



How Improved Partnerships between Government and Community Organizations Can Help Implement Minimum Wage Increases

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In recent years, many localities have passed ordinances raising the local minimum wage above levels mandated by federal or state laws. These new local ordinances are often accompanied by new implementation procedures to speed compliance. Some stipulate fines and penalties for noncompliant employers or establish new local agencies to investigate wage complaints from workers. Other new measures involve outreach and publicity to ensure that low-wage workers and the broader public are informed about the new minimum wage rules.

Local governments do not always act alone to carry out labor regulations. Outreach efforts may involve contracts or partnerships with community organizations to facilitate targeted outreach, much as community partnerships are used by other government agencies to encourage voter registration or enrollment in public healthcare programs. When it comes to labor policies, community organizations may be able to spread information quickly because they have ongoing ties to constituent groups within specific industries. Often, such groups have language skills or cultural capacities that government agencies lack, making it easier for the community groups to spread information about public policies to particular ethnic or racial groups. They can act as intermediaries to encourage workers to contact government agencies ready to address labor issues – including complaints about minimum wage violations.

Difficulties and Challenges

My recent research shows that partnerships are valued by policymakers and community organizations alike value implementation partnerships, but they involve various challenges:

Individual contacts versus broad information-gathering. The deliverables involved in county or city contracts require community groups to make one-on-one contacts with thousands of workers. This may shift organizational priorities toward individualized contacting as opposed to amassing and spreading in-depth information about working conditions in entire industries. The need to deal one on one with workers can, ironically, end up diverting from a core function of agency partnerships with community groups – to learn about working conditions and identify workplaces where more targeted investigations should be launched.

Insufficient resources for partner organizations. Local agencies often underestimate the effort involved in outreach plans that require paid staffers from community groups to contact thousands of workers in a brief time. When resources are insufficient and volunteers cannot be used, community organizations may have to shortchange their ongoing core missions.

Inconsistent messaging. City and county agencies provide the materials used in outreach efforts. Although this relieves community organizations from producing such materials, inconsistent messages can result. Most community organizations aiming to help workers discuss issues like wage theft or minimum wages in their own ways, which may clash with descriptions in printed materials from public agencies. For instance, agency materials typically emphasize the date and time of when a new minimum wage increase will go into effect, but may lack details about reporting requirements and other logistics involved in submitting wage claims. Agency materials can thus be problematic for community organizations focused on problem industries, where raising worker awareness about wage theft has long been a priority.

Recommendations for Improving Implementation Partnerships

A series of straightforward steps written into implementation plans and contracts could help agencies and community groups work more effectively together.

- **Agencies should allow workshops and community presentations to have equal status with individual contacting activities.** Already, such group-learning formats are included in government contracts with community organizations, but they could be made more prominent, allowing community organizations to set aside more time and resources for questions, dialogue, and fact-gathering from entire groups of workers. In implementation plans and contracts, I recommend that agencies lower the target number of individual contacts and place more emphasis on workshops and similar formats for group-learning and information dissemination.
- **Support the use of volunteers, not just paid staff from community organizations.** Most labor-focused community organizations have membership bases that could be enlisted to help in policy outreach. Enlisting these members would not only expand the number of participants involved in outreach, it would also enrich outreach by mobilizing people who have deeper, more trusting ties with low-wage workers than paid staff often do. Deployment of volunteers would increase the efficacy of outreach efforts, help community organizations quickly meet goals without disruption, and expand leadership opportunities for members of community groups.
- **Blend community organization messages into agency-produced materials.** City and county agencies should create some outreach materials explicitly focused on wage theft – and such materials could be combined with those already produced by community worker support organizations. To streamline message integration in eventual printed materials, agencies could require suggestions for messaging materials to be provided by community groups applying for implementation contracts.

All of these recommendations are meant to allow community organizations more flexibility in conducting effective worker outreach. By adopting new approaches, city and county agencies would not need to relax proper accountability and oversight. Prioritizing a high number of individual worker contacts is not the only – or the best – way for city and county agencies to evaluate implementation efforts by community organizations. Instead, agencies should ensure that partner community organizations optimally spread information and facilitate two-way communication between vulnerable workers and public officials charged with protecting them.