

Push is on for living wage for in-home care workers

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Sebastopol resident Paul Esparza earns \$11.65 an hour for his work as an in-home care provider, cooking, cleaning and tending to the daily medical needs of a pair of elderly men and a 38-year-old man who has developmental disabilities.

The pay is barely enough to support Esparza and his three teenage children, leading him to take side jobs to make ends meet.

“We are so underpaid for this kind of work,” said Esparza, 57.

That grievance is at the heart of an escalating debate in Sonoma County, pitting the largest group of county-affiliated contractors and their allies in organized labor against county officials and taxpayer advocates concerned about ballooning public expenses.

Propelled by a growing national movement to address flat wages for a large swath of the working class, local labor activists are redoubling their push for a sweeping pay raise, to \$15 an hour, for about 5,500 county-affiliated workers, including nearly 5,000 in-home care workers like Esparza.

The move comes on the heels of the Board of Supervisors recent endorsement for a narrower wage boost, which would raise pay to \$13 an hour for 560 people employed under county contracts.

Supervisors balked at broader action covering more workers, including in-home care providers, citing concerns over costs for taxpayers and other budget priorities.

The stance sets up a looming standoff with labor advocates, who are hoping to seize on momentum from other cities and counties across California and the country where proposals to raise pay for low-income workers have surfaced and passed recently.

The issue could be one of the most contentious to come before the Board of Supervisors next year.

Activists say the county’s scaled-down living wage measure falls far short.

“I’d call it a huge step backwards,” said Marty Bennett, co-chair of North Bay Jobs with Justice, the nonprofit group leading the call for a broader living wage measure. “This whole issue is growing regionally across the Bay Area and nationally. Our timing is critical.”

But supervisors say they can’t afford to spend millions of dollars a year on pay increases, while advancing other budget priorities including funding universal preschool and fixing the county’s crumbling roads.

“I know that Marty is trying to drum up grassroots support, but I don’t know how we pay for that,” said Supervisor David Rabbitt, the board chairman. “Pay for in-home care workers is determined by collective bargaining, and that’s probably where it should be.”

The stagnation of wages over the past decade for low- and middle-income workers has become a key political talking point nationwide, and labor groups have increasingly lobbied local governments to set a higher pay

floor for the lowest wage earners.

The high cost of living in the Bay Area has made it a hotbed for such campaigns, and labor-friendly politicians in the region have shown that they are willing to back the pay increases.

“We’re seeing this become very important, and now we have here in the Bay Area the highest wage law that’s been passed in the country,” said Ken Jacobs, chair of the Labor Center at UC Berkeley, referring to Santa Clara County’s recent passage of a \$19 per hour living wage. “There are multiple reasons to raise wages, but the core argument is that people who are working hard should earn enough to survive and support their families.”

The debate has sharpened in Sonoma County after votes by San Francisco, Oakland and Marin County to boost minimum wages or pass living wage laws.

In Sonoma County, three cities — Petaluma, Sonoma and Sebastopol — have passed living wage ordinances.

A living wage differs from a minimum wage in that it covers a specific group of workers, and takes into account standards of living, including cost of housing and health care, for example.

Bennett said North Bay Jobs with Justice is looking to Santa Clara — one of the Bay Area’s wealthiest counties — in hopes of replicating their successful campaign.

Santa Clara County supervisors last week passed what is being touted as the most comprehensive living wage law in the country. It sets minimum pay for about 15,000 county contractors at \$19.06 per hour, and creates other protections, including more stable hours for part-time workers and bidding preferences for companies whose employees live in Santa Clara County. The new rules apply to about \$2.5 billion in county contracts.

Advocates in the South Bay said rising rents and the growing gap between the rich and the poor, coupled with increasing political will to adopt higher wages, helped speed approval of Santa Clara’s ordinance.

Elly Matsumura, director for the group that led the effort in Silicon Valley, said her organization started to lobby supervisors in April. The final ordinance was approved Dec. 16, on a 3-1 vote.

“I think what enabled this campaign to happen in less than a year is the fact that we have living wage ordinances in more than 140 cities and counties throughout the country,” Matsumura said. “And we’ve seen an enormous trend of income inequality rising over the last 50 years. So many people in Silicon Valley work one or more jobs and still can’t even afford the basics.”

Santa Clara County’s ordinance does not cover in-home caregivers, but Matsumura said that was never part of the proposal because caregivers had already won higher wages in contract negotiations.

In Sonoma County, Bennett’s proposal — the \$15 per hour pay raise for 5,500 county-affiliated workers — would cost \$12 million per year. The county’s proposal, covering just 10 percent of the larger contractor pool, would cost about \$300,000 annually. It is set to come before the Board of Supervisors this spring.

Labor groups are planning a series of meetings they’ve dubbed “worker’s rights hearings” before the board discussion to highlight the income pressure faced by in-home caregivers and press supervisors to back the broader proposal.

“A living wage will create good jobs and improve job quality, particularly in the private sector,” Bennett said.

Yet critics, including taxpayer advocates, contend that the higher cost of doing business will lead to less hiring, and some companies moving to automation, dropping county contracts or leaving the county altogether.

“It’s economic fantasyland,” said Jack Atkin, president of the Sonoma County Taxpayers’ Association. “Living wage laws might mean that some people will earn a little more, and that’s a nice idea, but in reality, it will decrease jobs.”

Bennett is hoping to persuade supervisors that investing money into higher wages for county-affiliated workers will actually save taxpayer money in the long term, by getting low-income people off other public assistance programs such as Medi-Cal and food stamps.

The county has only recently begun tracking how many in-home caregivers are on public assistance. Preliminary numbers tallied in November found that roughly 13 percent of the county’s 4,976 in-home caregivers are on CalFresh, the state’s food stamp program, and nearly 7 percent were on Medi-Cal, the state’s low-income health program.

In-home workers have lobbied for years, in both contract talks and in public demonstrations before the Board of Supervisors, for higher pay. Their most recent raise, from \$11.50 to \$11.65 per hour, was approved in July 2013.

Still, supervisors have showed no signs of retooling their living wage proposal to cover the larger group of workers.

“It’s one thing to look at the concept of a living wage, and talk about what’s fair and just. What we can afford is another thing,” said Supervisor Susan Gorin, who will be seated as board chairwoman in January. “This board has decided what we can afford to finance at this time.”

The debate has hit home for Esparza, the Sebastopol in-home caregiver.

He spends much of his time in his car, shuttling between his home and carrying out chores for his clients.

Last week, he met his youngest client, Jason Carlin, 38, at his Rohnert Park apartment. Carlin was born with developmental disabilities, conditions that qualify him for government-subsidized in-home care.

“Jason, can I pick this up?” Esparza said, pointing to a box of electronics while tidying up Carlin’s cluttered living room.

Esparza said he plans to describe his work to county supervisors when they take up the pay issue next year. The lobbying effort — a new role for Esparza — could be worth it if it leads to better pay for him and thousands of caregivers like him.

“I couldn’t see any light at the end of the tunnel, but now I am starting to,” he said. “We’re going to work hard to get higher wages and benefits.”

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