



NEW YORK CARING MAJORITY
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Testimony

Finance Committee of the New York State Legislature

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My name is Irene Jor and I am the New York Director for the National Domestic Workers Alliance. I have organized with domestic and care workers for 7 years in New York, California, Massachusetts, and internationally. **I offer my testimony in support of making strong investments in care, that ensure workers are paid for all hours worked.**

In New York City my team runs the only domestic and care work sector-specific legal clinic in the state, and possibly in the country. Home care workers have sought us out on numerous occasions because they have experienced wage theft and wish to address this persisting injustice. We have calculated and supported workers to take action to cover lost wages that range from \$1,350 (for a year and a half of employment) to \$80,000 (for four years of employment).

Care workers' quality of life, and long-term security can be deeply impacted by the issue of wage theft. Today I want to share one member's story that I think of often. When I first started organizing in New York I met Marlene Champion. An early assignment I had at NDWA was to prepare Marlene to share her story of caring for Dr. Morris Steiner, for a speaking engagement in Orlando, FL alongside NDWA's director, Ai-jen Poo.

After Orlando, Marlene and I became close friends. She took me to church and would open up her kitchen to me. She also taught me the history of organizing and winning the New York State Bill of Rights. I would imagine her early morning bus rides up to Albany, the conversations she had on the park bench with other workers, and her work to build relationships with parents, employers and seniors.

As our friendship and work together deepened, our conversations often turned to the question of “who cares for the caregiver?” Marlene is getting older. Today she is 72 years “young and wise,” but she doesn't know when yet she can retire. And she is not alone, as many aging workers in domestic and care work face this issue collectively. Home care work, and other types of domestic work are not well paid for the most part, and rarely afford workers the opportunity to save and plan long-term for themselves and their families.

3 years ago Marlene's grandson, Damien, got into a near fatal motorcycle accident. I remember our phone calls. Her pain and worry was palpable through the phone. He is now a paraplegic and lives at a rehabilitation center in Brooklyn. When Marlene is not working she is often spending time with him, adding additional support and care to his daily life. Their family want to move him out to an apartment that is wheelchair accessible and would allow him to return living in their community. Prior to his accident Damien lived with Marlene on the fourth floor of her Crown Heights brownstone apartment. There is no elevator, and Marlene has been on an unending search for housing that is accessible for Damien, and affordable for them to live in together.

In many situations, workers are constantly walking the tightrope of economic precarity and cannot access their most basic needs like healthcare, adequate housing, childcare, and so forth. Many workers care for others when their own health is deteriorating, their bodies breaking down. Wage theft exacerbates all of this.

Marlene loves her work, as do many other home care workers I know, but there are sticking issues with the conditions of this work that we must address. Wage theft is one of these issues. Home care workers across New York State must be paid a living wage, for all the hours they have worked, and the proper overtime rate. Furthermore addressing wage theft will increase retention in this workforce and ensure that caregivers can access the care they will need themselves on day.

Since the passage of the New York State Domestic Worker Bill of Rights, and the issuance of USDOL's Home Care Final Rule, our Alliance has supported many workers to assert and enforce the labor protections they have been historically excluded from. Needless to say it is challenging. In 2016 our local coalition of affiliates and partners advocated for and passed legislation to establish a Division of Paid Care, which now exists under the New York City Department of Consumer Affairs - Office of Labor Policy and Standards. We are now looking for high-level commitment from our leaders in New York State to make the proper investments into a care system that recognizes all of our lives.