

BLACK AND BROWN, ESSENTIAL, AND STRUGGLING

**Los Angeles County's Subcontracted
Service Workforce Fights For Survival**

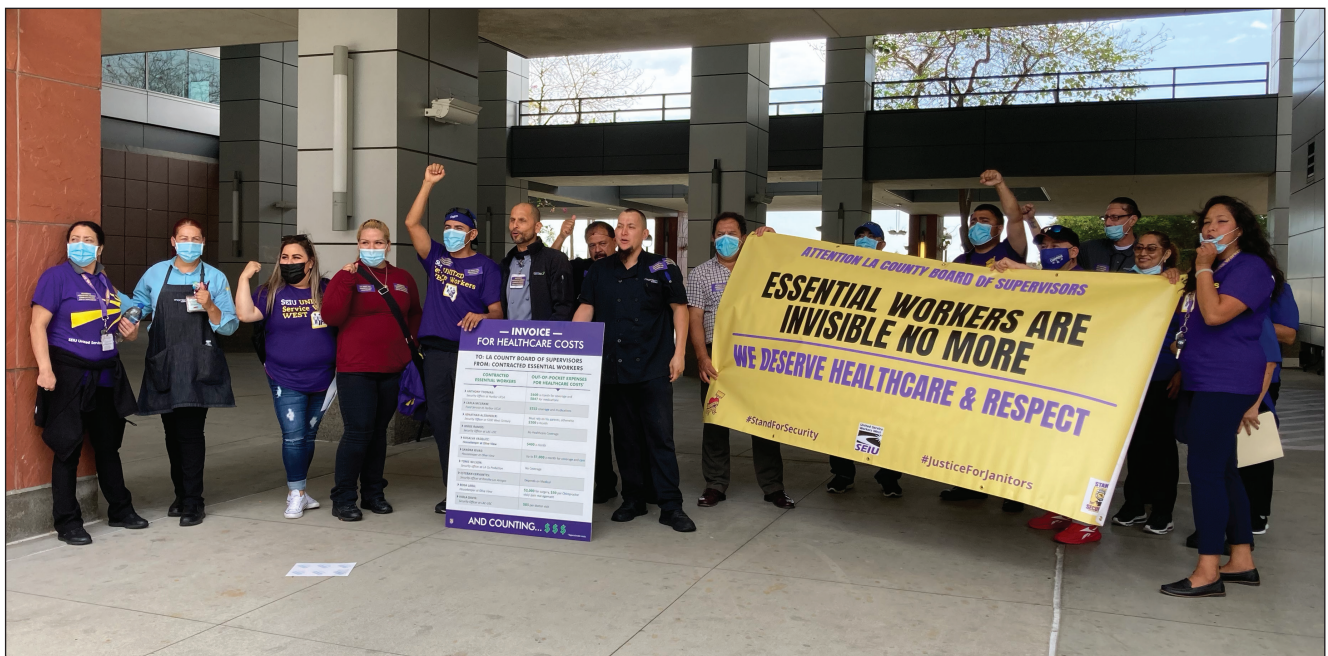


Black and Brown, Essential, and Struggling

Los Angeles County's Subcontracted Service Workforce Fights For Survival

Los Angeles County relies on a subcontracted workforce of over 2,000 security, janitorial, environmental and food service workers to keep critical infrastructure like County-run hospitals, clinics, courts, and juvenile halls running safely and efficiently. These essential workers have been critical to the County's continued operations throughout the pandemic, risking possible COVID-19 infection to clean patient rooms, prepare and serve patient meals, enforce social distancing and secure County facilities. Despite their essential role in the day-to-day operations of County facilities, many of these frontline workers, who come from predominantly low-income Black and Brown communities

throughout Los Angeles, earn approximately half as much in total compensation as their counterparts who are directly employed by the County and most are not afforded standard benefits like affordable employer-paid healthcare and adequate paid time off. This report examines the challenges that this low-wage, predominantly Black and Brown workforce faces amidst LA's simultaneous housing, public health and income inequality crises. It underscores the urgent need for the County of Los Angeles to invest in public contracts, improve contracting standards, and enact policies to ensure that essential workers are respected, protected, and paid fairly.



Los Angeles County Is Not Doing Enough for Subcontracted Essential Workers

Subcontracted security, janitorial, environmental and food service workers are struggling due to the County's insufficient investment in public contracts and inadequate contracting standards. These essential workers are on the frontlines but earn approximately half as much in total compensation as many workers directly employed by Los Angeles County performing similar work.

As a result, many subcontracted workers who clean patient rooms at Los Angeles County facilities cannot afford healthcare for themselves let alone their families. Contracted security officers—who do not receive any paid holidays from their employer—are forced to take a paycut if they want to celebrate Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. day. The impact of low pay and inadequate benefits reverberates throughout these workers' communities.

These essential jobs are performed by predominantly Black and Brown Angelenos and low standards in this workforce only deepen the vast disparities in income and access to quality healthcare as well as the high rates of housing and job insecurity.



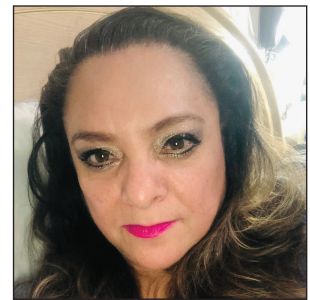
*Carla McGraw,
Food Service at
Harbor-UCLA*



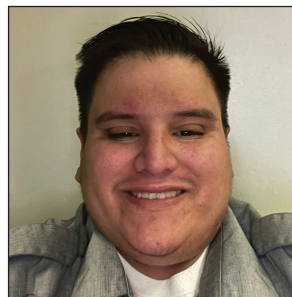
*DelSheena Armstrong,
Security Officer at
MLK Hospital*



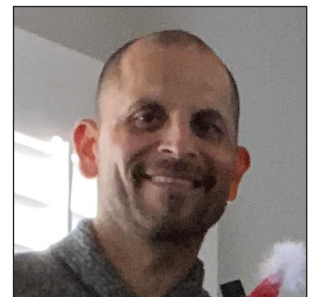
*Jane Arenas,
Housekeeper at
MLK Hospital*



*Sandra Rivas,
Housekeeper at
Olive View Medical*



*Johnathan Little,
Security Officer at
Rio Hondo Probation*



*Richard Mendivil,
Barista at
LAC-USC*

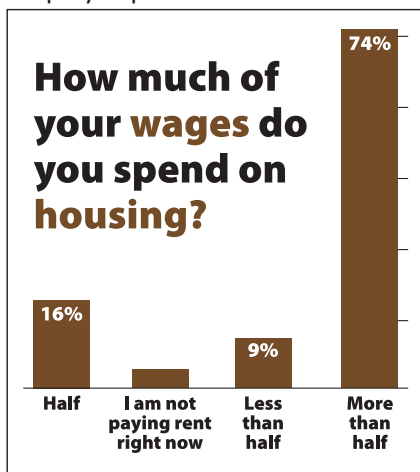


Black and Brown Frontline Workers Left Behind

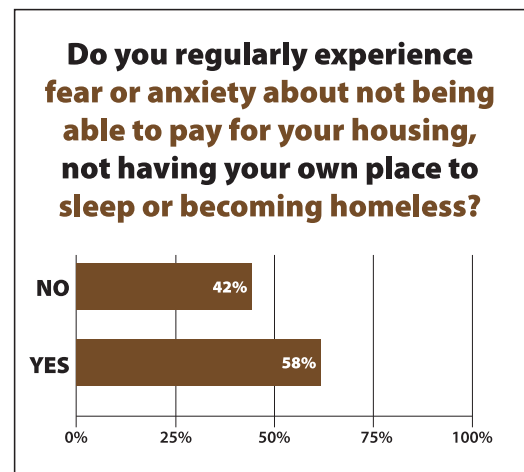
Many of the security, janitorial, environmental and food service workers subcontracted to service LA County facilities, including County hospitals and medical centers, are not provided affordable employer-paid healthcare, exacerbating long standing disparities in healthcare coverage and quality of healthcare among low-income Black and Brown workers in Los Angeles. The COVID-19 pandemic has made these disparities all too clear as the virus ravages Black and Brown communities at extremely disproportionate rates. In Los Angeles, COVID-19 killed Black and Latino residents at two to three times the rate of white Angelenos as of March 2021. As COVID-19 reached, then exceeded, ICU capacity at County hospitals, the County relied on workers from the very Black and Brown communities already most impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic to keep their facilities operational, even while the vast majority of this workforce lacked affordable employer-paid health care.

Without access to affordable employer-paid healthcare, the same workers who risked potential COVID-19 exposure to clean, secure and sanitize County hospitals have reported spending up to \$1,400 a month in out-of-pocket medical expenses. A housekeeper at Olive View Medical Center reported spending \$2,000 out of pocket for surgery, plus \$50 per appointment for her pain management, a security officer at Harbor UCLA Medical Center reported spending \$600 a month for healthcare coverage plus \$847 for his medications, while a security officer at LAC-USC Medical Center reported simply going without health coverage all together.

With the majority of this workforce earning just \$16.62 an hour, these out-of-pocket costs can account for a huge portion of workers' income, already stretched very thin by the rising cost of living and exorbitant



74% of subcontracted security officers surveyed reported spending more than half of their income on housing and more than half reported regularly experiencing anxiety about not being able to pay for their housing, not having their own place to sleep or becoming homeless.



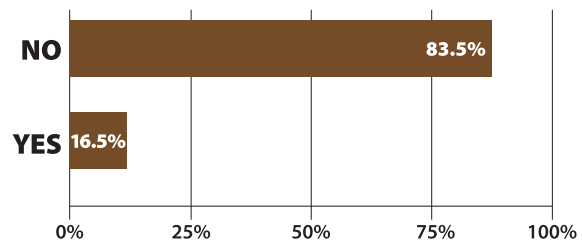
housing costs in Los Angeles. A 2020 study of subcontracted security officers working at LA County facilities conducted by SEIU-USWW found that 84% of officers surveyed did not earn enough from their job at County facilities to pay for monthly expenses. It isn't surprising that workers earning \$16.62 an hour struggle to survive in a County as expensive as Los Angeles, where the minimum hourly wage necessary to meet the basic needs of a family of four (two working adults, two children) is \$28.04 and even higher for single parents.²

\$16.62 doesn't go very far in the midst of Los Angeles's ever intensifying housing crisis and these low wages have exacerbated rates of housing insecurity for subcontracted County workers. According to a March 2019 study by the Economic Roundtable, janitors and security officers faced high rates of job turnover and represented the third largest share of persistently homeless workers (10%). Our 2020 survey of subcontracted officers securing LA County facilities confirmed the housing insecurity of this low-wage workforce. 74% of officers surveyed reported spending more than half of their income on housing and more than half reported regularly experiencing fear or anxiety about not being able to pay for their housing, not having their own place to sleep or becoming homeless.

The low wages and standards of this County-subcontracted workforce is particularly striking when compared to wages and benefits afforded to the County's direct employees. Workers directly employed by the County performing similar work to the subcontracted service workforce earn approximately twice as much in total compensation as many of their subcontracted counterparts.³

“Without access to affordable employer-paid healthcare, the same workers who risked potential COVID-19 exposure to clean, secure and sanitize County hospitals have reported spending up to \$1,400 a month in out-of-pocket medical expenses.”

Do you earn enough from your LA County security job to pay for monthly expenses?



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ANGELICA ARMAS
Housekeeper,
Olive View Medical Center

“We should not have to choose between having food, a place to live, paying our bills or going to the doctor, especially because we are exposed to getting sick from the work we do every day.”

Good Jobs for Subcontracted Workers Support Quality Services at County Facilities

Low wages, lack of adequate benefits, and high turnover rates detrimentally impact recruitment and retention of these frontline workers who are so essential to the County's day-to-day operations. For instance, only a little over a quarter of subcontracted security officers at County facilities surveyed by SEIU-USWW reported planning to stay at this job long term, with 21% planning to leave the job in the next six months to a year. Of those officers actively seeking other employment, 67% reported insufficient wages or benefits as their primary reason for doing so. Improving standards will help raise retention rates and help ensure that County facilities run efficiently and safely. It is crucial for employees that service County facilities to be experienced, well-trained, and have a familiarity of the worksite. An investment in quality jobs for these essential workers is an investment in quality service.



Tell LA County Board of Supervisors: Don't Leave Black & Brown Essential Workers Behind

Thousands of Los Angeles County's subcontracted essential workers, many of whom are low-wage workers of color, struggle with precarious employment, high rates of housing insecurity and homelessness, lack of access to quality affordable healthcare, and widening income gaps. The Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors has a unique

opportunity to address this issue and its disproportionate impacts on low wage service workers like those servicing County facilities. To do so, the County must invest in public contracts, improve contracting standards, and enact policies to ensure that essential workers are respected, protected, and paid fairly.



TAKE ACTION TODAY and tell the LA County Board of Supervisors not to leave these essential Black and Brown workers behind. By October 2021, the Board of Supervisors must ensure access to affordable employer-paid health care and paid leave benefits for all contracted essential workers providing security, janitorial, environmental and food service to the County by immediately updating the living wage ordinance. Take action by signing this petition.



Endnotes

1. "Life, Death and Grief in Los Angeles," *New York Times Magazine*, March 2, 2021.
2. "Living Wage Calculation for Los Angeles County, California," Massachusetts Institute of Technology Living Wage Calculator, accessed at <https://livingwage.mit.edu/counties/06037> on July 27, 2021.
3. "Early Intervention To Prevent Persistent Homelessness," *Economic Roundtable*, March 20, 2019.
4. SEIU-USWW analysis of "Average Salary and Benefit Earnings by Position," LA County Open Data, accessed at <https://data.lacounty.gov/Operations/Average-Salary-and-Benefit-Earnings-by-Position/6635-a2qt> on June 1, 2021.



