

# City of Buffalo Sued for Failure to Enforce Living Wage Law

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*Economic justice advocates call on City to "stop placing the workers of Buffalo on the back burner"*

Economic justice advocates have sued the City of Buffalo for failing to enforce a living wage ordinance that took effect there more than a year ago. The Buffalo living wage law requires that employers receiving City service contracts pay their workers no less than \$7.15 per hour plus health benefits or \$8.15 per hour without health benefits. By refusing to enforce the living wage law, the City has denied hundreds of Buffalo's low-wage workers and their families this increased pay. Those harmed by the City's non-compliance range from the janitors that clean city buildings to the laundry workers that wash city uniforms.

The lawsuit against the City, brought by the Coalition for Economic Justice and Citizen Action of Western New York, was filed on July 11, 2001 in New York State Supreme Court.

"In a city like Buffalo, a living wage is critical," explains JoAnn Cole, director of Citizen Action of Western New York. "The time is now to implement the ordinance and stop placing the workers and citizens of Buffalo on the back burner."

The Coalition for Economic Justice and Citizen Action together supported the successful campaign to enact the Buffalo living wage ordinance in 1999. The City's persistent refusal to enforce the ordinance after it took effect the following year left these advocacy organizations no choice but to turn to the courts. The Coalition for Economic Justice and Citizen Action represent broad coalitions of low-wage workers and community, labor and religious activists in the Buffalo area.

The plaintiff organizations are represented by Buffalo-based attorneys Stephen Halpern and Sean Ryan, together with the Brennan Center for Justice at NYU School of Law.

"The Buffalo lawsuit is about ensuring that government follows the law," explains Brennan Center associate counsel Paul Sonn. "At the urging of local voters, the Buffalo City Council joined more than 60 other cities and counties across the country by enacting a living wage law. Government must take these legal obligations as seriously as it does those that benefit more powerful political interests."

The living wage movement continues to gain momentum both nationally and in New York State. Campaigns to enact living wage laws are currently underway in a variety of New York cities and counties including New York City, Suffolk County and Westchester County.

The Brennan Center serves as legal counsel to the national living wage movement and is active in helping to design, enact, and enforce living wage legislation around the country. Last year, the Center filed a lawsuit to enforce a living wage law in St. Louis – the first legal action of its type in the nation. The Center is active nationally in fostering grassroots initiatives to help working families support themselves.

For more information, please contact Amanda Cooper at (212)  
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