



Testimony in Support of Bills to Raise the Minimum Wage  
(HB 2004, 2008, 2009 and 2012)  
Joint Meeting of House Committee on Business and Labor and  
Senate Committee on Workforce

Speaker of the House Tina Kotek  
April 13, 2015

Thank you for the opportunity to testify on this important issue tonight.

Opportunity. That's the central theme of my testimony.

I'm here because I am deeply concerned that opportunity for success remains out of reach for too many hard-working Oregonians and their families, even while our economy improves overall.

I'm here on behalf of the hundreds of thousands of Oregonians who work hard, play by the rules, and deserve a fair shot at a better life.

I'm here because I believe that raising the minimum wage is an investment that will expand opportunity, reward hard work, and support healthy families.

Many of you know I worked for the Oregon Food Bank for several years. Through that work, I heard some heart-wrenching stories from people throughout our state – struggles with homelessness, kids going hungry, the daily fight to survive.

I also heard about the personal sacrifices too many Oregonians are forced to make as they struggle to make ends meet. To this day, I remember a conversation with a man I met in Ontario. He was working multiple jobs at minimum wage, and more than anything he wanted to coach his son's little league baseball team. I still remember the sadness in his voice when he acknowledged that such an opportunity was simply out of reach for him and his son, since he worked both a day shift and a swing shift and was still struggling to afford rent and food.

Now, I know we all have to make hard choices in our lives. But this man's struggle illustrates the greater harm we will allow if we fail to take action on increasing the minimum wage. And, conversely, the greater good we could do – for children, for families, and for communities – by creating greater opportunities for Oregonians to thrive.

Right now, nearly 150,000 Oregon workers make minimum wage and take home just \$18,925 per year, which we know is not nearly enough to meet a family's basic needs, let alone save for a secure retirement or build a brighter future for our children.

Meanwhile, the earnings for the wealthiest in our society have sky-rocketed. In fact, studies show that if the minimum wage had tracked the rate of income growth for the richest few, the federal minimum wage would have spiked to more than \$22 in 2013. Instead of seeing even a small portion of that astronomical growth, low-wage workers continue to struggle with stagnant or declining wages.

As the elected leaders of this great state, we have an opportunity and the solemn obligation to promote a fairer playing field – one on which Oregonians don't just get by, but have the opportunity to get ahead.

As we know from the several bills under consideration today, the specifics of how we raise Oregon's minimum wage are being carefully considered – as they should be. That said, I am firm in my commitment to two guiding principles as we move toward fairer wages that improve opportunity:

First, Oregonians cannot wait five or 10 years for the fair raise they need and deserve. For working families in every community across our state, a lift in the minimum wage will make the difference between living in poverty and gaining a foothold into the middle class. On a day-to-day basis, that increase may be the difference between buying groceries and skipping dinner, between paying the rent and risking a utility shutoff. We cannot delay action, while the gap between the richest and the rest continues to grow.

Second, we should raise the minimum wage to a level that ensures workers are getting a fair deal for their efforts. Contrary to the misconception that minimum wage workers tend to be teenagers who can easily move on to higher-paying jobs, the facts are that:

- The average age of a minimum wage worker is 35 years old;
- Four in ten are the sole bread winner of their family;
- Approximately two-thirds of minimum-wage earners are women; and
- Twenty-two percent are women of color.

Raising the minimum wage by just a dollar would not do enough to increase fairness or opportunity for these women and working families. We must pass a significant increase in Oregon's minimum wage in order to create meaningful change.

Family. Fairness. Opportunity. We can fulfill these promises to the people for whom we work – the people of Oregon – by raising the minimum wage.

As you listen to people's stories tonight, I encourage you to keep thinking about the difference we can make in Oregonians' lives by giving them a fair raise.

Thank you. I look forward to continuing this important conversation.