

Can 31 cents per hour change the world?



Home Forward's executive director, Michael Buonocore, has deep roots in social justice, community organizing, and advocacy. He believes communities must work together on many fronts to fight the effects of poverty, while seeking the resources necessary to address the causes of the problem.

BY MICHAEL BUONOCORE
CONTRIBUTING COLUMNIST

There has been a lot of discussion about income inequality in our country lately – we are living in a time when wealth is concentrated among the richest Americans, and the gap between the richest and everyone else is the widest it's been since the 1920's. People work hard, often at multiple jobs, and still struggle to pay rent and put food on the table. The idea that if you just work hard enough, you can get ahead doesn't bear out for many families and retirees.

As the new executive director of our state's largest affordable housing provider, I am grateful to be in a position to make a difference in our community's fight against poverty.

At Home Forward, we provide housing for people who are struggling economically. We hear and read a lot about poor people living off the system, not doing their fair share, being lazy and dependent. We watch most of those same people get on the bus to get to their job every day, and see that even with a paycheck, food stamps and housing help, hardworking families struggle to leave poverty behind.

We do what we can to use our housing resources wisely and to help as many families as possible, and we will strive to do more. We also recognize that our role in the community is not just as a housing provider but also as an employer.

It is a strong value of ours to hire people who participate in our housing programs. But getting a job at Home Forward doesn't always end an employee's struggle with poverty.

To help them in that effort, we have

established a wage floor of \$15 per hour for all staff and interns employed directly by us, effective this Dec. 1. That will mean increases between 31 cents and \$4 an hour for some 30 staff. These employees include resident specialists who work with our most vulnerable residents and entry-level maintenance staff who keep our apartments in good repair – crucial jobs in the agency's mission to help the 15,000 households we are serving at any point in time.

The new wage floor will cost the agency about \$76,000 a year. This year we can absorb the expense with personnel funding that goes unspent when we have staff turnover. Next year, we expect flat funding from our various revenue sources, and this will present a budgeting challenge. We could face choices such as not filling positions when someone leaves or cutting administrative costs in other areas, while maintaining our current service levels and quality. These decisions may be difficult, but doing the right thing isn't always easy.

Reactions from our staff to raising our wage floor give me confidence that our team will rally behind whatever path we choose. One employee told me the action we took really hit home from her vantage point – not just as someone who has struggled with poverty most of her life but as someone who has now made social service a career and sees up close how hard it is for so many to leave poverty behind. Mostly, I heard from employees who aren't receiving raises as a result of this move. They wanted to let me know they believe this reflects the values of an organization they want to be a part of. We're all in this together.

We've stopped short of requiring this

wage floor for the many for-profit and nonprofit organizations with which we contract, as we can't presume to know the pressures on their individual business models. Yet we hope other employers will take note of what we've done and consider increasing wages in whatever ways they can manage. I am encouraged that our partner Multnomah County, which is a major employer in our community, has joined our ranks. Other leaders in government, nonprofit and philanthropy have reached out to voice their support, learn more about what we're doing, and tell me about steps they're considering.

The staggering income inequality we see in our country and in the world involves many complex factors that are hard to untangle. Advocacy for broad policies and increased minimum wage standards is important, but we don't have to wait for entire systems to change. At its heart, the issue is about income – the paychecks people receive that give them security, stability and hope for the future. Can 31 cents per hour change the world? No. But it will make things a little easier, a little more equitable for a handful of our employees. That's a start.

Is there something you can do? We hope you'll join us.

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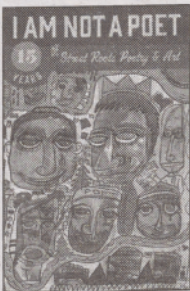
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