



The State Journal-Register

[Your turn: Illinois restaurant industry at risk if lawmakers pass new legislation](#)

Sierra & Eric Ferrell • March 22, 2024

If you read the news or spend any time on TikTok, you may think our generation is unhappy when it comes to their careers. From low pay to mundane 9 to 5 schedules, many young adults lament that their “job is just a job.”

For the two of us, it’s a much different story. We are married and have worked together in the restaurant industry for six years. It’s rewarding work that affords us great pay and flexible schedules that allow us to do the thing that we love most — travel and see the world.

But the career satisfaction we enjoy could end if lawmakers enact a new law that would disrupt our entire industry with a “solution” to a problem that doesn’t exist.

A proposed bill would require Illinois restaurant operators to pay tipped employees \$5.60 an hour more, arguing that such an increase will give us a more livable income. This may sound like a good idea, but the suggestion that tipped employees are underpaid is a complete myth.

Tipped employees already earn a median of more than \$28 per hour. On a busy night, we’ve seen our wages surge to as much as \$40 per hour. We’ve worked alongside students, single parents and others who agree that tipped income is a great way to get quick cash in our pockets to pay bills, buy groceries, pay a babysitter, or save for a vacation.

No restaurant employee ever earns less than the full minimum wage. If during any shift our wage plus tips do not equal or exceed \$14.00 per hour, our employer is legally obligated to make up the difference on our paychecks.

So, thanks to this long-standing safety net, no Illinois restaurant employee, tipped or non-tipped, is currently making less than the minimum wage.

If this legislation passes, there will be a cascade of bad consequences that could jeopardize our entire industry. Any change in the minimum wage has a compounding effect on a restaurant’s bottom line.

Costs would increase across the board and because our industry operates on very slim profit margins, any increase in costs can mean the difference between keeping doors open or closed.

Employers would be faced with extraordinarily tough decisions of hiking prices, reducing employee hours, and slashing jobs.

Tipped employees will watch their gratuities and overall income diminish because basic economics dictate that when customers must pay more, they are certain to tip less.

If Illinois lawmakers don't believe us and still think that raising the minimum wage for tipped employees is a good idea, they should take a look at what's happening in Washington, D.C., where restaurants are grappling with their own tipped wage hike.

Many are struggling to stay afloat and have had no choice but to add service charges on to customer tickets just to cover the costs, and everyone in D.C. is quickly having buyer's remorse over this failing policy.

We understand the financial realities of this better than most because we have also worked on the management side of a restaurant during the pandemic when restaurants faced their biggest stress test and are still trying to recover.

While being on the salaried side of the business had its positives, we decided to return to being tipped employees because of the high earning potential and the flexibility we desired.

The tipped income model is much like running your own small business. Your income is based on your effort and work ethic. You make connections with loyal customers. Being quick, attentive and entrepreneurial enhances the guest experience and you see immediate return on that hard work.

If lawmakers truly want to serve tipped employees well, they should talk to actual tipped employees instead of special interests.

If they did, they would hear stories of how we love our jobs because we earned enough to backpack through Southeast Asia, or how our colleagues have bought new cars, first homes, and put themselves or their children through college.

We hope they will so they can better understand our industry and reject this misguided legislation.

Sierra and Eric Ferrell are employees of Brickhouse Grill & Pub in Springfield, IL