



Testimony of Jesse Leffler
Owner, Creating Change Redemption Center
Owner, Green Bottle Redemption Center
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My business partner and I own and operate two bottle redemption centers in upstate New York spanning the last 13 years. Over that time, we have collected and sorted for recycling approximately 150 million beverage containers, preventing those containers from reaching our landfills and surrounding natural environments. In doing so we have employed many local community members (8 full time employees on average per year), and assisted hundreds of local groups and charitable organizations raise tens of thousands of dollars annually through our ongoing bottle drive program. If you were to visit either one of our locations on any given day you would see a revolving door of community members returning their beverage containers to friendly staff ready to process their returns through fancy, very expensive, machinery designed specifically for high volume returns. You most likely would say to yourself while you observe the large flow of containers running through our shop, "Wow, these guys do a lot of business, they must be doing so well". The very same thing many of our customers say to us daily as they retrieve their bottle deposit money with very little effort. At first glance, I would say the same.

The unfortunate reality is this- my business partner and I have seen our salary cut in half in just a few short years, with every tax season showing us worse off financially than the year prior, despite processing more containers. Investment into the growth of our operation has come to a halt. We have laid off 70% of our staff as we no longer can afford their salaries, a trend that will continue until our shops are 100% owner operated. The final step will be closing our doors for good. We as owners can no longer miss work due to illness, plan trips with our families, and attend family functions that do not align with our hours of operation because we have no one to operate our shops in our absence and we can't afford to miss a day's worth of volume. The conversation between my business partner and I has shifted from what the next step in the growth of our business will be to "how do I avoid losing my house?", "which shop makes the most sense to close first?" and, "when's the last time you ate lunch?".

The only reason for the drastic shift in the outlook of our business is New York State's inability to properly maintain the bottle bill, specifically the handling fee that is paid to redemption centers. This fee is set at 3.5 cents per container and has been so since 2009. Redemption centers

are unique in that they are a free service unable to pass along increased expenses to their customers as a typical business would. Now ask yourself, “could I survive in 2026 on 2009 pay?”.

I remember back in 2017 when I first heard about an amendment to the bottle bill in the news. I said to myself, “Lawmakers are aware of how the system is set up and without intervention there will be an entire industry wiped out. They know that if not properly maintained it would drive redemption centers into the ground as their own internal reporting has told them. We are a business that does such good things for our local community, they wouldn’t let that happen to us.”.

I remember in 2020, that was going to be the year. “New York State is coming to save us”. Unfortunately, as we all know, a pandemic year. The same pandemic where New York State deemed us “an essential business”. I remember thinking as I was running in and out of our building to process the never the ending line of pickup truck loads of spit covered beverage containers that had been accumulating in basements for months. “Let us just get through this pandemic. We are essential. New York won’t forget about us.”

I remember in 2023, I said to myself, “Maybe I just need to be more actively involved in speaking to legislators”. Since grade school, speaking in front of a group has been my biggest fear, but desperate times call for desperate measures. “When they hear it directly from the mouth of a small business owner they will understand”. So I did that. I went to Albany on lobby day to meet with reps despite being completely out of my element. I wrote the letters, I made the phone calls, I sent in signed petitions, I met with all of my local reps. I followed up on those meetings. Throughout this entire process from then until now I continue to receive the same response. Empathy with our situation. Shock and complete understanding on how we are set up to fail. Acknowledgment that we provide a valuable service to our community. But still, zero action. Radio silence on concerns they may have with how the legislation is written and how we might address those concerns to move forward. My experience has led me to understand the all-too-common stereotype of the legislative process and what really drives many lawmakers into action. It has been frustrating to say the least. I hold onto hope that it will change.

In conclusion, I ask you to take an honest look at the amendment to the Bottle Bill this year. There is a ton of supporting data that will be presented by others on why it is such a successful program and how it can continue to be moving forward for the State of New York. If you agree with what is presented to you, please move forward on an update to this legislation. Our businesses depend on it. Many other redemption centers' futures depend on it. Please don’t continue to add to the hundreds of redemption center closures by continued inaction.

Sincerely,

Jesse Leffler

