

Luisa Blue and Michele Lew: Living wage represents Silicon Valley's pathway out of poverty

By Luisa Blue and Michele Lew Special to the Mercury News

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The Santa Clara County Board of Supervisors is looking to set an example with a comprehensive living wage policy that will improve the lives of thousands of workers. At a time when many employers show far more concern for their investors than their employees, the county can set the standards of what it means to provide a good job.

A living wage differs from a minimum wage. Unlike the minimum wage, the county's living wage policy will only cover the direct employees of the county and the employees of county contractors. Also, a minimum wage, sets a floor for wages. A living wage sets a standard for wages and it includes other essential policy elements designed to enable workers to afford the essentials of living in Silicon Valley.

As a new study by Working Partnerships USA shows, paying a decent wage is part of the solution, but only part. Workers need full-time work; earning a decent wage for 20 hours a week will not cover basic expenses. Workers need a predictable schedule, so that if they are forced to take part-time work they can schedule multiple jobs and take care of family responsibilities. Workers need basic benefits like health care and sick leave. And workers need the freedom to form a union if they choose. Too often, Silicon Valley employers do not provide for these basic worker needs, but now Santa Clara County is moving to adopt these model employment practices.

Obviously, the living wage policy will be good for workers, but it will be good for employers, too. Many businesses want to provide good quality jobs, but they have to compete with low-road employers, who don't care about their workers. The living wage policy will level the playing field for county contractors, so that the good ones aren't at a competitive disadvantage.

The policy will also set an example for other employers in the county. Not every job is a good job. Most Americans who live in poverty work; they work for poverty wages with inadequate or no benefits. Here in Silicon Valley, one of the wealthiest communities in the world, one out of three households does not earn enough to be self-sufficient. The iconic companies of Silicon Valley, Google, Apple, eBay and others, can certainly afford to meet the county's living wage standard for their contract workers, many of whom do not earn enough to make ends meet. Everyone should take the "Can You Survive in Silicon Valley" online challenge at www.svlivingwage.com.

Employers who do not pay a living wage force the rest of us to subsidize their workforce. Their workers need food, medical care and other necessities. If those workers cannot afford the essentials, they probably will rely on government assistance covered by taxpayers. In order to end subsidies for low-road employment practices, we need good employers to lead the way. Santa Clara County should be proud to take the leadership role in setting the standards with a comprehensive living wage policy.

Luisa Blue is chief elected officer of SEIU Local 521. Michele Lew is president and CEO of Asian Americans for Community Involvement (ACCI). They wrote this article for this newspaper.