

# Airport workers call for better wages

*'PDX's greatest assets' are struggling on minimum wages*

BY SARAH HANSELL  
STAFF WRITER

Despite being on the job for only three years, George Van Gorder, wheelchair inspector at Portland International Airport, enjoys a senior status.

Close to 70 years old, Van Gorder is a father, a grandfather and a Vietnam veteran who wears his hat pronouncing his service proudly. In his 60s, he earned an associate degree in pharmaceutical work, but couldn't get a job in the field. At the time, his daughter was working at the airport, and encouraged him to apply.

Now, his co-workers call him "papa" — or the "Huntleigh lawyer," Huntleigh USA is the airline-contracted company he works for, providing baggage handling, wheelchair assisting, pre-board check-in screening, janitorial and other services. They call him "papa" because he's the oldest one there, he says, and the "Huntleigh lawyer" because his co-workers depend on him to advocate for them.

"They come to me with all kinds of questions," Van Gorder said. "Not just about work, but personal questions and everything like that. So yep, that's me."

In 2015, Huntleigh workers won union representation by the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) Local 49, and his co-workers nominated Van Gorder to be their union representative, to advocate for their rights and handle their grievances with the company.

The thing they tell him over and over again, is that airport workers simply cannot make ends meet on Portland's \$12 minimum wage. Far from it: The National Low Income Housing Coalition 2018 report on rental prices found that Oregon renters must earn at least \$21.77 in order to be able to afford a one-bedroom apartment.

One of his co-workers is a single mother, who has to live at home with her mother, because she can't afford to move out, even though she works full-time at the airport.

Another co-worker can't afford a car, so he takes Trimet's MAX train to the airport around 11 p.m., near the end of its run, and sleeps there until his shift begins around 3 a.m.

Bryce Pierson, also a co-worker of Van Gorder, is 26, and has been eager to live on his own for years, but just can't afford to move out of his family home.

"I need to have a life. I don't want to live with my mom and my dad anymore,"



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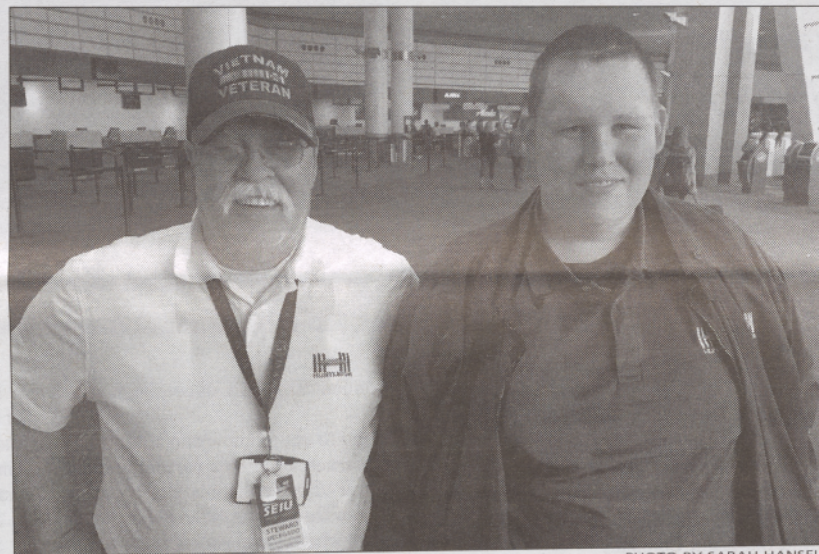


PHOTO BY SARAH HANSELL

George Van Gorder, left, and Bryce Pierson, work for the contractor Huntleigh USA at the Portland International Airport. They say their wages, and those of others working for contracted services, aren't enough to live on.

Pierson said. "It's just something I've always had my dream on; how I would put my stuff in my own place. I'm still dreaming."

Although Van Gorder is lucky, he says, because he receives Social Security, as well as health care through the VA, he isn't exempt from the struggle of surviving on minimum wage.

"There's no way, when you get \$700 every two weeks," he said. "My rent is \$1,200. That leaves me \$200 — to go for gas, to go for food, to go for insurance on the car and any other incidentals that I need," he said. "There's no way that a person can do it. And so what do you leave out? Do you leave out food this week? Or do you leave out gas, or do you leave out heat? And what happens if you have kids?"

Van Gorder is one among hundreds of Portland airport workers represented by SEIU Local 49, following in the footsteps of airport workers across the country organizing for higher wages. SEIU Local 49 represents workers at three of the companies that have contractual

relationships with the Port of Portland.

"By subcontracting these essential services — essential to run an airline and run an airport — by contracting them out to these low-wage, low-standard companies, they're able to save a lot of money and increase their profits," said Jeremy Simer, strategic researcher at SEIU Local 49.

In 2015, as a response to workers organizing with SEIU Local 49 for higher wages and better working conditions, the Port of Portland rolled out the PDX Workplace Initiative, which established a worker retention policy that helps protect workers' jobs when contractors change.

What it didn't do was raise wages for

airport workers, who are "PDX's greatest asset," according to a March 2016 press release by Chris White, Port of Portland's director of community affairs.

The call for higher wages for Port of Portland airport workers follows a national trend. In 2015, workers at the Seattle-Tacoma International Airport won a \$15 minimum wage. In Los Angeles, airport workers, who organized for higher wages, will now make at least \$17 per hour by 2021. In San Francisco, airport workers make close to \$15 per hour, and are organizing for higher wages. Airport workers in New York and New Jersey have been organizing for higher wages, and directors of their Port Authority have agreed to consider raising their minimum wage to \$19.

The Portland airport has been named the best domestic airport in the United States for six years in a row by Travel + Leisure, yet its workers are some of the lowest paid among leading West Coast airports, according to figures compiled by the union.

"They keep saying, 'Oh we're No. 1, in Portland here, because of our employees,'" Pierson said. "Well, take care of them. That's all I'm asking."

According to Steve Johnson, manager of content and media relations at the Port of

Portland, 2001 Oregon legislation prevents the Port of Portland from setting a minimum wage requirement. According to the Oregon State Legislature's website, the law "preempts all charter and statutory authority of local governments to set any minimum wage requirements."

However, the same law also makes an

exception to the rule, allowing public employers to set minimum wage requirement "in specifications for public contracts entered into." This suggests that the Port has the authority to set a minimum wage requirement for the workers at all the

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— GEORGE VAN GORDER  
UNION REPRESENTATIVE,  
HUNTLEIGH EMPLOYEE

See AIRPORT, page 13