

# Center for Youth Leadership

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Why wait for someone else to make a difference?

**Connecticut Legislature:  
Labor and Public Employees Committee  
*Testimony in Support of HB 5527:  
An Act Concerning a Domestic Workers Bill of Rights***

*March 13, 2014*

*Arlene Sanchez and Maria Rivas*

Hi Senator Holder-Winfield, Representative Tercyak and members of the committee.

My name is Arlene Sanchez and this is Maria Rivas. We are members of the Center for Youth Leadership at Brien McMahon High School in Norwalk, which is the largest youth activism organization in the state. On behalf of our 226 members, we are here to testify in support of *HB 5527: An Act Concerning a Domestic Workers Bill of Rights*

The Center for Youth Leadership addresses several social issues, including the rights of immigrants. Twice a month for the past six years we have provided day laborers that gather on a bridge in South Norwalk with food, clothing and access to medical services and legal services. We have led classes about labor law and published reports about their lives and the exploitation they have experienced at the hands of contractors and homeowners.

We have worked with several organizations for several years to raise awareness of the plight of undocumented students. For example, we helped pass legislation in 2011 that allows undocumented students to pay in-state college tuition; we hosted a day-long DACA session at our school; and just last week we were one of several groups

that delivered a petition to the Connecticut Board of Regents in support of financial assistance for undocumented college students. These issues are important to us because the fathers and uncles and brothers of some of our members are day laborers, and we have hundreds of students at our school, including some of our members, that are undocumented.

The same holds true for domestic workers. Many have sons, daughters, nieces and nephews that attend our school and are members of the Center for Youth Leadership. According to the Connecticut Brazilian Immigrant Center, they are among the estimated 40,000 domestic workers in the state.

We have heard countless stories of the work performed by these workers and the emotional and legal limbo they oftentimes find themselves in. The emotional limbo stems from the shame associated with what many people consider "illegitimate" work (believe us - housekeeping, caring for a child or a senior citizen - is more than legitimate work).

But there is a degree of legal limbo as well. One woman, the mother of one of our former members, talked at length about a broken kneecap she suffered at the home of an employer. The employer did nothing to help (not even a referral to a doctor) and the woman, fearful of losing her job, continued to report for work. Another woman, her hands raw from the chemicals she used to clean an employer's house, would take her high school aged daughter out of school for days so she could help her clean.

Absent a bill of rights, domestic workers are at the mercy of employers, some of who act with impunity when it comes to wage exploitation, workplace abuses, and sexual harassment. In fact, one of our partners - a domestic violence agency - has managed cases that include the harassment of domestic workers by employers. Many of these workers suffer in silence, on the outskirts of hope, because they need the job; because of their legal status; because they are unfamiliar with federal and state labor laws; and/or they do not have access to advocates.

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As far as HB 5527 is concerned, we agree with the employer requirements outlined in subsection "b" of Section 4, Section 31-71f. And we very much look forward

to distributing the educational material that the Department of Labor will produce in partnership with the Connecticut Brazilian Immigrant Center.

Please do not get us wrong. The domestic workers we know are grateful for their jobs and the ability to provide for their families, live in nice communities and send their children to good schools. But their dignity - like yours and mine - is not negotiable. Yes, their personal dignity is intact but that's because of who they are as people. This bill of rights provides workers with the kind of respect and dignity accorded those who are protected under the law. That protection does not discriminate, which is why we urge you to pass HB 5527.

Thank you very much for listening.

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