

Restaurant Jobs Provide Career Basics

By Brian DeBano, Michigan Restaurant Association President & CEO

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The restaurant industry has been an economic bright spot by providing good-paying, reliable jobs in our state – even when Michigan’s unemployment rate may struggle. The industry employs nearly 400,000 workers – keeping thousands of Michigan families on solid financial ground and strengthening our state’s economy.

What does the industry get in return for helping boost our economy? Critics distort these jobs as less than valuable to our workforce and our communities. I am troubled by the recent, inaccurate attacks on our industry by special interest groups and for the harm they cause the hundreds of thousands of Michiganders who should be valued for the work they do. The small business owners and workers who I meet in cities across this state are proud of their jobs and the contributions they make in their communities. They should be.

More than 13 million Americans – and more than 390,000 Michiganders – rely on the steady income and career growth opportunities of jobs in the restaurant industry. Many of us have done these jobs – it is the first job held by nearly one in three Americans.

Let’s stop attacking, and start valuing, these workers.

Let’s start with having a discussion based on facts. The fact is the restaurant industry pays a fair wage to employees based on their experience and skill-set. These jobs teach critical skills, like personal responsibility, teamwork, discipline, and accountability — providing workers with the resources and opportunities they need for successful careers. And many of them advance from their entry-level positions in the industry. In fact, nine out of ten salaried restaurant employees started in hourly positions.

It is an industry that is vital to our economic growth and which has helped fuel the national recovery we are now experiencing. More than 10 percent of the U.S. workforce holds jobs in foodservice. And, while nationwide employment grew by just 1.5 percent in 2012, restaurant industry employment grew 2.4 percent — making 2012 the 13th consecutive year that the restaurant industry has outperformed overall U.S. employment growth.

Most restaurant employees earn above the minimum wage. In fact, the majority of workers who are in minimum wage jobs work in other sectors – not the restaurant industry. Only five percent of restaurant employees earn minimum wage and those who do are mostly teenagers working part-time jobs.

Many Americans rely on the additional income and flexibility restaurant jobs offer as they seek to balance their careers with family responsibilities, or as a way to remain involved in their communities. Most industry workers are students with irregular schedules, teenagers saving for school, or parents and caregivers who need a job that fits their busy lives. Part-time, entry-level jobs fill a critical need in our nation’s workforce. And the fact is, restaurant owners typically provide raises when an employee is fully trained or prepared to take on more responsibility.

Both part-time and full-time positions make the restaurant industry a versatile career option for a variety of workers. For people from all backgrounds, the restaurant industry provides a pathway to a middle class income, whether in the restaurant industry or as a bridge to new careers.

Restaurant jobs are valuable for workers, their communities, and our nation’s economy. Demeaning and devaluing these jobs is wrong. As our nation’s economy continues to recover, we should focus on preparing workers for high-growth positions, supporting our growth industries, and respecting the hard work of millions of Americans.