

Low-Wage Workers in Suffolk County to Benefit from Broad Living-Wage Laws

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For Immediate Release

August 2, 2001

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Suffolk Becomes First Republican-Majority Body to Join National Movement

Thousands of Suffolk County's low-wage workers employed in government-subsidized child care jobs, Head Start programs, and home health care jobs will receive raises as the result of a new "living wage" law adopted on July 27. Suffolk County's legislature became the first Republican-majority body in the nation to adopt such legislation when it approved the measure by a 16-2 margin.

Kathy Burwell of Farmingville, New York, a former Suffolk County home health aide, praised the legislature's action. "The living wage will help me and many others who work full time and have a hard time making ends meet. We take care of the frail, elderly and sick. We should be able to care for ourselves." After three years as a home care worker Burwell was forced to leave the field because she could not

support herself on the \$7.35 an hour wage.

"Suffolk County will be rewarded for its leadership on this issue," said Brennan Center associate counsel Paul Sonn. "Paying poverty wages to home health care, child care, and Head Start workers makes no sense. It has prevented the County from attracting a stable work force for these critical programs. With a living wage, Suffolk will see an improvement in services to the elderly, to the disabled, and to children."

Republicans and Democrats in the Suffolk legislature joined together to design and adopt this important piece of legislation aimed at making work pay. Working in partnership with lawmakers was a broad-based coalition led by the Working Families Party, the Long Island Federation of Labor, and the New York Labor-Religion Coalition. The Brennan Center for Justice served as legal and technical advisor to the coalition and to the bipartisan group of County Legislators supporting the law.

"As a result of this vote, some 4000 low-wage workers will see raises averaging \$2500 per year," said Dan Cantor, Executive Director of the Working Families Party. "That will translate into better nutrition, more time with children, less anxiety about possible illnesses, stronger communities."

"Years from now we may be looking back at this vote in Suffolk County as a pivotal moment in the living wage movement," said Jen Kern, director of ACORN's Living Wage Resource Center in Washington. "Suffolk shows that the argument for rewarding work with a decent wage resonates as much in a Republican-leaning suburb as it does in urban areas."

Suffolk County's living wage law is an example of the new "second generation" of living wage laws now emerging around the nation more

comprehensive laws covering firms that receive a wide range of government benefits, including human services contracts, economic development subsidies, and tax breaks. The Suffolk law requires companies receiving County contracts or economic development assistance to pay at least \$9 per hour to workers with health benefits, or \$10.25 per hour to employees with no health insurance. Many of the first living wage ordinances enacted did not extend to non-profit government contractors operating in the human services area or to companies receiving economic development subsidies or tax breaks.

The Brennan Center serves as legal counsel to the living wage movement and is active in helping to design, enact, and enforce living wage legislation across the country. The Center works nationally to promote grassroots and policy initiatives aimed at helping working families support themselves. For more information, please contact Amanda Cooper at 212 998-6736 or visit www.brennancenter.org.