When Kathy Brown needs to get somewhere, she walks. Bundled in a dark parka and wearing a bright pink backpack, she has weathered this winter on foot.

Brown has no car and lives at her brother’s home in Foxboro because she can’t afford rent. She considers things like cheese and eggs a luxury. This is not the life Brown, 57, anticipated.

“Back when I was working in Milwaukee, working in my career field, I couldn’t even imagine this,” she said.

Even as the labor market looks up, Kathy remains downsized, unable to find a job in her profession. She worked for 25 years in film and television production.

Now she bags groceries at Shaw’s for minimum wage. She — and more than a quarter of a million workers — got a pay hike this January when the Massachusetts’ minimum wage went from $8 to $9 per hour. The rate will continue to climb a dollar a year, until it hits $11 an hour in 2017.

“It’s gone up by, I think, 80 cents — and does that make a difference? No, not really,” she said, laughing. “No, $9 an hour, no one can make it, that’s not a living wage.”

Janet Boguslaw, senior scientist at the Heller School for Social Policy and Management at Brandeis University, says since 1938, when President Franklin Delano Roosevelt first signed it into law, the real value of the minimum wage has dropped dramatically.

"Originally, the minimum wage was established so it would help provide a baseline for people," Boguslaw said. "If it had continued to be indexed to the cost of living it would really be around $18 now. So part of the whole effort to get the minimum wage raised is to get it back to what it was, which was to keep people out of poverty."
But in Reading, at a time when Main Street struggles to compete with online and big box retailers, small business owners say even a modest hike in minimum wage cuts into already tight profit margins.

"For the business owner, it becomes why hire people?" said Erin Calvo-Bacci, who owns the Chocolate Truffle in Reading Center, a corner shop filled with trays of hand crafted chocolates. "Why create new jobs? I'll just take the shifts myself. As a retail advocate and small business owner I want to see our Main Streets thriving."

But she says she’s considering closing shop and selling her chocolates online only.

"We want to keep small businesses in business," Boguslaw said.

Overall, Boguslaw says research indicates that minimum wage hikes help retailers because workers have more money to spend. "There may be an individual instance of mom-and-pop stores working so on the margin that they can't stay in business, but in the aggregate, if you raise the minimum wage, the overall society is going to benefit," she said.

Calvo-Bacci disagrees. She says the jobs she offers are entry-level, not intended to provide a long-term living.

"You get experience in retail, you're able to move up, or you move on -- and isn't that what our American dream is supposed to be about?" she said. "Earning more, achieving more -- I don't believe in, 'Here it was, we're told you're going to get this salary and that's what you're going to get for the rest of your life.' Where's the drive in that?"

Brown says she is driven to find a better-paying job, but — after years of searching, has had no luck.

"I don't think the Commonwealth sees it, I don't think the federal government sees it, that right here are a lot of people who are forced to live on the minimum wage," she said.

Which, in Massachusetts, is going up. But, for Kathy, not enough to make the road ahead much easier.

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