

Good Morning.

I want to begin by thanking Senator Harkin for the introduction and thanking the Committee for allowing me to speak today. I am Alicia, the mother of four wonderful boys, ages 11, a set of twins who are 10 and a five year old. These four boys are my priority and I'm their only parent involved in their lives. I am responsible for their emotional, spiritual, physical and mental development. It is a big job and I love them so much.

We came to Iowa almost two years ago. I was in a shelter in Illinois after leaving a domestically violent relationship. My family needed to get to a safe place and that ended up being Iowa and I am so grateful. One of the organizations that I began working with once I got settled was North Iowa Community Action. I enrolled in the Family Development and Self-Sufficiency Program, we call it FaDSS. This program is about helping me get off the system and become self-sufficient which is exactly what I want to do. I would prefer to get my money from a paycheck instead of from the system.

I work usually around 20 - 25 hours a week in the fast food industry. My job requires me to be quick, efficient and do what needs to be done, cooking, taking orders, cleaning, I do it all and it is hard, hard work. I have been at my current job just over a year. I started at \$7.25 an hour and this month after my year anniversary, I got an increase to \$7.65 an hour. With this raise came a slight increase in my rent, as we live in subsidized housing, a cut in food assistance and in TANF. I earn about \$450 a month from my job, receive \$256 from TANF and about \$240 in food assistance, not enough when feeding four growing and hungry boys. My fixed expenses like rent, utilities and bus passes cost almost \$600 a month. So you can see that my budget is really, really tight.

I have to make many hard choices every month. The boys are like most kids, they want to fit in with their friends and classmates. They want to participate in activities like sports and band but I never have enough money to let them all do it. So I have to rotate who gets to do what. One year, someone will get to play football (it costs \$75) and the other two participate in basketball, which cost \$18. My oldest son does get to be in the school band and he plays the drums because it is the cheapest at \$5 a month but he loves it so that is okay. I have to pay \$20 a month per child so they can bring their computers home to do their homework. We don't have one at home so this choice is the only one I can make. I did get the Earned Income Tax Credit last year, I had about \$700. I used those dollars to buy school clothes for the boys so I had to guess how much they would grow from March to August when school would start. Even with that help, I struggle with ongoing expenses.

For example, last month the school had a ski trip planned for the students and my oldest son really, really wanted to go. But in order to do that, I would not have been able to pay the bills so I had to tell him "no" again. It hurts so bad to keep saying no and they don't understand. They ask me "why isn't there enough money, you work and you work really hard". I don't have a very good answer, other than I don't get paid enough. They can never all get a haircut in the same month and I definitely cannot buy new shoes and clothes for them at the same time. I make promises that if you aren't the lucky one this time, I will get you next time.

Another decision I have made is that I don't own a vehicle; I rely upon the County Transit Program to get me to and from work. I get on the bus at 6:40 in the morning and ride it home after I get off work at 2:30. At this point, I can't work any additional hours due to the limitations of public transportation but it is the only choice I have.

If the minimum wage is increased to \$10.10 per hour and increases with the cost of living, it would be very helpful to my family. I would see more reductions in TANF and food assistance and would see another increase in my rent, but that would be okay, I will have more money overall and it would come from my own hard work and my family will be better off. These programs are supposed to be temporary, not permanent. I want to work and stand on my own two feet. As I said before, I work very hard doing my job and I believe I am worth ten dollars and 10 cents an hour. Earning additional income from a \$10.10 hourly wage won't solve all my budget problems, but it would be very, very helpful. I could do better at paying my bills on time and I would love to save \$20.00 a week and maybe, just maybe the boys could all play football and basketball and they could all get a haircut at the same time. That would be so wonderful.

I hope someday soon I will be able to work more hours and earn more money so I can continue to improve my life and help my boys grow up to be healthy, happy young men. If you can move forward with increasing the minimum wage, my family will be more successful in reaching our goal of a better life.

Thank you for listening to my story. I appreciate the opportunity to share about my life in hopes that you will understand how important this issue is for me, my co-workers and the thousands of other families in similar situations.