

Care Workers Protest in East Alton, Want to "Make Care Jobs, Good Jobs"

by Sydney Sinks, News Reporter
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EAST ALTON - SEIU Healthcare childcare and home care workers are advocating for increased wages and retirement benefits

Over the past few weeks, workers have traveled across Illinois on a “Good Care Job Sprint” as they bargain with Governor JB Pritzker for a new contract. They gathered in

East Alton outside the Illinois Department of Human Services (IDHS) Office of Rehabilitation Services on Thursday, Nov. 30, 2023. Workers shared information about their careers and their mission to “Make Care Jobs, Good Jobs.”

“We are necessary and essential workers and we deserve to be compensated as such,” said Jakki Brown, an SEIU member and home care provider in Edwardsville. “All care workers are dedicated healthcare professionals that provide an essential service to some of the most vulnerable members of our society, and we deserve to be able to retire with dignity and security, just like anyone else. It’s not right that we are forced to work until we are physically unable and then face financial insecurity.”

SEIU Healthcare union members work through the IDHS. Brown noted that most of these workers make less than \$30,000 a year and do not benefit from seniority. Christopher Belt, State Senator for the 57th District, was present at the speakout and acknowledged these challenges. He promised to fight alongside SEIU members for better benefits.

“There’s a special place in heaven for each and every one of you. Everybody could not do what you do,” Belt said. “It breaks my heart to hear all that I’ve heard. You’re fighting for livable wages. You’re fighting for a path to retirement. You’re fighting to be recognized and compensated for seniority. It boggles my mind that you could work somewhere for 15 years and have someone come work 15 seconds and make what you make. So I just want you to know that I stand with you. I want you to know that we’ll fight it together.”

Belt and Para Lee, a leader during the protest, both noted the importance of care providers in the community. Lee called SEIU “the greatest union across the country” and pointed out that people live longer, healthier lives with more dignity when they can stay in their own homes.

“Forty-four percent of care workers are age 50 and above,” Lee said. “Twenty-nine percent have more than ten years of service. If you’ve given ten years of your life, you should have something to show for it. In the Metro East region, a majority of care workers are women of color.”

As she shared statistics, a few SEIU members called out groceries they can no longer afford despite working full time, including bacon and chicken.

Several SEIU members and clients attended the rally to share their stories. Endia Ford has worked as a childcare provider for over 30 years in East St. Louis and emphasized how much she enjoys her job, though she sometimes struggles to pay her bills. She often sends kids home with extra meals or buys weather-appropriate clothing out of pocket for

the families she works with. She said she doesn't have any money set aside for retirement and will have to rely on social security to survive. She predicts she'll likely need to get a job at Walmart or Target to make ends meet.

Kim Singleton, who receives services through IDHS, noted the benefit of having devoted care workers like Ford in the workforce. Singleton expressed her gratitude for her own personal assistant, but said her PA deserves to retire because she is in her 80s.

Cathy Contarino echoed Singleton's appreciation for the care providers but stressed that they need better wages and benefits so they can continue their work. Contarino receives services through IDHS and works as the executive director of IMPACT Center for Independent Living in Alton.

"This program allows individuals with disabilities to continue to live in the community and not in a nursing home and ultimately saves the state money," Contarino explained. "Illinois can be a leader in supporting our state's care economy, including home care and childcare workers who make all other work possible. Living wages and a path to retirement are crucial factors in stabilizing this essential workforce."

SEIU currently has 45,000 care workers bargaining with the Pritzker administration for \$25 an hour wages and retirement benefits. They will continue to tour throughout the state to bring attention to their demands.

"Governor Pritzker says he wants to make Illinois the best state in the country to raise a family," Brown added. "We do, too, and the way to do this is by providing childcare and assistance to people with disabilities and by investing in those workers with good pay and good benefits. For us, that means a path to \$25 per hour and the ability to retire with dignity."

