

Struggling to stay above poverty line

By Hannah Yoon

Dollarama may not have been the first choice for Sheri Chard of Belleville, but a job is a job.

Chard, 35, has been there for four months as a part-time worker and earns minimum wage. Her hours are limited to 12-18 hours a week if she's lucky. This means she is averaging \$170 each week.

Despite a recent announcement on the increase of minimum wage to \$11 in June 2014 by Ontario Liberal leader Kathleen Wynne, many believe it is not enough.

The latest increase in minimum wage still leaves 16 per cent of these workers living below the poverty line.

As it is for most people, working at a part-time minimum wage job wasn't Chard's dream job.

"I always wanted to be a police officer. But I foolishly had a child very young. I was 16 when I got pregnant with her and 17 when I had her. And it does put a damper on things. It changes your course of what you're going to do," says Chard.

Chard had to adjust to this change. Since the age of 17, Chard has only been able to work minimum-wage jobs. From bartending to being a bouncer and working in a factory, Chard has been all over the map with minimum-wage jobs.

Chard, along with her daughters and her boyfriend, Bruce Campbell, live in a rented house where she pays all-inclusive rent each month.

With the help of Campbell's monthly income of \$2,500, the family is able to get by each month. On top of this income, she also receives a monthly baby bonus cheque from the government for her daughters, who are 13 and 17 years old.

However, the cost of feeding a family of four along with taking care of pets can be quite expensive. Chard spends up to \$500 a month on groceries. On top of food, Chard has to pay cell phone and the TV bills which amounts to \$300 each month.

Although she has regular bills to pay, she also has to deal with the lives of her teenage daughters. They need money for



Photo by Hannah Yoon

Sheri Chard, 35, spends time in her home in Belleville Feb. 2. Chard earns minimum wage at Dollarama and finds it a struggle to keep up with her expenses. Though her boyfriend, Bruce Campbell (not shown) earns more, it's still difficult to make ends meet.

clothes, school activities, trips and their social lives. Recently, her eldest daughter had to go in for surgery, which was an unplanned expense for the month.

Even though Chard isn't totally satisfied at Dollarama, she knows this is something to be thankful for. On top of

that, she finds she would rather be working a minimum-wage job than to stay at home.

"It's boring staying at home all the time. It's the other reason I work. I work because I have to. If I want to survive, I have to work," she said.

Chard said she doesn't believe the increase will make a difference in her life. On top of the pay being very minimal, Chard said it is strenuous work. For Chard, the pay isn't enough to compensate for the hard work.

She said she finds it hard to advance or

move up in minimum-wage jobs, which pushes her to consider finding a second job.

"It's just not enough. Prices are increasing everywhere. Also, the minimum wage jobs that are out there are hard. They are rough."

Anti-poverty groups say \$11 an hour not enough

By Duncan Cairns-Brenner

The Ontario Liberal government has raised provincial minimum wage to \$11 an hour from \$10.25. This will be implemented starting June 1, which will tie Ontario and Nunavut as the provinces with the nation's highest minimum wages.

However, anti-poverty groups in Ontario petitioned for a \$14 an hour minimum wage, which would place all minimum wage workers roughly 10 per cent above the poverty line. Instead the provincial government decided to raise minimum wage in step with inflation, correcting for the three years minimum wage remained static.

In an official Ontario government press release, the wage hike is cited as being, "part of the provincial government's commitment to fairness." But, is this increase significant to low income workers in Belleville?

Statistics Canada does not publish an absolute measure of poverty in Canada but its statisticians do collect data for what they call Low Income Cut-Offs. LICs are based on the proportion of a family units income that goes towards necessities: food, clothing, and housing. Since living costs are relative, Stats Can divides up LICs into five categories based on the size of the community a family lives in. In Ontario the difference between an LIC in a rural community, and one in a city of over 500,000 for a family of three is about \$8000.

Belleville's LIC is \$29,652 for a family of three, falling into the middle category of the LICs: census agglomeration between 30,000 and 99,999 inhabitants. These LIC numbers are from 2011, but since minimum wage has stagnated while the price of necessities has risen, one can assume they are only a conservative estimate of where people really fit economically.

According to a 2013 report on low income earners issued by Toronto's Wellesley Institute, over 40 per cent of minimum wage workers are over 24, the majority of those being recent immigrants, or single parents. Stats Can expands on this, stating that 81 per cent of minimum wage earners are persons under 25 or women between 25 and 54.

At the current minimum wage, \$10.25, in order for a single mother of two to make \$29,652, the LIC for a family of three in Belleville, she would need to work almost 3,000 hours, the equivalent of just over 72 40-hour work weeks. At \$11 an hour, she would need to work just shy of 2,700 hours, or slightly over 67 40-hour work weeks. Either way, the family would come up short.

Another Stats Can report shows that roughly 60 per cent of all minimum wage employees only work part time, less than 30 hours a week.

Many of societies most vulnerable people live on

minimum wage. A 2013 poll taken by the Canadian Medical Association showed that only 39 per cent of poorer Canadians are in good health, while 68 per cent of the richest are.

Minimum wage is designed to function as a stepping stone for further opportunity: to give youth experience and make them marketable, to help pay for an education, and to help people get a job quickly to get back on their feet. Minimum wage jobs, by their basic construct, are not meant to be permanent employment, merely a means to something else.

But, millions of Canadians live off minimum wage. Stats Can estimates that just under 50 per cent of Bellevillians live on a before tax income under \$28,000 a year, with 30 per cent living on one under \$14,000. With statistics like that, it's hard to argue that bumping up the minimum wage by 75 cents will make a lot off difference to those living off it.

Bel Marine Retirement residents still living outside of their home

By James Wood

The newspapers on the front step of the Bel Marine Retirement Residence are piling up, and it has been five weeks since anyone has needed to collect them.

Following an electrical fire that forced an evacuation, the building has been empty save for the comings and goings of the owners and repair workers.

Evacuated residents have been put up in homes and hotels, with the bulk of the home's occupants being housed on the fourth floor of the Travelodge Hotel.

Residents are two to a room, with a television and comfortable beds for all.

A nurse's office is at the end of the hallway closest to the elevators, and residents move throughout the hotel. The chairs in the lobby are a gathering point for residents, who will sit and chat to pass the time. However, the long wait has worn a bit thin for some residents, with added roommates and a change in surroundings leaving residents longing to return back home.

"Everyone's anxious to get home," said Craig Chamberlain, an evacuated resi-

dent. "I'm not used to sharing a room, and now I'm sharing a room." Although the hotel is comfortable, the change in setting has disrupted some resident's regular routines, and a stay of five weeks was not what they had in mind.

"I think most of us when we came over thought we'd be here for a few days, not this long," said Chamberlain.

Despite the long wait, however, communications between Bel Marine staff and their evacuated residents have been good.

"When they know something, they

tell us," said Chamberlain. The managerial team is composed of two owners, Jeannie Griggs and Raj Uthaya. Griggs is the day to day manager at Bel Marine.

"This week," said Griggs, when asked about when she hoped to have residents back home into the residence.

The scene at the residence itself is one of busy repair. Seen through the front window, it is evident that wiring is being replaced and insulation being moved around.

The building itself has gone through multiple owners. "It's an old building,

it has its issues, hopefully they'll get them all corrected," said Vickie Hartwell, a healthcare worker for Bel Marine.

Having worked at Bel Marine for the past two years, she had not noticed any major issues in the maintenance of the building. However, the building's age may be a key factor. "I forget how old the building is. I know it was there when I was a kid and I'm 53 years old!" said Hartwell.

If all goes well, residents should be returned home within the week.

Diary...

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In late fall, Bennett received a phone call from Ferguson, and Bennett explained that he wanted to return the diary that had been lost for so many years. The catch, however, was that Ferguson must return to Germany to reclaim it.

"I remember Bill telling me, he said 'You know, I'm going to get my book, but the only thing is I have to go there,'" recalled Don.

So in April 2005, Ferguson travelled with his son Drew and daughter-in-law Cherie to the town of Wildetaube, where they were met by a huge crowd of townspeople and reporters, all wanting to celebrate and share in the return of the diary to its rightful owner.

At last, Ferguson got to hold his diary again, with the red maple leaf emblazoned on the cover. It was 60 years to the day that he had last held it in his hands. Ferguson was almost completely blind by this time, so he held the diary up against his face, using a magnifying glass to make out small details. He knew his wife Doris, who had by now passed away, would have been so happy to read the tales contained inside.

Upon returning from Germany, Ferguson stopped in Toronto, where he visited with his nephew Don, who travelled into the city from his home in Brighton, Ont. Don remembers holding the diary in his hands, and feeling overwhelmed by emotion as he held such an important piece of his family's history.

"I saw his book. I had to move it away because I was crying. Probably as much as he did at the time," said Don, wiping away a tear.

It was only a little more than a week later that Don received another phone call from his uncle.

"It was on a Sunday, we had some company in the house for dinner. I got a phone call. I knew it was my uncle. My wife said, 'well, we have company.' I said I know I'll make it brief. But he was the one that was brief. He said 'you

probably won't hear from me again, and you'll know why.' And the next day he had passed away," said Don.

It's nearly been nine years since Ferguson returned to Germany, and reclaimed the lost diary. The stories inside the diary are important pieces of history for the Ferguson family. But the story of how the diary was finally found is the greatest of them all.

For a video look at this story, go to: <http://www.qnetnews.ca/?p=35596>



Photo archives

Canadian prisoners walk after the Battle of Dieppe in France during WWII. A total of 3,623 of the 6,086 men were killed during the battle.



Submitted Photo

Sgt. Bill Ferguson holds his war diary once again after losing it as a POW in Germany 60 years ago. Ferguson lived in a POW camp for four years during World War Two, after sustaining a serious chest injury during the first Dieppe Raid. He left the diary inside a barn where the soldiers were ordered to rest for the evening. In the early morning, the American troops had arrived at the farm to free the prisoners, and Bill left his diary hidden inside the hay.