

March 5, 2015

Testimony for the Labor Committee in FAVOR of SB 858 to eliminate the tipped sub-minimum wage, and HB 6933 for fair schedules.

My name is Jennifer White Bonaparte and I am here today to give you a glimpse into the daily working life of many women in Connecticut and the economic realities we face each day.

After searching for eight months, I found a job as a server at small pizzeria in New Haven, where I now live. I was promised minimum wage plus tips. Desperate for a job, I accepted it, excited at the chance to earn the money I needed to move into a new apartment.

Very soon after starting, I learned that the business was mostly take-out, not eat-in customers. Patrons do not tip the cashier on take-out orders even though the take-out cashier is paid the subminimum wage with the expectation – or promise by her employer – that she will make up the difference in tips. I made maybe 6 dollars worth of tips on a busy shift. Often I earned none. That means that often I would earn only 50 bucks for a full 8-hour shift, and my employer was never held accountable for not paying me more.

Even though I was being paid the servers' wage, I was required to lift heavy cases of bottled drinks and stock the kitchen. I even took it upon myself to sweep the front walk when customers were tracking salt in from a recent snowstorm. I was doing everything to keep that job. I needed the job.

Then the owner's father started touching me. It started with putting his hands on my hips to move me. "If you say excuse me and tell me to move, I'll get out of the way," I told him but the touching escalated. He never touched me above the waist but he did scream in my face, two inches from me, calling me stupid. I said nothing. I needed the job.

I was on call 24 hours every day. "Can you come in first thing in the morning?" the owner would call or text me at night. Because I take the bus, I had to add two hours to every shift for the time it would take me to commute. I couldn't schedule appointments I needed to make so I just went without doctors appointments and other errands. I needed the job.

One day, the touching got to be too much. I approached the owner and asked him to see if his father could stop touching me. I was fired that night, told "I knew you

wouldn't last," by the owner. I begged to keep the job. Economic necessity made me willing to put up with abuse and harassment and being paid less than a living wage. I needed the job.

While I worked at this pizzeria, I was paid in cash, off the books. A man who works in the kitchen works twelve hours a day for five dollars an hour. He is excited to be paid in cash, too. He needs his job. Needless to say, none of the employees get any consideration for when they are sick with paid sick days or any type of leave. I hope the committee will understand that when employees live with this much financial insecurity - no reliability in their schedules, the right of the employer to pay less than minimum wage -- it opens the door for employers to get away with all kinds of abuses. If servers are paid a sub-minimum wage, then employers stretch the law and pay it to cooks and bus boys. If employers can fire us for not being able to come in to work on a moment's notice with no schedule, then they think they can treat us poorly in a host of other ways.

The legislature needs to pass a comprehensive set of laws that protect women employees, particularly, low wage earners. Paid sick days, fair scheduling regulations, family medical leave and a fair minimum wage that complies with current labor laws are a start. I doubt that anyone on this committee would want their daughter or niece or wife or mother to endure what I did because I needed a job.