

Doing the math: For many in the D.C. area on minimum wage, the ends never meet

Charles Wells did the math.

From a tattered wallet held together with three rubber bands, he pulled out \$5. His Metro card didn't have enough on it to cover his trip to Reagan National Airport in Virginia, where he works pushing wheelchairs, so he paid \$2.70 toward the fare. That left him with \$2.30 — not enough to get home to the room he rents in the District.

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But Wells is not one to complain, or worry. And so on that morning, and others before it when the numbers didn't fall in his favor, he quietly accepted what an empty wallet means. If he didn't get any tips that day, he planned to do what he had done many times before — sleep at the airport, sitting upright, coat pulled tight on top of him.

“They keep the temperature real cold in there,” Wells said. But he said it's better than the alternative: no paycheck. “If I stay home, I'm getting nothing. So I gotta go out there.”

This Labor Day weekend, as the national debate intensifies over whether the minimum wage should more than double to \$15 an hour, states, cities and counties are implementing a hodgepodge of wages. That leaves the country's lowest-paid employees facing different circumstances depending on where they live. And nowhere is that disjointed reality more stark than in the Washington region, where people travel fluidly, sometimes in the same day, among Virginia, Maryland and the District, which share a high cost of living but diverge drastically in their minimum wages.

In Virginia, the minimum wage remains at the federal \$7.25 an hour rate. In Maryland, the rate is now \$8.75 an hour and will rise to \$10.10 in two years. Montgomery and Prince George's counties go above their state's minimum to \$10.75 by Oct. 1. And in the District, the minimum wage a few months ago hit \$11.50, with the goal of reaching \$15 in 2020.

The confusion for workers is nationwide, where 29 states have set their minimum wage above the federal level.

What this means, according to interviews with employees and service providers, is difficult decisions based on uncertain math. Should a person travel from Virginia to the District, knowing they will have to pay more for transportation and can't get home quickly to take care of children who might need them at unexpected times? Should that same family move to Washington, where they might find higher pay but also higher rents?

Is it worth Wells taking the train to work, knowing he might not make it home?

Wells, 63, said he enjoys helping those who can't help themselves. Besides, he doesn't know what other job he would do. He is a self-taught artist whose paintings are good enough to hang on restaurant walls, but to a potential employer, he has a GED, a limited résumé and bad feet that he shoves into shoes without socks because otherwise the pain is too intense.

"I'm glad to have a job," Wells said. But he'd like to see Virginia follow Washington in raising the minimum wage. "That's not too much to ask for someone who is willing to get up at least five days a week and work hard. It seems to me, the less money people earn, the more work they have to do."

'Not just me'

Kerrie Wilson can tell you exactly how much more work that is: 137 hours a week.

That's how many hours it takes for a person earning minimum wage in Virginia to afford an average rental apartment in Fairfax, said Wilson, who runs Cornerstone, a Northern Virginia nonprofit agency that provides shelter and support to families in need.

"What that means is people working two or three jobs," Wilson said. It means minimum-wage workers living in homeless shelters or choosing to leave children home alone so they can work more hours, she said.

Stephanie Berkowitz, who heads Northern Virginia Family Service, a nonprofit agency based in Oakton, Va., said that nearly 70 percent of the people using the agency's housing-assistance program are working and that 60 percent of the people in their homeless shelters are employed.

"When you are living in a community where it appears most people can meet their basic needs, people have cars and food and take vacations, it's easy to forget about the fact that there are lots of people in our community who don't have those opportunities," Berkowitz said, "They literally are making choices across their basic needs."

Carleisha Foster, a 28-year-old District native who moved to Virginia this year, faced a choice during the last snowstorm. She could leave her five children on a day when she didn't have child care or she could lose her \$7.50 an hour job at Dollar Tree. She chose her children, she said.

Within a five-month period, while living in a homeless shelter, she also lost a job at Starbucks because she couldn't work weekends and a job at Target because she couldn't work nights. Now, she is earning \$8 an hour at a salon and receiving housing assistance. She said it is the first job that has excited her in a while, but even so, her limited hours means a paycheck of \$280 a month.

"I'm late on bills every month," Foster said. "People ask me all the time, every day, how do you do it? The truth is, it takes you for a ride. You have to learn to maneuver through it."

Business leaders nationally have argued against raising the minimum wage, saying it will force employers to cut jobs and hours. The impact on individuals also remains uncertain because in many cases people who receive government assistance will see those benefits decreased as they earn more, leaving them just as financially fragile.

But union and civil rights activists argue that a livable wage is a moral issue, and nationally the “Fight for \$15” movement has only gained momentum. Just two weeks ago, thousands of people marched through Richmond in support of the cause. Some held signs that read, “Can’t survive on \$7.25.”

In his 2015 State of the Union address, President Obama urged Congress to raise the federal minimum wage, saying: “If you truly believe you could work full-time and support a family on less than \$15,000 a year, go try it. If not, vote to give millions of the hardest-working people in America a raise.”

Democratic presidential nominee Hillary Clinton has said she would support a \$15 federal minimum wage, with stipulations. Republican presidential nominee Donald Trump, [after giving conflicting statements on the issue](#), has said he supports a \$10 federal minimum wage, while allowing states to decide what’s appropriate for them.

Mary Kay Henry, president of the Service Employees International Union, said in just a few years, starting with fast-food workers taking a stance, the discussion of a \$15 minimum wage has moved from “being ridiculous” to “being a standard.”

She said the hope is that Washington’s increase will pull its neighbors along.

Delfina Flores, a 62-year-old woman who cleans office buildings in the District, said \$11.50 an hour has helped, but she still has to take housekeeping jobs on the side to make ends meet. She earns \$396 every two weeks and rents a room for \$450. After paying for bus passes, her phone bill, medication and food, she said she has no money left to send to her mother and daughter who remain in El Salvador.

“I tell them, ‘I want to, but I just don’t have enough,’” Flores said in Spanish. “I don’t even have enough for me. Right now, I’ll go to the mall and I don’t spend any money. I just go to look.”

She said she is looking forward to when the minimum wage in the District reaches \$15 and that she hopes it becomes the standard “because it’s not just me this is happening to.”

‘Been through a lot’

In a shoulder bag missing its strap, Charles Wells keeps everything that is important to him. On a recent morning, he pulled from it a folder filled with drawings for a comic series he hopes to one day publish. The subject matter, like his pen strokes, is dark and deep. In one strip addressing stealing at a homeless shelter, he wrote, “One man was so traumatized by the theft of his shoes, he never wore a pair again, even in the winter snow, he only wore socks.”

Wells knew the man and said the loss “just really affected him.”

Wells, who grew up in the District, used to move with a gait rapid enough to warrant comments from those he passed. Now, he shuffles on feet that hurt him constantly. He said he has worked at National Airport for seven years and during that time spent three years living in a homeless shelter and one year sleeping most nights at the airport.

Now, he rents a room for about \$500 a month. On a recent morning, he walked into his bank to cash his paycheck and then went to the Post Office for a money order that he then deposited into his landlord’s bank

account. Just like that, in less than an hour, the money passed through his wallet.

“It’s been through a lot,” Wells said, turning the fraying leather over in his hands.

He could have been talking about himself.

Wells’s sister Diane Williams, who works as the curator of his artwork, maintaining a [website for him and other artists in the family](#), said her brother is a creature of habit. Before his wife died 14 years ago and he fell into a depression, he worked at a hospital transporting people in wheelchairs and gurneys. Now, she said, he is comfortable doing that, even if the pay doesn’t offer much security.

And she should know. She has done the math.

Williams handles her brother’s taxes each year and said his annual pay has remained consistently between \$11,000 and \$12,000. She said he also hasn’t sold much art lately, although his work has been displayed at Busboys and Poets and currently hangs at Everlasting Life restaurant in Capitol Heights. When he couldn’t afford art supplies, she said he utilized whatever was available. He has painted on cardboard and the backs of political signs.

Williams said the life she wants for her brother is one in which he could teach art to children who otherwise wouldn’t have access to it. They ran a workshop in Anacostia two summers ago and he “loved it,” she said. But she and her brother are realistic about his situation. Regardless if the minimum wage is \$7.25 or \$15, it adds up the same in one crucial way: “He’s going to have to continue working until he can’t work anymore,” Williams said.

Wells said he has accepted that he won’t be able to retire anytime soon, or ever. But he isn’t one to complain, or worry. Instead, he gets up for work each day, hoping that maybe that day he will get a tip and the math will fall in his favor.