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Narrow gender wage gap by helping home care workers

By Yesenia Martinez Apr 8, 2017

As an in-home caregiver, I was dismayed when I heard that the Republican senators' proposed state budget doesn't include funding for the in-home care workers contract. This budget will have a disproportionate impact on women and people of color — we make up a large portion of the caregiver workforce. We'll be kept from earning a living wage. We could see deep cuts to our health benefits.

Only 11 percent of in-home caregivers in Washington state are men. As with most work that's predominantly performed by women, caregiving is a low-wage job. Our work tends to be undervalued, underpaid, and brings little clout — all elements that contribute to the gender pay gap.

Nationally, women earn about 79 percent of what men make. Over the course of a career, that disparity adds up to more than \$400,000. And the difference only grows for Latina women; we make up a big portion of the home-care workforce in Central Washington. According to the National Women's Law Center, Washington state is among the 10 worst states in the U.S. for Latina women in regard to lifetime loss of wages due to the gender equity wage gap. (On average, Latinas bring in only 54 percent of what white men make.)

This pay discrepancy is a gross inequity, and the state should do something to change it. Funding our contract would be a step in the right direction — it would be good for the vulnerable seniors and people with disabilities we serve, and it would help the tens of thousands of women working these critical jobs.

The work we do is underpaid, but that doesn't mean it isn't important. Caregivers have physically and mentally demanding jobs. I've taken specialized classes in working with Alzheimer's patients. If you asked my client's adult daughters how important my work is when I'm spending time with their mom, who has Alzheimer's disease, they would agree that I provide an invaluable service.

But, my pay doesn't reflect the importance of my work; it's not enough to cover my bills. Sometimes I get behind, and it's really hard. I've had to borrow money from my parents.

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The average hourly wage for in-home care workers is \$12.82 , and as a newer caregiver, that amount is more than I make per hour. Despite the low pay, I want caregiving to be my career. I have passion for the work — I trained for it. My job should pay me a living wage.

I like what I do and I love my clients. Nothing makes me happier than going to my client's house and seeing her smile — it makes me love my job even more. During this legislative season, Washington state can set a new course, help lift in-home care workers out of poverty and narrow the gender wage gap.

* Yesenia Martinez lives in Yakima.