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FEATURE

Nonprofit workers helped NYC get through the pandemic. Now they want better pay

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A #JustPay rally at City Hall Park on March 10. Photo: Andrea Pineda-Salgado

By Andrea Pineda-Salgado

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Throughout the pandemic, human services workers who were employed by nonprofits filled in the gaps left by the government. They were the ones feeding the hungry on long food pantry lines, housing the homeless and providing stability and comfort to those struggling with their mental health.

Their pay comes from a combination of city and state contracts as well as donations and fundraising given to their organization. Yet for all they do, nonprofit workers are notoriously underpaid.

According to a study done by the [Human Services Council](#), New York's human services workers like Chan Henry, 22, a housing specialist at [Urban Pathways](#), are paid roughly 71% of what government employees make, and 82% of what private-sector workers receive for similar jobs. Wages are so low that 15% of workers in the nonprofit sector qualified for food stamps in 2016-2018.

The [#JustPay Campaign](#) seeks to change that. Na'ilah Amaru, a campaign organizer and director of policy and campaigns for the [Human Services Council of New York](#), an organization that aims to strengthen New York's nonprofit human services industry, says the government should end government-sanctioned poverty wages for nonprofit workers.

"It has been a long time coming. The sector has recognized the need to organize to more effectively advocate for its budget and legislative needs," Amaru says. "If there was a service that was needed to provide stability to New Yorkers, it's our workforce that offers those services."



Na'ilah Amaru at the March 10 rally.

What is the #JustPay Campaign?

The #JustPay Campaign aims to accomplish three core goals for nonprofit human services workers in New York State:

- **Establish, fund and enforce an automatic annual cost-of-living adjustment (COLA) on all human services contracts.**

“This is important because if your paycheck comes from contracts with the state, you have not had a COLA in 12 years. If you were a city contract worker, it’s been almost four years since you’ve seen any type of COLA reflected in your raise,” says Amaru. “These poverty wages are a direct reflection of the decision that the government has traditionally made to not invest in this sector.”

- **Set a living wage floor of no less than \$21 an hour for all city and state-funded human services workers.**

“People who are drawn into this type of work in the human services sector want to make people’s lives better. They’re drawn into this work of wanting to help people and they don’t do this type of work to get rich because it is a service-oriented job. With that said, because you have a service-oriented job does not mean that the government should fund poverty wages for work that is a necessity,” says Amaru.

- **Create, fund and incorporate a comprehensive wage and benefits schedule for government-contracted human services workers comparable to the salaries made by city and state employees in the same field.**

Highly educated, yet poorly paid

In July 2021, Henry, a recent graduate from St. John’s University, got a job offer from Urban Pathways with an annual salary in the low \$40k’s, a figure that she says is not representative of the amount of work required to do her job proficiently.

Henry’s main duty is to get homeless New Yorkers off the streets. However, she says the job entails a lot more than meets the eye.

“You are someone who reminds them of their medical and psych appointments, reminds them to take their medication. There have been times where I’ve literally had to sit there and watch my clients take their medication because I need them to do that to get housing,” she says. “We’re pretty much like counselors.”

Henry loves her job and is passionate about helping out the community around her, but her pay makes it difficult at times. Her monthly rent for a small studio in Inwood, Manhattan, — \$1700 — eats up nearly half of her paycheck alone. Add groceries, student loans, transportation and bills, and she’s barely getting by.

“I feel like we put so much into giving back to our communities,” she says, “yet we return with so little.”

Henry's pay could be adjusted if the government would provide nonprofit organizations with more money. Her paycheck comes from a combination of city contracts and donations to Urban Pathways.

The study also found that 66% of human service workers are female, and 46% of those are women of color. Most have completed a GED or higher but will make about \$20,000 a year less than a public sector worker with a comparable education

Benice Mach, 24 has a master's degree in public administration from Binghamton University. She is a Mobility LABs project coordinator for the nonprofit [Chinese-American Planning Council](#) (CPC) an organization that aims to promote the social and economic empowerment of Chinese American, immigrant and low-income communities of NYC. The position pays \$50,000 annually.

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She began working at CPC in July 2021 after deciding to pursue a career in the human services sector amid the rising anti-Asian sentiment. Her role consists of creating projects to sustainably lift individuals out of poverty.

Like Henry, Mach has student loans to pay off. She currently lives with her parents, and after contributing to rent and helping with utility bills, she has little leftover, not even enough for mental health counseling, which she feels she needs, especially with the stress of working in her field.

While Mach is passionate about the work she does, there are days she doubts her career choice.

"There are still times where I would look back and think it would probably be so much easier for me to pay to pursue a career in a higher paying sector," she says. "But at the end of the day, I realized that that's not what I want to do. I released societal expectations of what success looks like and blindly pursued a career in public service, not knowing what it would look like for me."

Most of Mach's paycheck comes from the [Robin Hood Foundation](#), however, around 93% of CPC's employees' paychecks come from city contracts as well. If the city provided more funding to CPC, Mach's pay would increase as well. While the majority of Mach's paycheck comes from the Robin Hood foundation, the majority of other employees' paychecks come from city contracts.

Both Mach and Henry entered the human services sector during the pandemic.

According to Amaru their respective organizations were among the many to provide some stability to New Yorkers who suffered the most —and they should be considered and treated as essential workers.

"When we're talking about who is the most essential, we have to take into consideration the people who left the safety of their homes every day to go to their jobs to provide safety and security and stabilizing services to New Yorkers," Amaru says. "Our workers are absolutely essential. However, the government has not recognized them as being essential because they have been paid so poorly through city and state contracts."

How to get involved:

There are four ways you can get involved with the #JustPay Campaign and advocate for human services workers:

1. **Sign up to become a supporter** of the #JustPay Campaign. [Click here](#) for an individual sign-on and [here to sign up](#) your organization.
2. **Share your story.** If you are or were a nonprofit worker, talk about how the underfunding of human services has impacted you. The stories can remain anonymous.
3. **Spread the word via social media.** The #JustPay Campaign gives you templates you can use if you are not sure what to say.
4. **Write letters** to your New York State senator, New York State assembly member and New York City council member to ask them to support the campaign. Find out who yours are [here](#).

And above all, Henry says it's important to simply recognize the hard work of human services workers:

"Just be more appreciative of our services and also give us the recognition that we need because the city wouldn't be what it is now if social services weren't open during the pandemic."