

Supporting Local Legislation to Protect Low Wage Workers

The Challenge

In the last 4 years, Chicago passed ordinances to prevent wage theft, increase the minimum wage, and require paid sick leave for all fulltime employees. Though these items are now “on the books,” egregious violations continue to occur.

The Response

Brought about by a coalition of workers’ centers, faith based organizations, and other advocates, an amendment to the Municipal Code of Chicago (section 2-25-200) was proposed to establish the Office of Labor Standards in the Department of Business Affairs and Consumer Protection. The role of the new Office would be to assure enforcement of the wage theft, minimum wage, and paid sick leave ordinances. While the coalition was able to provide compelling testimony--invoking standards of fairness and appealing to moral values--they looked to the Illinois Occupational Surveillance Program (IOSP) to add a dimension to their advocacy. One workers’ center educated IOSP personnel about the details and history of the proposal and guided the development of an evidence-based health dimension to these arguments.

The Impact

IOSP delivered a testimony at City Hall to the Chicago City Council’s Committee on Workforce Development, in conjunction with 9 other community presentations. The ordinance was passed unanimously by the Committee, and moved to the full City Council, where the measure was voted into law in October, 2018. Aside from a direct influence on legislation, new linkages were made and other connections strengthened:

- Following the testimony, one alderman approached IOSP personnel, requesting future help with related occupational health issues
- Building on a growing collaboration, workers’ centers are linking arms with IOSP to conduct research that will establish evidence on the relationship between fair labor practices and health.
- The parties are planning joint activities to address the Illinois workers’ compensation system in such a way as to protect the health and the rights of low wage workers.

The ability to gather, digest and present data is a recognized need on the part of legislators and will allow IOSP to have a direct influence on policy in the City and State. IOSP’s community engagement with workers’ centers will advance knowledge of the links between work and health and will guide activities to promote worker health and safety.

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