

Testimony regarding s.23, “An act relating to increasing the minimum wage” to the Vermont Senate Committee on Economic Development, Housing and General Affairs. (2/5/2019)

Good morning, I am Brenda Siegel and I live in Newfane, VT. First I would like to thank you for passing s.40 last session and taking this bill up swiftly this session.

I am the Executive and Artistic Director of the Southern Vermont Dance Festival in the Brattleboro area which is designed as a long term economic driver for the area as a response to Tropical Storm Irene in which my son and I lost all of our belongings. I also formerly ran a pre professional training program for modern dancers. I teach political classes at Compass School and sub contract at Mt. Snow. Additionally, I recently have founded an organization that helps low income people run for office as well as a leadership team to work closely on the plan that I created to heal the opioid epidemic. I have been searching for additional full or part time employment to better meet my families needs. I am also the recipient of Food Stamps, a section 8 housing voucher, fuel assistance and Medicaid.

I strongly support raising the minimum wage to \$15/hour as quickly as possible. This needs to be the case tomorrow, but, a bill that raises it by 2024 is a start and needs to happen. New York, Massachusetts and Maine will all be at \$15/hour sooner than 2024, I believe the latest nearby state is 2023. I would be concerned about moving slower timeline in light of that fact. I also am aware that there is a concern that New Hampshire holds a federal minimum wage and therefore businesses might leave. I first offer that I don't think we need to be in a race to the bottom with NH and I would counter that if we have a worker shortage in this state wouldn't it then stand to reason that if our minimum wage increases, folks living on the border will be more likely to choose to work in Vermont. There are a lot of reasons for people to live, work and grow their businesses in Vermont and I would propose that we need our families to thrive so that our businesses can survive, not the other way around. The impacts of poverty trickle up as opposed to the benefits of wealth trickling down. Those impacts now affect our businesses, our schools and overall our state.

A \$15/hour minimum wage would allow Vermonters like myself to have stronger purchasing power, helping build up our small businesses, reduce our burden on taxpayers and ultimately put an estimated \$240 million directly into Vermonters pockets.

I grew up in an upper middle class family, I know the difference between the opportunities that my son has versus the ones I had. I understand where I have safety nets that others in my position do not. I see the difference between my own responsibilities vs. that of a family who is not struggling to make ends meet. In my own family in our lowest financial moments we have had to cut corners on necessary household items. I have skipped meals so that my son could eat a healthy meal or even so that I could free up enough money to buy my son some shoes when his had holes in them. These are just some examples of sacrifices I have made and what is important to note is that my struggle does not come close to that some of our fellow Vermonters face every day.

Some have said we shouldn't raise the minimum wage because of the "benefits cliff" issue.. However, this cliff is a problem today and keeping a sub-livable wage does not protect those of us who receive benefits, it just prevents us from having a way out. I believe that it is with the best intentions that people are afraid to raise the wage out of fear that people like me will lose our benefits, but, I am here to tell you that while that problem is very real, it is real now, today and was real when the wage was lower as well. It is a separate issue that certainly intersects with wage increase, but, it should not prevent any legislators from voting yes as these bills come before you. In fact, the increase in local spending caused by a higher minimum wage, along with a stronger tax base will give you flexibility to address issues just like these. We should be fixing the problem of the benefits cliff by properly funding our benefits programs so people like me are not held back from taking raises, promotions, or more hours. And, we should bring the minimum wage up to a livable wage. We can, and must, do both.

I am very concerned about the sub minimum wage assigned to students in this bill. My son works in order to cover costs that his peers parents can cover for their children. Luckily his employer from the spring through the fall, does not pay him less during the school year. The weekdays that he works, he has to do his homework at 9pm and often

doesn't get to bed until 12 or 1, then gets up at 6am to get himself to school. He is a near straight A student and keeping his grades up was a real challenge this past fall. He has been unable to find work this winter which has increased the household financial burden but admittedly lessened his own. My niece, began paying most of her own expenses at the age of 16. She walked in her High School graduation with her class this past June, but, is still completing her senior year work today. Her school work was interrupted in part by the death of her brother, my nephew, in March, but before that she was already working full time, keeping up with school work was near impossible. Imagine what that would be like if she was making \$3 less/hour than others with her same job. That would mean she would likely have to work another part time job and likely would feel pressured to drop out of school. Kids like my son, who help to cover some expenses would have to work more days, meaning more late nights and less sleep, likely lower grades. Kids like Audrey and Ajna already are forced to leap hurdles that are only put in front of kids from low income and marginalized families and communities. It is important to remember that there are families in our state with much greater hurdles and even more barriers than the ones that my own family faces and to add more burden to them as they try to succeed would be unconscionable. To move to a sub-minimum wage year round for Vermont's youth can only increase the barriers that young folks from low income families experience. A better choice would be to rectify the law that allows employers to pay child labor at a lower rate by eliminating sub minimum wage from the bill before you.

I want to briefly speak to the idea that was put to this committee by the administration recently that low wage workers likely just "don't have the fire in their belly's", I am quite sure that it would be difficult to make an argument after my run for Governor this summer that I lack a fire in my belly. The truth is that the low wage workers that I know do not lack "fire". In fact they are the most fiery, strong, usually women, that I know. They fight for their families, their kids and the person that most often is left behind is themselves as they take care of everyone else's needs and there isn't enough to take care of their own.

I want to see a Vermont where our economy thrives I want to see a Vermont where those at the top contribute their fair share and those at the bottom are empowered to

participate in our economy in way that they currently are not able. Our state has the power to continue to be a national leader in the movement for economic justice and equity while building a stronger economy. Today I am here as a low income Vermonter as I was last session and business owner to say yes to raising the wage to \$15/hour as soon as possible and no to a subminimum wage. Thank you for your leadership on this very important issue.