

**Testimony to the Senate Special Committee in Aging
“21st Century Caregiving: Supporting Workers, Family Caregivers, Seniors and People
with Disabilities”
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Thank you, Chairman Casey, Ranking Member Scott and members of the Senate Special Committee on Aging for inviting me to speak to you today. My name is Brittany Williams, and I'm a single mom, a home care worker and a proud member of SEIU 775 from Seattle, WA.

As a home care worker, I help seniors and people with disabilities in my community live with dignity and independence at home. Home care workers like me provide essential, life-saving care, such as bathing, cooking meals, cleaning, helping clients go to the bathroom or move around their homes, driving to and from appointments, running errands and anything else someone may need throughout the day.

Caregiving isn't just a job for me — it's in my genes. I grew up in Arkansas, watching my grandmother and mother care for seniors and people with disabilities in our community. While I was in school learning my ABCs and 123s from my teachers, I was also learning from my mother and grandmother invaluable lessons in compassion and what it means to care for someone in need. They were the best role models a young girl could ask for. It became clear to me at a very young age that care is essential, and that care work makes all other work possible. I felt a strong calling to carry on the legacy of the generations of women before me and become a home care worker.

I currently take care of three different clients. When I start with each client, I do the baseline check I learned in training. This helps me ensure that each client is in a good place and there have not been drastic changes from the last time we met. After my baseline check, I do a variety of care plan directed activities, such as making sure they have the medications they need, picking up groceries and preparing food for them, and making sure their homes are safe and clean. It's life-giving work I am proud to do.

In addition, I am occasionally asked to fill in for another caregiver. When these opportunities arise, I'm not always given complete information about my temporary clients' conditions. For one such client, I knew they were agitated from the moment I stepped in the door. Relying on my deescalation training, I was able to help the client feel comfortable and safe. Throughout the week I relied on this training daily. By the end, when I met the client's representative, I learned the client suffered from dementia. I was thankful for my training — without it, that week could have taken a very different turn.

Because of the care home care workers provide, people in need of long term care can stay in their homes, surrounded by the people and things that they love. Home care workers help our clients live longer, fuller lives. It's a blessing to work with my clients, and the trust and love we share with one another is unlike any other.

But this job is hard. It's physically and emotionally demanding, and you have to have unlimited patience, compassion and energy to do this job well. But it's not just the job itself that's taxing. It's also what's happening behind the scenes.

I always say home care workers are the maintainers of life — but we can barely survive ourselves.

Home care is one of the lowest paid jobs in the country. The median hourly wage for home care workers nationally is just over \$12 an hour. Of the more than 2.4 million home care workers in this country, 47 percent live below 200 percent of the poverty level, and more than 50 percent rely on some form of public assistance. Many of us don't have affordable healthcare, and because we can't afford to see a doctor, we sometimes have to push through an injury or illness and go to work. Many home care workers don't have paid sick time either, so if we take a day off, we don't get paid. And without that paycheck, we might not be able to afford groceries, that month's rent, or our children's school supplies.

I first started home care work in Arkansas, and was paid minimum wage. I couldn't afford to take a sick day and struggled to support myself. When I moved to Washington, I joined SEIU Local 775, the state's caregivers union. Being able to join with other home care workers changed my world and created a new sense of possibility. When I started, I took 70 hours of training to make sure I can do the work I need to do to keep my client safe.

My mom says that home care work in this country is like [diving into the deep end of a swimming pool when you can't swim](#). And that's the way it's always been for home care workers — long before my mom or my grandma started doing this job. Today, nearly 90 percent of home care workers are women, more than half are women of color, and three in ten are immigrants. Black women like me have been the caregivers of the nation for centuries, but due to a long history of racism and sexism, our work has been falsely labelled as unskilled women's work, and that narrative has been used to exclude home care workers from labor laws and deny us the protections afforded to other workers.

And if things weren't bad enough already, the COVID-19 pandemic ran home care workers into the ground. Everything I thought was secure, the pandemic took away. It took away my security of having someplace safe for my son to learn when the schools closed down. It took away my security of being able to work the hours I need to work in order to provide for my family. And that resulted in losing the security of having a roof over my head in the city that I love. Even though eviction moratoriums were in place, when my lease came up for renewal I was forced with the choice to pay back thousands of dollars of missed rent or move. I was lucky to have a

community around me to support me and help with my move, but the pandemic caused a whole lot of stress.

Over the past year, healthcare workers have been celebrated as heroes. We've all seen the videos of people clapping, banging pots and pans, and honking their horns for healthcare workers starting their shifts. It's a beautiful thing. But who has clapped for the home care workers, who worked tirelessly to keep people safe in their homes and out of nursing homes during a global pandemic?

Each day, home care workers like me are forced to make impossible decisions, and the daily anxiety of feeling that I could potentially put my client at risk when we faced PPE shortages was crippling. How do I make these decisions in the midst of everything that's happening around me? Pandemic, economic turmoil, fighting for hazard pay and PPE, and then add on top of that, racial violence. That's asking people to do too much by themselves. I stayed strong and I did what I had to do for myself, my family and my clients — but I'd be lying if I said I wasn't scared for my life each and every day I walked out the door.

I ended the year exhausted and angry. I'm angry at the injustice of it all.

Home care is one of the most important jobs in our communities, and home care workers deserve to be respected, protected and paid a living wage for the essential work we do. Some 20 million Americans already require long term care. With roughly 10,000 people turning 65 every day, we will need to fill an estimated 4.7 million home care jobs by 2028. In Washington State alone, estimates find that by 2030, Washington will need an additional 400,000 home care workers to meet the demand for care services. But the low quality of these jobs forces people out of the industry, leading to turnover rates as high as 60 percent in some markets.

Without a strong, well-supported home care workforce, our country is in the midst of a care crisis. Long term care is often inaccessible and unaffordable for working families. With no other options, people must quit their job to serve as full-time, unpaid caregivers. And sometimes, those in need are forced to go without care altogether.

No one should be forced to leave their jobs to stay at home and care for a loved one, just because there is no other option. And no one should ever have to forego the life-saving care they need.

To solve this crisis, we need to build a strong home care workforce that can answer the call for care. When families are in need, we need a system where affordable care is accessible to everyone — no matter who they are or where they live— and gives families the piece of mind so that they can continue going to work knowing their loved one is safe and cared for.

In addition to being a third generation home care worker, I am also a third-generation union member. My grandma was part of the bus union in Arkansas — she was the first woman to drive a city bus in Little Rock. My dad was a member of the police union. My mother has been a

caregiver for over 32 years, and when she lived in Washington, she was a proud member of SEIU 775, too.

And thank God for my union.

When I first started in home care I made just \$9.45 an hour — a wage I couldn't afford to live off of. But united in our union, home care workers were able to win the raises and benefits we needed. Caregivers now start at \$16.72 an hour, we have paid time off, mileage reimbursement and guaranteed raises every six months, with increases based on experience and training. We have paid sick leave, paid administrative leave, access to free slip resistant shoes to minimize on the job injuries, and PPE at no cost. We won healthcare benefits. We have solid retirement plans. Just before the pandemic, we celebrated the passage of the HADit bill — a law to make care environments safer for everyone by eradicating harassment, abuse, and discrimination of caregivers.

But even that isn't enough. With the cost of housing and food and everything else, \$17 an hour isn't a living wage. Thanks to the temporary increases in federal funds through the Families First and American Rescue Plan laws, we have won hazard pay of roughly \$2.50 an hour through the pandemic. That has been a lifesaver, helping caregivers pay the bills, stay in our homes and continue working. But we need a living wage all the time, not just during the pandemic. When this temporary federal funding ends, we're back to the status quo for home care.

The national long term care system isn't working, and healthcare disparities have created a reality where a person's zip code determines access to essential health services and the standard of care they receive, as well as the quality of home care jobs. My mom is still a home care worker in Arkansas, and although we do the exact same work, her situation is worlds different from mine. She makes just over \$11 an hour caring for my grandmother — with all of the experience she has, she would be making around \$20 an hour doing the same work in Washington.

My union sisters and brothers have been able to make Washington State home care jobs among the best in the nation. I'm grateful for my union and the work we've done together and am so blessed to be part of this community, but the victories are bittersweet because I know not every home care worker is in my same position. Every home care worker who provides essential services to seniors and people with disabilities should have that same kind of union support to back them up.

As home care workers, we work tirelessly to help support quality of life and feel a moral responsibility to do so. I don't fight for just myself, my coworkers and clients, but for the younger generations too. If my children choose to follow in my footsteps and become caregivers, I don't want them to struggle to make ends meet and provide quality care like I had to. I don't want what we've won to become a thing of the past.

The more than 740,000 home care workers united in SEIU and the two million still fighting for a union share a vision of America where long term care is accessible, affordable and sustainable for all. We're to transform home care jobs into family-sustaining careers for the generations of workers and consumers to come. This transformation would not only help those that do this work get the respect, protection and pay we deserve, but it is necessary if we are going to build a durable long term care system.

Our country needs a wakeup call, especially in the wake of a devastating global pandemic where care was center stage. The American Jobs Plan's \$400 billion investment would be life-changing for home care providers and consumers alike. We need access to quality, affordable health services, clean air and water, and opportunities that allow our children to grow and thrive no matter where we live. New funding is needed to raise wages to attract the workforce we need to meet the demand for care and return quality of life for millions of seniors and people with disabilities who are reliant on our services. We need policies that make it easier for workers to join unions and advocate for their profession and those that they serve, so people have an actual choice of where they want to receive care and age without bankrupting themselves. And this investment will provide an opportunity to address the impact of systemic racism and sexism on home care workers and women of color to lift millions of Black, Latina, Asian, indigenous and immigrant women out of poverty and provide a much-needed economic boost to communities of color — those hit hardest by COVID-19.

Take it from me: the need for care can change in the blink of an eye. When that time comes, don't you want the comfort in knowing a skilled, dedicated caregiver will be by your side? If you or a family member suddenly needed home care tomorrow, are you confident that you'd be able to get the resources and services you need?

I suggest you not wait and find out. Care can't wait.

We can't go back to the way things were before the pandemic and that is why we are supporting the American Jobs Plan. Care work is infrastructure because it's what makes all other work possible. Care work gets seniors and people with disabilities the support they need to live with dignity and independence at home and in their communities. It's the foundation of our economy — no one can do their job if they or their loved ones aren't cared for. I want to thank you in advance for standing up for caregivers, standing up for essential workers, and making sure the world we are building is one we can all be proud of. Caregivers need to be seen as the professionals we are. We are the maintainers of life, and for that, we must be respected, protected and paid.

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