

ECUMENICAL MINISTRIES *of* OREGON

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February 2, 2016

Testimony in Support of Raising the Minimum Wage
Before the Senate Committee on Workforce and General Government
Submitted by Britt Conroy, Public Policy Associate, Ecumenical Ministries of Oregon

Chair Dembrow and Members of the Committee:

Good afternoon, my name is Britt Conroy and I am Public Policy Associate for Ecumenical Ministries of Oregon. EMO is a statewide organization of over 140 religious denominations, congregations and direct community service providers representing rural and urban communities throughout the state – including multiple members in each of your districts, 27 in all. Thank you for this opportunity to testify today.

In EMO's interfaith and theological dialogue programs, our service to communities in crisis and people in need, and in our public advocacy, we seek to create a more sustainable and compassionate world.

Currently in Oregon, a worker earning minimum wage at a full-time job cannot make enough to provide housing, food and other basic necessities for her family. The gaps in the budgets of thousands of households around the state undermine the economic foundations of these families, of the businesses they frequent and of the state's social services budget. The need for a more sustainable and compassionate minimum wage is supported by sobering statistics and by the stories of the clients EMO programs serve every day.

Nearly one in seven Oregonians did not have enough money to buy food at least one time in the past year. Indeed, at our Northeast Emergency Food Program, we regularly provide groceries for children whose parents work full-time.

One in four Oregon mothers with young children work in low wage jobs, the second highest rate in the country. Our staff at EMO's Russian Oregon Social Services program (ROSS) sees this reality daily. ROSS helps domestic violence survivors obtain skills that enable economic self-sufficiency. But when a victim of domestic violence feels she must stay with her abuser because even her full-time job cannot support her and her scared children, we have erected a barrier to a better, safer life where there should be a bridge.

With a drive toward a deeper commitment to our values and as witnesses day-in and day-out to the struggles of those earning the minimum wage, EMO as a statewide association requests three things of this committee and this legislature:

- ✓ First, raise the minimum wage so that families in rural Oregon are self-sufficient;
- ✓ Second, establish a wage structure that acknowledges there are real cost-of-living differences across our state;
- ✓ Third, stand strong in the face of pressure to create exemptions for certain employers from a new statewide minimum wage. There are no exceptions to human dignity, none to whom our values do not apply. Where an industry needs help to survive, we must choose policy approaches that do not result in our most impoverished neighbors bearing our collective burden.

A minimum wage increase will mean stability and much-needed hope for many. Thank you for giving this issue your time and your thoughtful discernment.