

Community View: Rewarding Work with a Living Wage

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COMMUNITY VIEW: Rewarding Work with a Living Wage

By Carlos Bernard, David Schwartz and Paul K. Sonn

The debate in Westchester County over a proposed living-wage law concerns one of the oldest American values: rewarding work.

Westchester is known for its relative affluence. But there are plenty of hard-working, low-income families among us that just can't make ends meet. Too many full-time jobs pay \$7 or \$8 an hour with no health benefits - not enough to meet even a small family's basic needs. And many of the lowest paid are caregivers, people like home health-care and child-care workers who provide essential services to Westchester's working families, and homebound elderly and disabled residents.

Tolerating low pay for these workers makes it impossible for them to house, feed and clothe their families in Westchester. But it really harms all of us. Child-care and home health-care agencies can't keep workers in these jobs at that pay. The high turnover undermines the quality of care we all receive. Elderly and disabled residents may be forced into nursing homes - at far greater cost - because there aren't enough home-health aides able to work for \$7 without benefits. And the county ultimately pays the price when working families turn to emergency rooms for their health care and food pantries for sustenance.

More than 80 localities around the nation have responded to this

problem by adopting living-wage laws. Leading this grassroots movement recently have been major suburban communities much like Westchester, including Montgomery County, Md.; Ventura County, Calif.; and Suffolk County, N.Y. While the details of each of these laws differ, their ambitions are the same: When local families work hard at full-time jobs, they should earn enough to climb out of poverty.

How does this work? The living-wage proposal for Westchester applies to businesses that seek out significant taxpayer-funded benefits - chiefly vendors with county service contracts or businesses receiving substantial tax breaks from the county. It asks that in exchange they agree to pay their workers \$11.50 an hour with health benefits.

The biggest impact would be on the county's home health-care program, where the proposed law would ensure decent pay for the more than 1,800 women who care for elderly and disabled Westchester residents in their homes. The bill also contains an innovative provision developed in collaboration with the child-care community to help raise pay for as many as 1,000 more workers at child-care centers that serve low- and moderate-income Westchester families.

Of course there is no free lunch, and living-wage proposals have their costs. These raises are only possible if the county extends the needed funding to the non-profit agencies that provide these services. But the long-term cost is less than you might think. Because of favorable rules under the state Medicaid program, after the first two years, virtually all of the living-wage cost for home-care workers would be covered by increases in matching payments from Albany. Recognizing Westchester's current budget challenges, supporters of the living wage are exploring options for phasing-in the new law over a period of years to reduce the initial cost to the county.

While these budgetary concerns are unquestionably very real, other issues raised by opponents of the living wage are red herrings. Careful

economic studies disprove the charge that wage increases will be negated by reduced eligibility for public benefits and tax credits. The lion's share of the increased pay will reach the pockets of the covered caregivers.

Equally untrue is the charge that, with decent wages, the current crop of child-care and health-care workers will be displaced by better qualified job-seekers with college degrees. In fact, better pay is needed simply to stabilize a labor market that now struggles to hold onto workers at \$7 an hour.

As with most such debates, it's worth considering the respective messengers. Community groups, labor unions and religious leaders believe the living-wage proposal will make thousands of Westchester caregivers better off and are therefore urging its passage. The main voice questioning whether workers will really benefit is the research director of the Business Council of New York State.

If the living-wage proposal is adopted, thousands of people who work and live in Westchester will benefit. Low paid caregivers will get a much deserved and much needed raise. The quality of childcare and home health care will improve. Elderly and disabled county residents, and many of the county's young children, will enjoy better services. Plus, in this country, rewarding work has always been the right thing to do.

Westchester should enact this targeted living wage proposal.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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