

Testimony of Carolina Portillo
Before the New York State Wage Board
Regarding issue of minimum wage for tipped workers in the hospitality industry
On October 20, 2014

Hello, my name is Carolina Portillo. I live in Queens, and have been a server in New York City for the last 7 years.

I earn \$5 per hour plus tips. If all things are going perfectly, I'd say I could make between \$400 and \$500 per week, including tips. But tips are not something that's steady. It depends on so many things, like the time of day, day of week, season of year, and how the customer is feeling. Some weeks I can also make much less because, for example, this week I was only scheduled for three shifts instead of the usual five. So my income is very unsteady and unpredictable. And it makes it hard for me to budget ahead of time.

My company also just changed their policy – we used to add gratuity to parties of 6 or more. But now they don't automatically add gratuity anymore, so I'm sure we are losing money. Tips will be less. I thought working for tips, you would make more money. Sometimes it's true, but many times it's not. Sometimes I just don't make enough...if it's a bad month. My rent is \$700 because I live in Queens with three roommates. Some months I just barely make enough to survive – pay rent, food, bills. I don't have money for anything extra. If I'm sick, I can't afford to call out because I need that money.

If I don't make enough for rent, I borrow money from friends. In the past, I used to put in on my credit card, but now I'm in a lot of debt, so I learned my lesson. I try not to borrow, but sometimes I have to. This week, for example, I am only scheduled to work three shifts, so I'm probably going to have to borrow from a friend this month. I don't want to think about it, I don't want to do it, but I might have to.

It would be nice to have the option to live by myself – it's not because I hate my roommates, but it would be nice to be able to afford to live alone. I'm 36 years old and still living with roommates. It's just not possible to live alone. If a roommate leaves, I have to find someone to replace them the next day.

One of the sad things is that when you work in a restaurant, most of the servers are starving. We are all broke, but also because there are long hours and no breaks. We are always complaining about it – how it's ironic that we are serving food and we are hungry. Most of the servers I know are broke. They rely on family meal at work to feed themselves. I can't even eat family meal because it's always meat and I'm vegetarian.

Not having enough money just becomes part of your daily life, so you learn to live with it. But it doesn't mean that it's right. It would be nice to not have to worry about money, about food, about rent. It would be nice to have some savings. It would be nice to not have debt.