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Human services workers push Mayor Adams to include 6.5% pay bump in budget

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More than 100 human service organizations from around the city closed about 30% of their programming on Thursday to protest consistently low wages for the sector's workers.

Simultaneously, hundreds of human service and health care workers rallied outside City Hall, urging the Adams administration to include a 6.5% cost of living adjustment in the city's Jscal 2024 executive budget so they can afford to serve vulnerable New Yorkers as living in the city grows more expensive.

Rally participants represented 177 organizations and more than 125,000 employees from the sector, which ranges to include workers from substance use treatment organizations to assisted living facilities to shelters for people experiencing domestic violence. The closed programming excluded lifesaving services and The Human Services Council organized the display.

The human service workers' demands ring similar to asks from direct support professionals and health care workers around the state, who pushed Gov. Kathy Hochul to include cost of living adjustments in the Jnal state budget to bolster their workforces. The rally is the latest in a string of strikes and events where workers demand better pay.

The latest version of Adams' executive budget, released at the end of April, includes \$4 billion allocated to provide fair wages to members of the city's workforce. However, it does not include a cost of living adjustment for human services staff, which advocates say is a necessary step in making the city more livable for those who care for sick, aging and marginalized people.

According to the Human Services Council, which is based on the Upper East Side, the contracts the city offers human services firms contribute to the low wages companies are able to offer employees. These wages create high turnover and recruitment issues, which can jeopardize care.

Kathryn Haslanger, the chief executive of the Jewish Association Serving the Aging, described the nonproJt as a safety net for older New Yorkers. JASA serves more than 40,000 people and provides home care, mental health services, affordable housing, meals and legal assistance. The organization is currently focused on hiring social workers to work one-on-one and in groups with elderly people.

JASA experiences a social worker vacancy rate of at least 15%, she continued, and offers those staff about \$44,000 per year.

“People can do that work in hospitals and other settings for twice that much,” Haslanger said. “Their choices are to go out and work in the private sector or even work for the city of New York for much higher salaries.”

The nonprofit is funded almost entirely through contracts with the city, she added, which limits the salaries JASA is able to provide. She noted that some multi-year contracts don’t include increases to account for rising costs, and said she is advocating for the city to add money to contracts as well as pushing for the 6.5% adjustment.

Low pay for human service professionals has been an issue in the city for years across mayoral administrations, said Na’ilah Amaru, the director of policy and campaigns for the Human Services Council.

Nearly 60% of the city’s human service workers, many of whom are women and people of color, qualify for government assistance programs at their current salaries, Amaru said. She added that the Human Services Council wants to partner with the Adams administration and has had ongoing conversations with deputy mayors. However, officials have not met with JustPay campaign organizers yet.

Meanwhile, the City Council’s preliminary budget response, announced in April, includes an additional \$60 million to support human services employees. Councilwoman Sandy Nurse of District 37 told Crain’s the council, which is majority-women, supports a cost of living increase.

“We know what it’s like when the city doesn’t pay its bills on time in terms of contracts. The city is 100% relying on this apparatus of social service providers to take care of New Yorkers as part of its social safety net,” she said.

Nurse added that human services organizations prevent many New Yorkers from experiencing homelessness. The council will continue to advocate for higher wages and timely contract payment as the budget negotiation process draws to a close, she said.

Jonah Allon, a City Hall representative, said the Adams administration has already made “unprecedented investments” in the city’s human services sector, including baselining contract adjustments in the Jscal 2023 adopted budget and unlocking more than \$4 billion in contractual dollars through a “Clear the Backlog” initiative.

While Allon did not directly respond to a question about how the city is engaging with human services workers to hear their concerns, he said the administration will evaluate additional funding proposals as the budget process continues.

The \$4 billion the Adams administration has proposed in the budget for fair wages represents just under 4% of the total \$106.7 billion executive budget; the mayor and the City Council aim to reach a budget agreement by July.

— Jacqueline Neber