

TO: CT Labor and Public Employees Committee
FROM: Jordan Laris Cohen, Yale Law School J.D. expected '17
DATE: February 17, 2015
RE: Testimony in Favor of Proposed S.B. No. 446, An Act Concerning the Definition of the Term "Domestic Worker"

Mr. Chairmen, and members of the committee,

My name is Jordan Laris Cohen and I am student at Yale Law School in New Haven. The summer of my sophomore year in college I volunteered at Domestic Workers United, an advocacy group of nannies, housekeepers, and eldercare providers. DWU had just succeeded at passing a domestic worker bill of rights in New York, similar to the one now under consideration in Connecticut. I came to this work through my brother, who had been helping to organize employers of domestic workers within the Jewish community, who were in favor of the bill.

While I was interning at DWU I saw plenty of cases of mistreatment, of inhumane working conditions, and of verbal and physical abuse. But today instead I want to tell you about a conversation I had with my friend David. David was a good friend from college, and also happens to have just gotten married. In the middle of that summer I was hanging out with David and started telling him about some of what I was learning—how domestic workers had been excluded from labor protections in the 1930s, based upon the prejudice of southern segregationist senators; how many received less than minimum wage and no overtime, much less sick leave or healthcare benefits.

David interrupted me and said, "You know my grandma has someone who lives with her and takes care of her. She's paid decently but must have not had a day off in the entire year." He stopped to think about it and he repeated himself, with what seemed like a mix of surprise and rising feeling of shame: "not a single day off."

I mention David's story because I know he and his grandma are not malicious, selfish, or even outwardly ungenerous. And yet she was engaged in what we'd properly see, and what David instantly saw, were unconscionable and—in any other setting—highly illegal practices. There's a way in which the intimate relationships of domestic work can cover up casual exploitation, and how the needs of domestic workers as individuals become invisible or subsumed under those of the employer and her family. Few people realize that nannies often have children of their own, and the time they spend nurturing someone else's child is often time missed with their own family.

This law, which is so desperately needed and long overdue, brings to light an industry that has for too long produced injustice in the shadows. It establishes clear, basic, and truly modest rules—one guaranteed day of rest a week, the minimum wage, an hour of paid leave for every 40 hours worked (up to 56 in year). I bet that there are a lot of people out there like David's grandmother—well-intentioned, good people who nonetheless engage in employment practices that, with a single look and an ounce of empathy, we'd recognize as intolerable. To be sure there are also plenty of cases of outright abuse, and consciously taking advantage of domestic workers. In order to address both sets of cases, I strongly urge you to adopt the current bill.