

Westchester County (New York) Passes Living Wage Law

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For Immediate Release

November 26, 2002

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Capping a two-year campaign by a broad coalition of local community, religious and labor groups led by the Working Families Party and assisted by the Brennan Center, the Westchester County Board of Legislators voted last night to enact a living wage law raising pay for thousands of struggling families across the county. In agreeing that publicly subsidized employers should not pay poverty-level wages, Westchester joins more than 90 localities across the United States that have enacted similar laws in recent years. These include Suffolk County on Long Island, as well as New York City where a living wage bill passed by the city council earlier this month awaits Mayor Bloomberg's signature.

A bipartisan majority voted 12 to 3 to approve the legislation. "We are proud to follow Suffolk County in uniting across party lines to provide a much-needed boost to some of Westchester's hardest-working residents," said county legislator George Latimer (D-Rye). County Executive Andrew Spano has pledged to sign the bill into law.

The workers who will benefit provide the vital services on which all Westchester residents depend: 2013 home healthcare workers that serve the county's elderly and disabled; janitors and security guards that keep county buildings clean and safe; and child care workers that nurture the next generation of county residents. Workers that provide these services under programs, contracts, grants or leases subsidized by the County will be covered. Drafted by the Brennan Center in collaboration with the Working Families Party and county leaders, the law will ensure pay of \$10 per hour plus health benefits when it takes effect in January 2004. More than 2000 home healthcare workers, janitors, and security guards – many struggling to support families on just \$7 an hour – will receive raises. For the more than 1000 child care workers in county programs, the law establishes a task force which will examine different models for implementing the living wage and will submit a proposal to the county legislature by August 2003.

“New York State’s \$5.15 an hour minimum wage just isn’t enough for Westchester’s working families,” said Joel Le Fevre, Organizing Director for Local 812 of the Teamsters and a Working Families Party activist. “The County is sending a strong message that parents that work hard and play by the rules shouldn’t have to turn to food pantries to feed their families and the emergency room when they’re sick.”

“Westchester’s leaders see that a living wage is not just the right thing to do for the workers, but it’s smart policy all around,” said Paul Sonn of the Brennan Center, which advised the coalition in designing the legislation. “When home healthcare and child care programs pay \$7 an hour, they just can’t keep their staff. It’s the seniors, the disabled, and the kids that suffer when these programs can’t operate.”

“This law goes a long way towards helping Westchester’s working families,” said David Schwartz of Dobbs Ferry, Legislative Chair of the Working Families Party in Westchester. “Westchester residents

should be proud of our community's leadership on this vital issue. The next step will be working with the county to implement the commitment to extend the living wage to child care workers. We'll be bringing workers, parents and child care agencies together in the coming months to help the county develop that plan.”

Further information on living wage issues can be found at: http://www.brennancenter.org/programs/living_wage/index.html.