



## The Star-Ledger

### Shortchanging cleaning workers won't wash

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**BY EILEEN APPLEBAUM**

Hurricane Katrina brought Americans face to face with the realities of working poverty. What we saw were families desperately trying to raise and educate children on wages so low they could not afford the car, the tank of gas or the hotel room to escape the hurricane's devastation.

Unfortunately, families struggling to make ends meet and jobs paying very low wages are not limited to New Orleans. Even New Jersey, with a cost of living many times higher than in Louisiana and Mississippi, has workers who earn \$6.50 to \$7 an hour doing essential jobs that keep things working smoothly.

Many of the building service workers, mainly women, who clean government offices and bathrooms at the New Jersey Statehouse are employed by contractors who pay poverty wages and inadequate benefits or none at all.

These building service workers are employed at taxpayer expense by private companies with government contracts to provide cleaning services to government offices and agencies. When Gov. Christie Whitman privatized cleaning services a decade ago, privatization was supposed to save taxpayers money because contractors were going to increase efficiency, not because they were going to pay shamefully low wages to their employees. Yet that seems to be what has happened. There is no evidence that cleaning services have become cheaper in the decade since they were privatized, but wages and benefits of workers cleaning government offices have certainly declined.

Workers employed to clean government offices and buildings should be paid fairly. New Jersey taxpayers shouldn't have their tax dollars used to support contractors paying poverty wages.

In addition, New Jersey taxpayers don't save money when the state awards contracts to employers who pay poverty wages. Low-wage employers expect the state to pick up the tab for their employees' health care costs and to supplement their workers' low wages with food stamps, the earned income tax credit and other income supports. The price tag for the state-run health insurance plan for low-income New Jerseyans and their children is about \$200 a month per parent and \$113 a month for each child. With government cleaning contractors employing some 500 workers at low wages and assuming each worker supports two children on average, the annual cost for state-provided health care alone for these families comes to more than \$2.5 million.

Now New Jersey has an opportunity to fix this situation. Pending legislation would ensure that workers who clean state government offices are paid the same as those who clean the offices of private companies. The U.S. Labor Department tracks the prevailing average wage of janitors and cleaning staff in the private sector in every county of the state. The legislation would require contracts for the state building services to stipulate that workers not be paid less than the local prevailing wage for their job. That is, government contractors would have to pay workers who clean offices and buildings the same wage as private-sector employers in their county pay for this work.

State law requires contracts to be awarded to the lowest bidder. That makes good sense provided that the contractors bidding for the work pay their workers wages and benefits in line with what similar workers in the private sector earn.

But it's no bargain for New Jersey taxpayers when the low bids come at the expense of decent jobs. Passing the prevailing wage act will close off the low road and encourage employers to improve efficiency to remain competitive. And it will enable the workers employed by these contractors to support their families and raise their children with dignity.

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