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Flexible Work Arrangements: Improving Job Quality and Workforce Stability for Low-Wage Workers and their Employers

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Flexible Work Arrangements: Improving Job Quality and Workforce Stability for Low-Wage Workers and their Employers

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by Liz Watson, Legislative Counsel, and Jessica Glenn, Communications Specialist, of Workplace Flexibility 2010.

This year, workers and their families across the country felt the impact of serious economic downturn, with unemployment reaching a 26-year high. While recent news suggests things may be improving, we cannot forget that for many low-wage and hourly workers—who now represent over a quarter of the U.S. workforce—the recession only exacerbated their ongoing struggle to hold down quality jobs while caring for their families.

Low-wage workers face many of the same challenges that the rest of us face in reconciling our work, family and personal lives, but for many of these workers, it’s simply a whole lot harder. Low-wage workers are more likely to face involuntary part-time work, rigid or unpredictable schedules, or night, evening and weekend work, all of which can have serious consequences for families, including unstable and inadequate child care, poor health outcomes, family instability, missed work, lost and unstable income and job loss.

A persuasive case has been made that access to various forms of time off are critical to low-wage workers’ job quality, economic security, and family and individual health. More recently, research has shown that Flexible Work Arrangements (FWAs)—including meaningful input into work schedules, as well as predictable and stable work schedules—are also important parts of the solution. Although FWAs cannot ease all the complex struggles facing low-wage workers, they are a key part of a larger solution that will increase low-wage workers’ ability to raise healthy families and achieve financial security.

FWAs can help workers provide care for young children, aging relatives, and other loved ones while remaining effective on the job. They can enable workers to stay on top of their own medical care, which reaps benefits for employees and employers alike. FWAs can also help workers access advanced job training in order to expand opportunities for meaningful work and to build family assets. For employers, FWAs help achieve a more stable and predictable workforce and improve employee engagement and productivity.
This year, WF2010 has taken a close look at the role FWAs can play in improving job quality for low-wage workers and increasing workforce stability for employers across a range of industries, occupations and work schedules. In January, we hosted a community forum in partnership with Step Up Savannah, an initiative that works to reduce pervasive poverty in the community of Savannah, Georgia as an economic development strategy. During the forum, we heard directly from local employers, nonprofit and government agency representatives and community advocates about the challenges facing Savannah’s low-wage employees—specifically, the negative consequences that arise from a lack of needed control and predictability in their work schedules. We engaged in in-depth conversations on how innovative workplace flexibility policies can help Savannah’s low-income workers maintain meaningful employment while allowing the city’s employers to reduce turnover, enhance job performance, and increase their competitive advantage.

In July, we co-hosted a briefing with the New America Foundation that examined the particular challenges low-wage workers face in balancing the vicissitudes of life with work schedules that are often rigid or unpredictable. Panelists presented the latest research on scheduling challenges and best practice solutions to these challenges from the research and business community. The briefing also highlighted the increasingly powerful business case for expanding access to flexible work arrangements for low-wage workers. Employers now implementing FWAs for hourly and low-wage workers are reducing costs associated with turnover and overtime in addition to improving workers’ satisfaction and well-being and increasing productivity. We know that FWAs make a tremendous difference to low-wage workers and their employers and yet very few low-wage workers have access to FWAs.

Our goal is to identify which types of FWAs are most salient to low-wage workers and their employers across a range of industries, employers, and occupations and develop a range of public policy ideas for making those FWAs widely available. In the private sector, innovative pilot programs have explored what types of FWAs can make a significant difference in the lives of low-wage and hourly workers and to discover which FWAs can improve business outcomes. In our Public Policy Platform on Flexible Work Arrangements released this spring, we called for the federal government to begin a pilot program requiring federal contractors to offer hourly workers at least two types of FWAs and to fund similar pilots in the private sector, with both researchers and businesses at the helm.

Although FWAs are historically associated with middle and higher-income workers, innovators across a range of perspectives are working to change that. (See an extended list of resources on FWAs for Lower-Wage Workers here). In the coming months, we hope to contribute to this dialog a robust range of policy ideas to make FWAs more widely available to low-wage workers.

For more information on Workplace Flexibility 2010’s recent work, please see our July Network News interview with Chai Feldblum and Katie Corrigan.