

Testimony for Wage Review Committee

May 24, 2018

Good evening. I'm Dr. Sara Goodkind and I'm a faculty member in the School of Social Work at the University of Pittsburgh. My research examines policies, programs and services designed to support children and families. While there is much that we can do to support children and families at the program and agency level, my research has led me to the conclusion that many of the challenges that families face are a result of the fact that far too many jobs do not pay living wages. **In fact, almost half of all jobs in the U.S. pay less than \$15 per hour, despite evidence that this is not enough to meet the needs of most workers and their families.**

I am here testifying today because grocery stores, like every other employer, need to pay their employees a wage that is enough to live off of. If not, their employees are forced to rely on public assistance, which, in essence, means that our tax dollars are subsidizing these large corporations. **I want to share with you some findings from research that Pitt colleagues and I are currently conducting here in Pittsburgh that documents both the hardships and challenges faced by low-wage hospital workers as well as the positive effects of raising wages for these workers. We have surveyed 235 workers and conducted in-depth interviews with 49 and are just beginning phase 2, in which we survey and interview the same workers that we talked with last year. This research began because two and a half years ago, one of my colleagues served on the Pittsburgh City Council's Wage Review Committee. This committee took written and oral testimony from hundreds of workers who spoke about the struggles of working for low wages. The Wage Review Committee released a report on the struggles of workers, which motivated my colleagues and I to initiate this study of hospital service workers, seeking to further understand what it means to live on low wages and whether and how workers' lives improve as their wages increase.**

While the study is ongoing, initial findings from our research reveal that:

- Hospital service workers take great pride in their work, are cognizant of the importance of their work, and take steps to make sure they put on a professional face despite struggles they might be having.
- **Despite working full-time, with more than half working overtime, the workers in our study have a hard time making ends meet and many face financial hardships, food insecurity, and medical hardships (including going without needed medical care or medication).**
- Before their first pay increase, 87% of the workers we surveyed reported living paycheck-to-paycheck and more than half reported not being able to pay utilities on time.
- Workers employ a variety of strategies to make ends meet including juggling bills, borrowing money, living with family and friends, skipping meals, and relying on public and private benefits and assistance.
- Following a pay raise that all workers received, hardships and reliance on these strategies remained but decreased significantly.
- Workers making above \$15 an hour face significantly fewer hardships than workers making below \$15 an hour.

As our region continues to grow and prosper, it is essential that we consider who benefits from this growth, especially how it impacts workers and their families. As the cost of living increases, so must workers' wages. Decades ago, grocery store jobs used to pay a living wage, but this is no longer the case. **If we want Pittsburgh to be a livable city for all, we must ensure that all of its employers pay their employees a living wage.**