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A \$13 Victory: Homecare Workers Invisible No More!

By Martin J. Bennett

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Homecare workers employed by Sonoma County and represented by SEIU 2015 recently ratified a contract boosting their wages from \$11.65 to \$13 an hour by 2017, the largest wage increase since these workers voted to unionize in 2002.

Homecare, or In-Home Supportive Services (IHSS), workers provide subsidized personal assistance and nonmedical care for low-income elderly and disabled adults, enabling clients to live at home.

A majority of county IHSS workers are women, new immigrants and people of color. Turnover is high due to low wages, inadequate hours and lack of benefits (only one in eight receive medical benefits). Nearly half receive Medi-Cal and food stamp subsidies, and one-quarter hold second jobs.; two-thirds are primary contributors to their families' total income.

In 2014, North Bay Jobs with Justice and other organizations comprising the Living Wage Coalition proposed a \$15 an hour living-wage ordinance that would cover employees of the county and county contractors, including 5,000 IHSS providers.

The Sonoma County Board of Supervisors exempted homecare from living wage legislation last December. Now the board has taken an important step forward by raising wages for these workers.

However, IHSS workers deserve a wage of no less than \$15 an hour.

According to the California Budget and Policy Center, a living wage in Sonoma County is more than \$22 an hour for two parents, each working full-time, to support two children and pay for basic needs without relying on public assistance.

Over the last two years IHSS workers and the Living Wage Coalition have organized demonstrations, public forums, signature gathering and board presentations, which helped caregivers to be "invisible no more" and raised public awareness about the need to increase wages so that homecare workers can raise their families with dignity and provide quality services to their clients.

This grassroots advocacy campaign undoubtedly influenced the Board's decision, however belated, to negotiate a decent contract.

Homecare workers have joined fast food, childcare, security and building services workers in the nationwide Fight for \$15 movement to raise the wage floor for 42 percent of the nation's workforce earning less than \$15 an hour.

Recently, the growing power of the movement has enabled unionized homecare workers in Massachusetts, Oregon and New York to win \$15 an hour. It can happen here too.

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