

Testimony of Manuela Butler
Home Health Care Worker of District Council 1707, Local 389
of the
American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME)
before the
Workforce Protections Subcommittee, Committee on Education and Labor
U.S. House of Representatives
on
“H.R. 3582, the Fair Home Health Care Act”
October 25, 2007

My name is Manuela Butler. I want to thank the Chairwoman and members of the Subcommittee for inviting me to testify today. I'm a home health care worker employed by a private, non-profit home care agency. I am also a member of District Council 1707, Local 389, which is part of the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME). District Council 1707 represents 25,000 community and social agency employees and AFSCME has 1.4 million members nationwide.

For the past 17 years I have been a home health care worker caring for seniors with dementia and people with physical disabilities. It is physically demanding, dirty, difficult and emotionally challenging, but it can be satisfying. I have been deeply touched by all the people for whom I have cared. I am proud of my work.

For the past decade, I have worked with a woman who has dementia and diabetes. Mrs. G. is 92. I have seen the progression of dementia. It can take away memories. It can take away the ability to perform basic activities of daily life. Mrs. G. can no longer walk, sit up, bathe herself, cook, feed herself, clean her home, dress herself, shop for food, or use the toilet. But because of what I do for Mrs. G. for 42 hours a week, from eight in the morning until eight at night, she can live in her home. She is still the queen of her castle. Dementia may change a person but it will never take Mrs. G.'s humanity because my work preserves her independence. What I do as a home health care worker helps Mrs. G. keep her dignity.

Because Mrs. G. cannot sit up, she spends most of her time in bed. I bathe her each morning and cook her breakfast. I also prepare her lunch and dinner. I ask her what she would like to eat today, like she is in a restaurant. It is the little things that can maintain independence.

Because Mrs. G. is in bed most of the day we must be very careful to prevent pressure sores. Using a mat and draw sheet I move her every two hours, wash her bottom and change her diapers. I also lift her and move her to be showered.

I also launder her bed linens and clothes and shop for her food. I update the visiting registered nurse and Mrs. G.'s family daily.

Even though I regularly work more than 40 hours a week, I do not get overtime pay.

Home care work can be dirty and difficult but at times it can also be dangerous. This past April, Syndia Jean-Pierre Brye, a home care worker in my local union, was tragically killed on the job when a mentally ill family member shot her, her client and his family. This young woman is greatly missed by all who knew her. My local union and council are establishing a trust fund for Syndia's three children.

Unlike my current job, the agency I worked with before did not have a union. At this previous agency, I had no paid leave, no health insurance and no pension. Thanks to AFSCME, I now can take a day off with pay if I am sick. I have health insurance and we have a pension plan. I am paid \$9.40 an hour during the week and \$11.00 an hour on the weekends.

Should the woman that works the night shift after me not be able to work, and the agency is unable to send a replacement, I will be required to work through the night. If this were to happen I would get straight time pay, not time and a half for my overtime.

Under the Fair Labor Standards Act, I would get time and half pay for my overtime hours for performing the same tasks for Mrs. G. *if she were in a nursing home facility*. But because my work helps her to stay in her home, I am deprived of overtime pay. That's just wrong and unfair.

H.R. 3582, the Fair Home Health Care Act, would protect home health care workers who, like me, are currently not covered by the overtime and minimum wage protections under the Fair Labor Standards Act.

In a few months I will turn 65. I don't know when I will be able to retire. I can't afford to retire now.

The work I do for Mrs. G. and the work other home health care workers do across the country, is essential for the dignity and independence of persons with disabilities. Our work should be respected and valued. Passing H.R. 3582 is a good beginning.