

Center for Youth Leadership

Why wait for someone else to make a difference?

Connecticut Legislature:
Domestic Worker Task Force
Testimony in Support of a Bill of Rights
November 20, 2014

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On behalf of the 226 member of the Center for Youth Leadership at Brien McMahon High School in Norwalk, we are writing in support of a bill of rights for domestic workers. As you may know, members of the Center for Youth Leadership testified before the Labor and Public Employees Committee in March 2014 in support of HB 5527: *An Act Concerning a Domestic Workers Bill of Rights*. This testimony reaffirms that support.

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 in March 2014 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.

And in July of this year we started to work with unaccompanied minors from Guatemala and Honduras who resettled in Norwalk. For example, we led a bus tour of Norwalk for the students; we plan to complete a documentary of their lives by mid-January 2015; and just last week we convinced the Norwalk school district to provide the unaccompanied minors with trauma-informed counseling.

These issues are important to us because the fathers and uncles and brothers of some of our members are day laborers. We have hundreds of students at our school, including some of our members, who are undocumented. And many of the unaccompanied minors are in classes at Brien McMahon High School with members of the Center for Youth Leadership.

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 graduates, 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.

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. A 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 establish a bill of rights.

Thank you very much for listening.

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