

RESEARCH BRIEF

“Without Us the Hospitals Wouldn’t Stay Open”:
Essential Contributions of Service Workers | Mar 2020



PURPOSE

“It’s been almost 25 years that I’ve been doing this. So, when people say, ‘You just a housekeeper,’ I say, ‘No, I’m a professional, honey.’ ... We are the ones who keep the infection down. Without us the hospitals wouldn’t stay open.” ~Housekeeper, \$12.64/hr

Income inequality in the U.S. is on the rise. Attention to the struggles of low-wage workers has increased over the last decade. Spurred by the Fight for \$15 and other organizing efforts, this attention has produced increases in the minimum wage in numerous places as well as pressure on large employers to raise wages. Much research on raising wages has focused on macroeconomic effects. However, it is also important to examine effects on workers’ lives. Data collected to document the effects of increasing wages also reveals the meaning and importance of their work. In illustrating workers’ challenges, as well as their pride in and dedication to their work, this brief enhances understandings of the essential contributions workers make to effective hospitals and healthy communities.

METHOD

The Pittsburgh Wage Study is documenting the effects of raising wages for service, clerical, and technical workers in a hospital. The study uses a longitudinal, mixed methods design, including an annual quantitative survey offered to affected workers and in-depth, qualitative interviews with a subset of workers. Two waves of data have been collected. This policy brief draws from the qualitative data.

The first two sets of interviews include 76 unique participants. These workers were primarily women (75%), and most had some post-high school education through either college or trade schools (69%). About half were Black and half White. They had worked at a hospital for an average of 8 years (range 1 month-43 years) and after raises earned an average wage of \$15.46 per hour (range \$10.25-23.89).

KEY FINDINGS

- Service, clerical, and technical hospital work is essential for a well-functioning hospital and a healthy community.
- Hospital work is difficult, demanding, and requires a high level of responsibility.
- Through their dedication and hard work, service, clerical, and technical hospital workers contribute to a positive hospital climate and quality patient care.

FINDINGS

Workers described their work as distinct from that of other workers earning low wages (e.g., fast food workers). Hospital workers reported their work as demanding. They also described having a high level of responsibility for patient care, satisfaction, and safety. Workers saw clear connections between their work and the overall success of the hospital. For example, workers described their role in minimizing infection rates and ensuring patients were satisfied with their experience in the hospital. Finally, workers saw their often-specialized work as requiring skill and being too challenging for “just anyone” to come in and do. In these ways, they viewed their work as playing an integral role in hospital functioning and perceived their low wages as minimizing or obscuring their role in the organization’s success.

DEMANDING WORK

Workers described multiple facets of their work as arduous. One aspect is that their work is physically demanding, requiring many hours on their feet, repeatedly walking across the hospital, or physically caring for patients. In addition, workers described their work as emotionally laborious, working with stressed nurses and doctors as well as upset, confused, or very ill patients.

“[The most challenging part of the job is] combative patients. When I was almost 8 months pregnant, I got kicked in the stomach.”

~Nursing Assistant, \$11.66/hr

“It’s difficult working in such a stressful environment when you’re kind of lower [in the hierarchy]. Because ...you have doctors, you have anesthesia there. You have nurses, you have surgical techs, you have radiology, you have all these people, and they’re stressed because the OR is so stressful. It’s life and death...and so, they are not always in the best mood. And they expect a lot from you with as little as you can do, really.”

~Operating Room Nurse Aide, \$10.50/hr

Workers also recognized that their work is extremely stressful and challenging, including cleaning up or coping with bodily fluids. Some workers described feeling undervalued despite fulfilling many demands.

“The amount of care...being overwhelmed and stressed...It’s like nursing assistants are being pulled in all different directions at one time.”

~Nursing Assistant, \$14.45/hr

HIGH LEVEL OF RESPONSIBILITY

Many workers described having a high level of responsibility. In some roles, workers are responsible for alerting doctors and nurses if a patient’s vital signs indicate they are in distress.

“The scope, intensity of the calls that I take. The fact that I’ve been told by management that I have someone’s life in my hands – especially on a heart attack alert.”

~Hospital Phone Operator, \$13.65/hr

Workers described how attending to detail in their work translates to saving lives. These comments are evidence of the pride workers take in their role in caring for patients.

"It's a lot of paying attention to detail. It's a lot of things in here that you really have to be responsible for. People get an infection. They can get sick. They can die. All because you didn't clean or take care of what needed to be taken care of."

~Operating Room Housekeeper, \$11.25/hr

ESSENTIAL CONTRIBUTIONS

"We're important for the patients and their feeling of well-being...just having somebody there to talk to when you're moving them. It makes a difference. And then you meet people who are terminally ill, and they need some comfort, and you try to offer that. We're there for people."

~Patient Transporter, \$11.35/hr

Many service, clerical, and technical workers described their work as essential to the functioning of the hospital. Workers explained their role in keeping patients satisfied and cared for emotionally. While these workers recognized that their education level meant their role was distinct from those of doctors or nurses, they described how limited doctors' work may be without a strong foundation.

"What we do is an important job...We're not as important as a doctor, maybe, but if we don't feed them, the doctor can't really get them much better."

~Dietary Hostess, \$12.06/hr

Other workers described their critical role in keeping infection rates down, which is linked to hospital reimbursement and patient health.

"If everybody in [sterilization] left, then the hospital would be in a bad situation because you have to know how to process the instruments ... to keep down possible infections. And you just can't have anybody back there doing that. So, I know the importance of it, and I enjoy it."

~Sterilization Technician, \$15.00/hr

Additionally, workers are committed to customer service and a positive hospital climate.

"And also, with what the hospital expects from us, and without trying to sound like I'm perfect, I do try to live up to the hospital's expectations. I do try to make patients feel that they are right all the time, which is not easy. And I still have to maintain a positive outlook for the hospital."

~Rehabilitation Support Associate, \$13.58/hr

RECOMMENDATION

ATTRACT & RETAIN DEDICATED WORKERS

Why?

Good employees are needed for healthy hospitals, which are essential for healthy communities.

How?

- Pay fair, competitive wages
- Adjust for cost of living and account for long-time wage stagnation
- Compensate experience and growth in employees across their careers
- Recognize the contributions of service, clerical, and technical workers to overall hospital success