

Center for Youth Leadership

Why wait for someone else to make a difference?

**Connecticut Legislature
Labor and Public Employees Committee
*Testimony in Support of SB 446:
An Act Concerning the Definition of the
Term Domestic Worker***

February 17, 2015

Maria Rivas and Tatyanna Molina

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

My name is Maria Rivas and this is Tatyanna Molina. We are members of the Center for Youth Leadership at Brien McMahon High School in Norwalk. On behalf of our 226 members, we are here to testify in support of *SB 446, which looks to update laws in order to provide protections to domestic workers.*

The Center for Youth Leadership addresses several social issues, including the rights of immigrants, which includes day laborers, students who do not have papers, and domestic workers. Our work includes direct service; public awareness initiatives to educate others about the lives and rights of immigrants; and social change campaigns that influence policies and laws.

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 and legal services. We have worked with several organizations for several years to raise awareness of the plight of undocumented students, including those who fled the violence of Central America this past summer. 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. The domestic workers in our community are among the estimated 42,000 such 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 healthy dose 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 her (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 (one of our members) out of school countless times so she could help her clean.

◆ The mother of one of our current members worked for a family for years from 7 AM to 7 PM five or six days a week. The family would never allow this woman to take a day off, even for what you and I would consider a valid reason. This woman was fired when she took time off to rest from an operation to remove her appendix.

Absent protection under the law, domestic workers are at the mercy of employers, some of whom 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.

The domestic workers we talk to 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 because they do not have access to advocates. We suspect the same for the hundreds of domestic workers in lower Fairfield County.

Therefore, we strongly urge that the legislation you pass mandates employers to produce a written agreement at the time of hire of the worker's:

1. Pay rate, work hours, wage payment schedule, and job duties;
2. annual paid leave time;
3. right to one day off per 7-day calendar week, with overtime pay provided if the worker voluntarily agrees to work on his/her day off;
4. protection from deductions for food and lodging;
5. right to privacy in private living spaces and in a worker's private communications;
6. protection from seizure of a his/her documents; and
7. protection from retaliation for enforcing these rights.

Also, we encourage the Department of Labor to produce a document that outlines worker and employer rights, and to distribute the document to public sector and private sector networks that work with employers and domestic workers. This is especially true for those employers who want to make a good faith effort to follow the law when hiring domestic workers.

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 should not discriminate, which is why we urge you to pass SB 446.

Thank you very much for listening.

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