

I voted “No” on Initiative 77. However, I am here today to defend it. Since the election, I have come to read and understand both sides of the issue, and I believe that many of the arguments against it were false. And furthermore, I believe the fundamental duty of a modern democracy is to respect the voice of the people. Implementing 77 is an opportunity for us Washingtonians to do just that.

For over 8 years, I have worked as a professional in the service industry. I serve your food. I make incredible cocktails. I listen to and empathize with your secrets, your heartaches, and your joys. I work very hard to make sure that you have fun after you finish work.

In fact, most people never see how hard we work. It’s grueling work. We have the right to a break, but most often the concept is laughable on a busy 12-hour shift.

Often, our livelihoods as service workers are jeopardized by the uncertainty of what we might make that night. The minimum wage wouldn’t erase this uncertainty, which restaurant workers broadly acknowledge, but it would be a step in the right direction. Now, our tenuous tips put us in precarious situations. We are at the mercy of the unpredictable generosity of guests, which subjects us to toleration of all kinds of bad behavior.

When the #metoo movement began to swell online, I laughed away the thought of posting my own experiences. Why would I? Harassment is nearly a daily issue. Topsy guests misread my friendliness as an invitation for advances. But I just need their money. Men take advantage of a crowded room to grab me. And I just need their money. People yell insults about my intelligence or my body. And I still need their money. This is my income. Guaranteeing a stable base wage would be a step towards professionalizing this industry and giving restaurant workers like me the respect that we deserve.

What is critical is for us to support our service workers as professionals. Now as a manager of restaurant staff, I frequently think of my uncle, who built a multi-state cement business that he ran for nearly forty years until his passing last December. An exemplary boss and business owner, he exhibited deep respect for his employees. When a truck driver or a mixer shared his thoughts about their work, my uncle listened. His mindset was, “I learn from every one of my employees, because they are experts in their own work. They might have a perspective or an idea that I don’t, which makes the business better.”

I take that lesson to heart every day. Listening to people in different positions is critical. If you overturn 77, then the voices that you listen to will only be that of the Restaurant Association. It denies the voice of the voters and those who work in all sections of our service industry.

As our city fights for the fundamental right to have representation in Congress as the 51st state, it is critical that Washington, DC remains an exemplar of the democratic process. We cannot overturn the voices of voters. Washingtonians understand the needs of our city in ways the federal government does not.

So too, have restaurant workers spoken about their needs. Across the city, we are demanding secure wages. I urge you to listen, to learn from the experiences of those who serve you. With Initiative 77, we are demanding steps to the security and respect that professionals like us deserve.