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“We just want to be visible”

“Solo queremos ser visibles”

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Rally urges action for home care workers

By Emily Nadal



Home healthcare workers rallied for new federal legislation.

Last week, home health care workers paraded up Broadway to City Hall to cheers as part of the city's Hometown Heroes celebration honoring healthcare and essential workers.

A week later, many of the same participants were back at City Hall, this time with a specific cry of their own: to demand the passage of The Better Care Better Jobs Act.

The federal legislation represents a major investment in the caregiver economy, and would increase access to home healthcare services for the elderly and disabled, while raising the median wage for care providers, a majority for whom are women or people of color. It is currently supported by the New York Congressional delegation, as well as care providers, including Visiting Nurse Service of New York (VNSNY) and VNSNY Partners in Care. VNSNY, one of the nation's largest not-for-profit home- and community-based healthcare organizations, boasts a workforce of over 11,000 in the New York metropolitan area.



"We just want to be visible," said Sandra Díaz.

More than 6,000 of those are VNSNY Partners in Care Home Health Aides (HHAs).

"The Better Care Better Jobs Act is specifically designed to invest in the workforce," said James Rolla, Senior Vice President at Partners in Care. "It's proposing much needed funds that would be put towards better wages, improving technology, providing better working conditions, and creating an opportunity for employing homecare workers who have been long undervalued and sort of left out of the healthcare spectrum to be recognized."

VNSNY members joined with other health care workers on Tues., July 13th to rally for the legislation's passage.

Sandra Díaz has served as a home care worker for 12 years, accompanying patients to doctor's appointments, and helping to dress, cook and feed her patients at home. The pandemic had been particularly daunting, an experience Díaz described as surreal. In order to care for her patients at home, she observed every known safety protocol but knew that there were risks every day to her and those she tended to.

"[We are what] keeps family members home and not at facilities. We are that ritual," she said. "When they are alone, we're there for them."



The workforce is largely women.

Still, Díaz said that she and many home health workers did not receive hazard pay, leading to the sense that their steadfast service – and the inherent risks they braved – were not as highly valued as those of other frontline workers. “I feel like we are working in an invisible workforce,” said Díaz. “It’s time for us homecare workers to be visible because we are that bridge.

And for home care workers, we just want to be visible. We want to be recognized.”

Members of the 1199SEIU Homecare Workers union marched in the union’s signature purple and yellow colors.

In his remarks, President George Gresham referenced the celebration held a week prior.



“You are the heroes,” said Mayor Bill de Blasio.

“We were in a parade last week thanks to Mayor de Blasio. We were proud to be there,” said Gresham. “That was all very nice, and deeply appreciated. But what we will appreciate even more is pay to take care of our families.”

“Because with all of the platitudes that we received and that we earned, you can’t serve that on a plate,” he added. “You can’t take that home. You can’t give it to the landlord. You can’t give it to the banks. You can’t give it to Con Ed. You can’t give it to any of them.”

Mayor Bill de Blasio, also in attendance, echoed the need for federal action.

“God bless you for what you did for the people in this city during our toughest hour. You are the heroes,” exclaimed de Blasio. “We had a beautiful parade last week. But now we need Washington to provide a real thank you. The leaders in Washington know they have the power to set things right, to support homecare workers, to put that \$400 billion in the pockets of people who are everyday heroes.”



“Workers are worthy of being paid more for the amazing work that they do,” said Jessica De La Rosa. Jessica de la Rosa knows firsthand the need for direct services.

De La Rosa survived a serious car accident at the age of 18, suffering multiple injuries and requiring intensive care. Thanks to home health care services, she received care and recuperated in her own home rather than a nursing center. "While I was recovering, I remember being home that first night in my bed and thinking how lucky I was. I remember thinking how thankful I am to live in a city where this service is provided," said De La Rosa, who serves as a Systems Advocate at the Brooklyn Center for Independence of the Disabled.

"I still rely on these services," said De La Rosa, who uses a wheelchair. "Now more than ever, we need to start recognizing all the homecare workers for all the hard work, love, and sacrifices they've made."



Rallying cry.

De La Rosa's partner also requires home health care. One of his care providers commuted to and from work at the height of the pandemic, ensuring that his patients were seen and cared for.

Ultimately, the toll was grave: the provider contracted and died of the Covid-19 virus.

"[Home healthcare workers] wear many hats when taking care of our daily needs," said De La Rosa. "They are not just the people who get us up and feed us for the day, but they're also our psychologists, our massage therapists, our extra set of hands, and so much more. We need better wages for them because anything else would not be fair. We are worthy of living a normal productive life like anyone else- and homecare workers are worthy of being paid more for the amazing work that they do."