

Kate Brown
Governor



Oregon Commission on Black Affairs
"Advocating Equality and Diversity"
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Testimony in support of raising the minimum wage for Oregon's working class women and women of color
January 14, 2016, Hearing Room F, 6:00pm
House Interim committee on Business and Labor and Senate Interim Committee on Workforce and General Government

Chairs Dembrow, Holvey and members of the committees:

For the record, my name is Robin Morris Collin. I am a professor of law at Willamette University College of Law. I deeply appreciate the opportunity to testify before you today, and I appreciate your time and attention to the matter of raising Oregon's Minimum wage.

I'm here today in my role as a commissioner serving on the Oregon Commission for Black Affairs (OCBA.) We believe that gender equality and racial equity are essential to closing the income inequity for working class Oregonians. The OCBA has worked collaboratively with the Oregon Commission for Women to review the data about Oregon's citizens working in lowest wage jobs. The information reveals the depth of the struggle:

- A large proportion of Oregonians working for minimum wage are women heads of household, and African American women.
- Child poverty for African American, Hispanic, and American Indian continues to hover over 60% in Oregon.¹ Research shows that raising the minimum wage reduces child poverty among female-headed households.² The families of women of color benefit from Oregon raising the minimum wage.
- Single mothers in Oregon have to earn wages, raise their children, and depend on the state for extra assistance. Women of color have a higher percentage of single-parent families, African American women the highest at 67 percent nationally.³

The OCBA and the Advocacy Commissions support you as you find ways to raise the ability of the working poor in Oregon to fully participate in our economy.

Our Commissions profoundly believe in the American credo that if you work hard enough, in America, you can succeed. We share the belief in this land of opportunity. Yet, when people can

¹ National Center for Children in Poverty, 2013 data, http://www.nccp.org/profiles/OR_profile_6.html

² Robert H. DeFina, "The Impact of State Minimum Wages on Child Poverty in Female-Headed Families," *Journal of Poverty*, vol. 12, no. 2 (October 2008), pp. 155–174, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10875540801973542>.

³ Kids count data center, a project of the Annie E. Casey Foundation, <http://datacenter.kidscount.org/data/tables/107-children-in-single-parent-families-by#detailed/2/39/false/36,868,867,133,38/10,168,9,12,1,13,185/432,431>

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work two and three jobs, 80 hour weeks, and are still unable to pay their bills, have food at the end of a month, or pay for health care or education, we are undermining the foundation of our collective beliefs, undermining our families and our communities. This kind of entrenched poverty “annihilates the future” to quote George Orwell. In many other countries, inadequate wages are offset by the provision of public health services, free or subsidized child care, subsidized housing and public transportation. We in Oregon are largely telling poor women to make it on their own. And the consequences fall on women and children first, and our communities and way of life in the long run.

Poverty itself used to be a transitory state that many experience for a while -- for example when we were young, just starting out in life, as students or teenagers. We had prospects for a better future as we gained an education, found a job and bought a house. The path out of poverty was just that clear -- an education, a job and an asset and you are on your way. Today, the path out of poverty is not so clear. Childhood poverty now prejudices lifelong health, and learning; women in poverty raising children in poverty is no longer a transitional period for anyone involved. We must restore the pathways out.

In Oregon, the average age of a minimum wage worker is 35; low wage workers, and tipped occupations are predominantly women, and most of these women are the primary support of their household. We are talking about adults, parents trapped in poverty.

A raise in the minimum wage helps families, especially women heads of household and African American women who are disproportionately represented. Better wages allow working parents to provide themselves and their families with shelter, food, and the hope for higher education. Better prospects for health and education prosper our entire community by enabling better contributions to our collective social security in future.

Additional projected benefits of a raise include:

- Reduction in government spending as fewer families and individuals need to rely on public assistance programs, producing substantial savings within a near term.
- Workers with more money to spend on basic needs will pump more money into the local economy including small businesses.

For women alone the lasting effect of your actions will follow them into maturity, when their Social Security contributions and their savings will allow them to retire. These and other statistics regarding the ongoing struggle of women and communities of color across the State compel us to support the raising of the minimum wage as a policy option. It will have the greatest impact on closing the wage gap between men and women of color in Oregon and we look forward to your good work on this issue.

- Black, American Indian, Pacific Islander and Hispanic women in Oregon are struggling in Oregon’s job market. Women of color consistently have the lowest median earnings for full time year round work, and Hispanic women are the lowest at just \$26,000 per year.⁴

⁴ U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey 2009-2014, Earnings by sex race and ethnicity Oregon 2009-2014

- African American women are disproportionately represented in jobs that pay at or below the minimum wage: they comprise 9.8 percent of minimum wage workers⁵ in Oregon, compared to 6.1 percent of all workers.⁶
- The BOLI brief on Equal Pay for Equal Work found that Oregon ranked 44th (or 6th to last) in disparities between minority women and men, with minority women earning only 58 percent of their male counterparts.
- Even in occupations that pay low wages, men still out earn women. In the low-wage workforce, African American women working full time, year round are typically paid just 73 cents for every dollar their white, non-Hispanic male counterparts are paid and 96 cents for every dollar their African American male counterparts are paid.⁷

The Oregon Commission on Black Affairs supports raising Oregon's minimum wage as a critical step towards achieving equal pay for women of color. Women of color are important stakeholders in the wage debate, and we appreciate your willingness to invite all of us to the table and to be heard as the development of policy on the minimum wage unfolds. If the OCBA can be of further support as you move forward we are honored to participate.

Sincerely,



Robin Morris Collin, Commissioner

⁵ NWLC calculations based on Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS), Characteristics of Minimum Wage Workers, 2014, available at <http://www.bls.gov/opub/reports/cps/characteristics-of-minimum-wage-workers-2014.pdf>

⁶ NWLC calculations based on BLS, Current Population Survey (CPS), 2014 Annual Averages, Table 3, <http://www.bls.gov/cps/cpsaat03.htm> (last visited July 7, 2015).

⁷ NWLC calculations from U.S. Census Bureau, CPS, 2014 ASEC, using Miriam King et al., Integrated Public Use Microdata Series: Version 5.0 [Machine-readable database], Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota, 2010.