my forever home. For a little while it was okay to support myself working for peanuts working on an organic farm. At some point my then partner and I decided to live a backwoods lifestyle, with improvised systems and no running water to be able to afford to live here. Eventually though, through no choice of my own, I found myself single with 2 kids, and that lifestyle wasn't viable anymore. I had to face the regular rental market, and it was frankly pretty scary, and that was about 2 decades ago. It's a lot worse now.

When I think about what I want to express to this committee, I want to make sure you know who it is that is working as hourly paid employees at the bottom end of the pay scale. I want to make sure that you know that it's not mainly kids or young adults who are just biding their time. I work at an independent bookstore in Brattleboro, where I've been for 18 years. My kids were 2 and 6 when I began there, and in so many ways it's been a great place to work. My kids essentially grew up there. There were numerous times that I had to park them in the children's area during a child care emergency, until someone could pick them up. My bosses, who are also my friends, were incredibly understanding about that, and thankfully my kids are both readers, so it could have been much worse. Prior to that I tried to keep a cottage business going working at my kitchen counter at night, but at some point I realized that my kids needed their mother to have slept some while she's driving them around in a car. I was grateful to have found this job, even though the pay was low. At the bookstore, I work with a few other mature women. We are all college-educated, and 2 of my co-workers are over 60. One of those works 2 other jobs to get by. We all have families who depend on us.

My kids are young adults now, so it's not as hard as it once was. They're still my dependents, but I'm no longer in the position of having to figure out birthday party presents and field trip money, or the million other things that weigh on you when you have young kids. What's also different is that, because I've been at my job so many years and have had small but somewhat regular pay increases, I am for some years now above \$15/hr. So I can speak to being on both sides of that mark. There's not anything magical about that exact number. Affording life still takes a lot of careful planning. You mostly go to the thrift store when you need things, and you forgo an awful lot. But it's the difference between standing in the health and beauty aids section of the supermarket and wondering whether you should buy toothpaste or laundry soap or actually being able to purchase both of those essential things when you need them. It means if you are super careful, you can mostly get your monthly bills paid without getting too far behind, instead of spending night after sleepless night trying to figure out how to rob Peter to pay Paul. You can even occasionally walk into the shops on your Main Street and make a purchase, or God forbid, sit down and have a bite to eat. I now have the dreaded car payment, which I've never had before, and which I can't really afford, but at least I can get to work. Until I earned over a certain amount, I wasn't eligible for financing. When my car died last summer, I didn't have a chunk of money to purchase even a clunker, so the fact that I was now, for the first time, eligible for financing, made all the difference. I'm not really sure what I would have done otherwise. I don't have the favorable terms that someone in more comfortable circumstances would have, but it's better than being without a car at all, which I have experienced,

and it's part of the stress that poor parents face.

Lastly, I want to acknowledge that I benefitted from programs like 3-squares VT and home heating assistance for a time, while I was eligible, and I greatly appreciated that they were there for us. I was also really glad when I could largely survive without those things, and I think most people would much rather do that. To me it's about the basic dignity, that if you are working, you can afford at least the basics of what your family needs to live in Vermont in 2018. As long as we make it so that people can still afford to work by assuring access to childcare, then work should allow them to survive and contribute to their communities. I know that raising the minimum wage to something closer to a living wage is only one piece of the puzzle for making life better for working families, but it's an important one and it needs to happen.