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Op-ed: The mayor must support all essential human services workers

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New York City took an important step toward economic fairness and racial and gender justice recently. The Adams administration and DC37, the city's largest municipal labor union, agreed on a new contract that will raise wages for tens of thousands of city employees. The new contract demonstrated the mayor's support for workers, many of them women of color, whose pay has been modest at best.

But city workers aren't the only ones who need fair, livable wages. Mayor Adams must also support essential workers in the human services sector. However, despite repeated calls for just pay, his budget proposal leaves them out.

Human service workers are the invisible engine that keeps this city moving. They work in childcare centers, food pantries, mental health clinics and immigration offices. They run domestic violence shelters, foster care agencies and after-school programs. They are 80,000 strong in this city; 75% of them are people of color, 70% of them are women, and 55% are women of color.

As head of an anti-poverty organization, the Federation of Protestant Welfare Agencies, and executive director of the Human Services Council, both of which advocate for the sector, we know that New York City would be lost without these workers. Their pay doesn't begin to equal their contributions, and that puts us all at risk.

Underfunded city contracts have led to insufficient, unjust pay that has not even remotely kept up with the cost of living in New York. Sixty percent of human service workers qualify for government assistance. Here's what that means: Full-time case workers who connect New Yorkers to food and other public benefits by day often have to live on those very same benefits at night.

That's why the Human Services Council started the JustPay campaign, which demands fair wages and a cost of living adjustment in this year's city budget. Last year, hundreds of workers took the fight directly to City Hall. This year, you can expect to hear from us again.

And that's why FPWA has advocated since 2020 for a true cost of living measurement for New York City, to guide decision makers about what income is required to meet basic living expenses. Fortunately, 81% of voters in the 2022 citywide election supported that measure, and beginning in 2024 the city will have to produce an annual estimate of what it costs to live and work here. But we can't wait until then to pay human services workers fairly.

This sector's work has become even more important this year, as New York has greeted a wave of asylum-seekers who need serious support—from immigration services to housing to mental health counseling. The human services sector has provided all that and more. According to HSC's winter survey, 96% of groups are providing these services out-of-pocket, without a formal contract in place. Stretched to their limits even before, this crisis has been nearly existential for some providers. But it hasn't stopped this sector from stepping up for New York City in its time of need.

It's time for New York City to step up for them. Giving these workers a raise will make our city fairer and more racially equitable. JustPay will help workers who provide lifesaving services reach self-sufficiency and true financial stability.

When Mayor Adams faced the need to pay city workers more fairly and combat government-sponsored structural inequity, he responded. Now that the ink has dried on DC37's new contract, the mayor needs to take the next step. He must ensure human service workers receive the fair wages they deserve.
