

## Highlights from Savannah, Georgia

### The Policy Forums:

Workplace Flexibility 2010 – a policy initiative based at Georgetown Law – is working to spur meaningful dialogue toward the creation of workplace flexibility policies that meet both employee and employer needs. As part of that process, Workplace Flexibility 2010 is hosting a series of six policy forums across the country to hear directly from local community and business leaders about the changing needs of their workforce – and to bring their perspectives and insights back to the national policy debate on workplace flexibility.

### Addressing the Needs of Savannah's Low-Income Workforce

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Workplace Flexibility 2010's fourth community policy forum was held in January 2009 in Savannah, Georgia – in partnership with Step Up Savannah, an organization that engages community members, businesses and social service agencies committed to reducing the pervasive, damaging poverty afflicting the Savannah community.

Significant and persistent poverty has plagued Savannah for over three decades. Today, nearly 35 percent of the city's households earn less than \$20,000 per year. Since 2003, Step Up Savannah has been working to develop new strategies for economic self-sufficiency and community development – to strengthen the community's workforce, create better, sustainable jobs, and support working families.

In this community policy forum, Step Up Savannah worked closely with Workplace Flexibility 2010 to explore how innovative workplace flexibility policies can help Savannah's low-income workers maintain meaningful employment – while also allowing the city's employers to reduce turnover, enhance job performance, and increase their competitive advantage.

Forum participants provided crucial insights into the challenges low-wage workers face in lacking needed control and predictability in their work schedules – and reflected on potential solutions that could meet the needs of both employers and employees. Over 65 people attended the forum, including the former chair of Savannah Electric, the human resources director from a large hotel chain, prominent community advocates from the Center for Working Families, a former manufacturing plant employee, and the general manager of IKEA's Savannah Distribution Center.

### The Low-Wage Workforce – Research and Best Practices

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To provide context for the conversation, Chai Feldblum and Elizabeth Watson from Workplace Flexibility 2010 presented an overview of the latest research on the low-wage workforce – and provided background on some of the acute challenges facing low-wage and hourly workers, including "just-in-time" scheduling, lack of control over schedules and mandatory overtime. They also explored how components of workplace

flexibility – specifically Flexible Work Arrangements (FWAs) and Time Off – can serve as solutions to those challenges.

Participants then heard from two local community members working to develop strategies to strengthen low-income employees' attachment to the workforce. To provide a private sector employer's perspective, Jill Fitzgerald – Human Resources Director for Ikea's Distribution Center in Savannah – outlined some of the innovative scheduling practices the company has implemented; including organizing focus groups with employees before making broad schedule changes; seeking volunteers for overtime; offering an optional compressed workweek; creating an open-door policy for employees to communicate their scheduling concerns to their supervisors; and providing on-site job training and education.

Rebecca Yocum from Department of Family and Children's Services (DFCS) then provided a public service agency perspective on the challenges facing Savannah's low-wage employees. She explained that many workers qualify for and receive critical public benefits like food stamps, Medicaid and subsidized childcare – but routinely lose those benefits because they cannot take time off from work to keep regular appointments with benefits offices. To address this issue, DFCS is now piloting a program to allow online and telephone applications and recertification for public benefits. The program has had some limited success – but Yocum shared that many low-income employees may not be able to make calls during work hours or have access to a reliable phone.

## Workplace Flexibility – Challenges and Opportunities for Employers and Employees

After these presentations, staff from Workplace Flexibility 2010 facilitated a number of in-depth, small group discussions. Participants were asked to address the following questions:

- 1. What are some of the challenges low-wage workers face outside of work that can impact their ability to hold a job?**
- 2. What are some of the challenges employers face in maintaining a stable workforce?**

In response to Question # 1, participants identified a wide range of issues facing low-wage workers – including child care availability, health care, and housing – but also touched on a variety of challenges specifically related to control of work scheduling and time off. Participants identified that:

- Low-wage employees are often unable or unwilling to communicate openly with their employers and supervisors about their work schedules, and they fear possible adverse consequences if they raise concerns or complaints about balancing the demands of work with their responsibilities at home.
- Low-wage employees often cannot access public benefits, medical care, and other critical services because of inflexible work schedules and lack of communication with employers (in addition to a lack of adequate transportation)
- Low-wage earners often cannot meet their financial needs with just one job, but are sometimes unable to maintain a second position because of employer prohibitions or inflexible schedules.

In response to Question # 2, participants identified the following challenges that often face businesses employing primarily low-income, hourly workers.

- Higher turnover rates among low-wage workers can put pressure on employers and cause them to be less invested in the individuals who make up their workforce.
- Employers are often unaware of their employees' personal and family needs due to a lack of ability or willingness to communicate about scheduling and other issues.
- Employers function in an extremely competitive marketplace – and many cannot afford to stay in business while also providing overtime pay, flexibility in scheduling, and time off.

After these discussions, participants were then asked to address a third and final question:

- 3. How can government support employers that want to implement innovative scheduling practices to help achieve a more stable workforce?**

Participants reflected on how Flexible Work Arrangements – including those designed specifically to support advanced notice of schedules, employee input with respect to work schedules, and employers seeking volunteers first for overtime hours – could help low-wage workers secure meaningful, lasting employment and help employers maintain a more stable workforce. In discussing this question, participants shared ideas and experiences that are now helping to shape Workplace Flexibility 2010's public policy recom-

recommendations for meeting the needs of low-wage workers and their employers. In order to provide meaningful support to the workforce, participants suggested that we must:

- Ensure that public policies encourage the opening of lines of communication between employers and employees around needs for flexible, predictable scheduling and time off to meet crucial personal and family obligations
- Ensure that public policies encourage the sharing of best practices and success stories, particularly those that address the needs and challenges of specific industries
- Ensure that public policies support the extension of grants and other incentives to encourage employers to experiment with and implement meaningful flexible scheduling programs that are designed to fit both employer and employee needs
- Ensure that public policies take into account the challenges faced by low-wage workers who must access public benefits in order to care for themselves and their families
- Ensure that public policies encourage employers to seek volunteers first for filling overtime, so that some employees may choose to work extra hours while others can maintain predictability in their schedules
- Ensure that public policies can ensure that employers have complete, comprehensive information on how current laws impact their practices around scheduling and time off.