

Speech presented by Lucas Burrows for Friends of Seasonal and Service Workers at the March 19, 2015 House Committee on Consumer Protection and Government Effectiveness of the Oregon State Legislature in Salem, Oregon

Hello, my name is Lucas Burrows. I am a student at Portland State University, service worker at Salvador Molly's restaurant in Portland, and a volunteer at Friends of Seasonal and Service Workers.

I am excited that this committee is considering this bill. It is a great start, but these protections cannot be limited to narrow groupings. The protections should extend to every Oregonian at or below 200% of the poverty line on a year-round basis and include all necessary utilities.

Many of my classmates take out loans and hold down jobs to put themselves through school. But the old model of "working your way through college" doesn't result in a four-year degree and a living-wage job any more. Instead it means ending up with growing debt to keep up with the rising cost of tuition, holding down one or two jobs leaving less time to study, and going to school for five or six years just to complete a degree. Then, we compete for the few good-paying jobs in the state while in reality, joining the ranks of the underemployed and low-paid by keeping the service work job we held through college.

According to the Oregon Office of Student Access and Completion, "over the last decade, average published tuition and fees at public four-year colleges rose 72% after adjusting for inflation." Along with these yearly tuition increases, including this year's 4.3% increase at Portland State, we have seen our cost of living go through the roof. The cost of utilities has been going up annually.

Since 40% of Oregonians work in low-wage jobs, the cost of living is outpacing what we can earn.

I have a friend who sleeps five hours a night because he works 40 hours per week in order to pay for the cost of going to school full-time, and he still takes out loans.

He is just one of the 60% of Oregon students in 4-year institutions that are graduating in debt, averaging almost \$22,500 per student. According to a September, 25 2014 article from *The Oregonian* titled, "*Oregon student debt doubles in a decade, colleges increasingly dependent on borrowed money*", students in Oregon are amassing an additional \$3.6 million dollars in debt per day.

Even two-year College is unaffordable for many low-income families who must devote 44% of their income to tuition, even after receiving aid. This crisis is exacerbated when our utility rates go up.

Today's university educations require the ability to access the internet. Without power, a student like me would likely fail their classes. This makes it harder for low-income students to get a degree. According to a report just released by the Oregon Public Utilities Commission, 71,000 homes were shut off last year. A percentage of these people, even with this bill, will have

their power shut off as PGE has stated they plan to seek rate increases annually for the next decade.

With the Oregon Public Utility Commission approving rate increase after rate increase, we have no reason to believe that this situation is going to improve. The Oregon Public Utility Commission guarantees a return for shareholders in profit; it is time for the government to guarantee working Oregonians and students protections from utility disconnections when we need them the most.

Conclusion I am calling on the House Committee on Consumer Protection and Government Effectiveness to act on behalf of the consumers, to protect us from these unjust policies. I call upon you to enact a comprehensive moratorium, *year-round*, to stop shutting off utilities like water, light and heat, to *all consumers at or below 200% of the poverty line*.

Thank you.