



Cheap L.A. Other countries are more generous with home-care workers

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published: October 05, 2000

The 74,000 Los Angeles County home-care workers who feed, bathe and give medicines to the infirm and elderly who might otherwise be hospitalized are among the lowest-paid such workers in the state. And that's with a union contract.



Even when the Board of Supervisors bumped wages up 50 cents an hour on September 12, after weeks of pressure from home-care workers and supporters, the hourly wage for local caregivers is only \$6.75, with no benefits. It amounts to \$14,040 a year for full-time work. Only two counties pay less than Los Angeles County. In Sacramento and Monterey counties, workers receive \$5.75 an hour.

In San Francisco the wage is \$9.70 plus benefits; it dips down about \$2 to \$7.82 for the 7,000 home-care workers in Alameda County, with negotiations for benefits still under way, and to \$7.50 with benefits in Santa Clara. The pay scale and benefits fall off a cliff in L.A.

The question of why L.A. home-care workers are so poorly paid is answered in part by a look at the way they get paid -- an answer that permits buck passing in every direction except toward the caregivers themselves. No one entity provides funding -- the workers are paid with a mixture of federal, state and county funds, and after the feds kick in their share, the state pays 65 percent and the county 35 percent.

And home-care workers' employer of record is not technically the county but a panel selected by the Board of Supervisors and called the Personal Assistance Services Council, a bargaining authority created by 1992 state legislation and instituted in Los Angeles County in 1998.

But the county is still responsible for over half the funding, and other counties with the same state-local split have anted up. Representatives of the union that covers California home-care workers, the Service Employees International Union (SEIU), call L.A. supervisors too shortsighted to come up with the funds to invest in a resource that is of increasing importance to aging baby boomers who would prefer home care to institutionalization for their parents or themselves.

"In San Francisco there are people on the Board of Supervisors who think home-care workers are a priority," says Jeanine Meyer Rodriguez, industry coordinator of the California State Council of SEIU. But Rodriguez concedes that home-care workers' raises took lots of organizing. "In most counties we had to do drastic things -- mobilize people endlessly, do civil disobedience." The arrest of 19 home-care workers in Alameda helped push supervisors there toward a somewhat livable wage. In L.A., 58 were arrested during a weeks-long campaign.

"We haven't built enough power to force this board to do it," observes Sal Rosselli, president of Health Care Workers for SEIU Local 250, commenting on the stubborn L.A. County supervisors.

No one says the workers shouldn't get paid more, says Joel Bellman, spokesman for Supervisor Zev Yaroslavsky, but the state should contribute a bigger percentage. County supervisors propose an 80-20 split--because L.A. County has California's biggest caseload, more than 92,000 people, or 42 percent of those needing such care in California.

"Who has the budget surplus?" asks Bellman, referring to California's \$13 billion in extra cash this year. The state also has the ability to raise revenues, something the county lacks, he says. "To simply expect the county to write a blank check without backing from the state -- it's not reasonable."

Glenda Wina, press deputy for County Supervisor Yvonne Brathwaite Burke, emphasizes that each home-care worker who helps someone at home saves more money for the state, which pays 80 cents of every dollar spent on permanent hospitalization costs, far more than the county, which pays 20 cents. Home care is much more cost effective than hospitalization, so Sacramento should pay more, she argues.

SEIU's Rodriguez says the county is swimming in a \$109 million budget surplus and the state has already stepped in with the \$100 million Aging With Dignity Act signed by Governor Gray Davis earlier this year.

Bellman, of Yaroslavsky's office, says the county's \$15 billion annual budget sounds like a lot of money, but most is accounted for. Any excess gets rolled into the next year -- so it isn't surplus. "That's like saying you have surplus because you're not bouncing checks," he says with some exasperation.

Antonio Villaraigosa, speaker emeritus of the California Assembly, authored legislation to push the state toward an 80-20 split on home-care worker funding, but it failed.

"We do have a higher poverty rate in this county that puts pressure on the safety net," Villaraigosa says.

"But other counties have been able to meet that challenge while continuing to pressure the state to pay a bigger share," he added. "Philosophically we agree that the state should have provided more, but other counties have done the right thing and provided a dollar raise."

SEIU's Rosselli says that the statewide union vows to put more resources into L.A. to pressure the Board of Supervisors to bring home-care workers above a poverty wage. Rodriguez agrees that they will press on with the tactics that won higher wages elsewhere, but observes, "It's hard to get noticed in L.A."