

**“Gradually Raising the Minimum Wage to \$15: Good for Workers, Good for Businesses,
and Good for the Economy.”**

**Testimony of Terrence Wise presented to the Education and Labor Committee, U.S.
House of Representatives, February 7, 2019**

Chairman Scott, Ranking Member Foxx, and Members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify. My name is Terrence Wise. I'm a 39 year old, second generation fast food worker from Kansas City, Missouri. I am honored to speak with you about the Raise the Wage Act (H.R.582), the bill to raise the federal minimum wage to \$15.

I began fighting for \$15 and a Union six years ago, because I knew that just asking the boss for a raise and benefits wasn't enough. I felt the struggle of raising a family on low wages my whole life. It all began in South Carolina. I grew up in government housing with my two brothers and a sister. My mother worked full time at Hardee's for 30 years. My dad also served in the military as a cook.

My mom would wake me up at 4am when she left for Hardee's. I had to get my siblings off to school. It was also my job to get the mail and sign for food stamps from the postman. Even with two full-time incomes and food stamps, our family had to skip meals. One winter I didn't even have a coat until my guidance counselor gave me one from the lost and found. Hardworking people with two full-time incomes shouldn't live like this, in the richest nation on earth.

I was a great student and by the eighth grade was in advanced placement classes. My teachers said, "Terrence you're going to do great things. You can be anything." I wanted to be a Gamecock at the University of South Carolina. I was going to be a writer.

But I went to work at age 16 to try to help my family survive. One day I came home from school, there were no lights or food in the fridge and I couldn't do homework without food and lights.

So I went and got my first job at Taco Bell. I only made \$4.25 an hour, which I believe was the minimum wage at the time¹ but I knew my family needed the money -- desperately. My first paycheck was \$150. It went to the light bill. One job wasn't enough. So I got a second job at Wendy's to bring in more money for my family.

I tried to balance both work and school. I had As in AP History, English, Science, and Math. I started falling asleep in class. My teachers asked, "Terrence, what's wrong?" I told them I was working two jobs.

I didn't need my AP Calculus to run the numbers at home. There simply wasn't enough money for basic necessities. I had left school and my dream of college behind. At 17, I became a full-time worker and was left with no other choice but to dropout of school.

¹ Tax Policy Center. State Minimum Wage Rates. 1983-2014.

https://www.taxpolicycenter.org/sites/default/files/legacy/taxfacts/content/pdf/state_min_wage.pdf

I've been working in fast food ever since.

Now, I have a family of my own. My fiancée is a home health care provider and we have three daughters--ages 17, 15, and 13. She takes care of some of the most vulnerable people in our society. Neither of us make enough money to make ends meet. I've worked two jobs most of my life.

I'd leave for work at Burger King at 2pm and then work the overnight shift at McDonald's from 10pm until 6am. Working 70 hours was a normal work week for me. I couldn't get my two jobs to line up with my off days. Sometimes I'd work for weeks without a day off.

Working for poverty wages doesn't just harm me. They hurt my whole family when I would only get to see my children when they were asleep.

My family has been homeless despite two incomes. We've endured freezing temperatures in our purple minivan. I'd see my daughters' eyes wide open, tossing and turning, in the back seat. Try waking up in the morning and getting ready for work and school in a parking lot with your family of five. That's something a parent can never forget and a memory you can never take away from your children. You should never have multiple jobs in the United States and nowhere to sleep.

I work for McDonald's, the second largest private employer in the world² and still rely on food stamps and Medicaid. Like other working people in America fighting for \$15 and a Union, I want to stand on my own. I want to provide my girls with three meals a day and give them the opportunities I didn't have.

This is what generational poverty in America looks like. It's what our movement is fighting to end. It's why I joined the Fight for \$15 and a Union six years ago. I'm fighting to ensure my mother's past and my present is not my daughters' future.

This movement has changed my life and empowered my entire family. My daughters march on the front lines with me during strikes and rallies in the Fight for \$15 and a Union. They understand what it means to fight for justice and do whatever it takes.

This movement has also changed our city, state and country. Many people didn't believe that \$15 was possible. But \$15 an hour has become a reality for 22 million workers across the country.³

² McCarthy, Niall. 2015. Forbes. "The World's Biggest Employers."
<https://www.forbes.com/sites/niallmccarthy/2015/06/23/the-worlds-biggest-employers-infographic/#7f1ebbbf686b>

³ Lathrop, Yannet. 2018. "Impact of the Fight for \$15: \$68 billion in Raises, 22 million Workers."
<https://www.nelp.org/publication/impact-fight-for-15-2018/>

75% of voters in Kansas City voted for a \$15 minimum wage in 2017.⁴ Workers won that victory by taking big, bold, and dramatic actions like going on strike, marching, and sleeping on the steps of City Hall for a week in our “Fast for \$15.” It was a huge victory for us until the state legislature pre-empted the minimum wage, returning it to \$7.65.⁵ Missouri voters increased the minimum wage in 2018 but we’re still not achieving \$15 per hour -- the minimum we need to support our families.⁶ That’s why we need Congress to take action immediately to raise the federal minimum wage.

I often imagine what \$15 an hour would mean for me and my family. I wouldn’t have to worry about providing the basic necessities for my family. We could keep food on the table. No one would have to worry about doing homework in the dark. I could get them the school supplies whenever they need them.

With a \$15 living wage, I could afford to take them out to do something fun. Honestly, the last time I went on a date with my fiancée, was to see the movie ‘Matrix’. That was in 1999.⁷ Valentine’s Day is next week and I want to buy each of the women in my life some flowers. I’m afraid that I won’t be able to afford a single rose.

But what would \$15 really mean? It would mean my daughters could meet their grandmother for the very first time, because we could afford to travel to South Carolina to visit her.

We know that there is more work to do. Low wage workers like me, will continue to organize and fight so all working people have economic justice. My coworkers and I have lifted our voices from the steps of City Hall in Kansas City to the White House, and right here on Capitol Hill today.

Everyone who wakes up and works in our country deserves access to the promise that America made to each and every one of us: “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” \$15 brings us closer to living out our values as a nation. The Raise the Wage Act will do just that.

I urge the members of this Committee to support the Raise the Wage Act and act quickly to pass this bill.

Thank you and I look forward to your questions.

⁴ City of Kansas City, MO. Election Summary Report. August 8, 2017. https://www.kceb.org/useruploads/8817/Election_Summary_Official_8-17.pdf

⁵ Smith, Aaron. 2017. CNN Money. “Kansas City wants a higher minimum wage. Missouri is blocking it.” <https://money.cnn.com/2017/08/09/news/kansas-city-minimum-wage/index.html>

⁶ Collins, Leslie. 2018. Kansas City Business Journal. “Minimum wage increase will put Missouri among top 10 states.” <https://www.bizjournals.com/kansascity/news/2018/11/07/minimum-wage-increase-will-put-missouri-among-top.html>

⁷ IMDb. The Matrix. 1999. <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0133093/>