



VIRGINIA INTERFAITH CENTER FOR PUBLIC  
POLICY

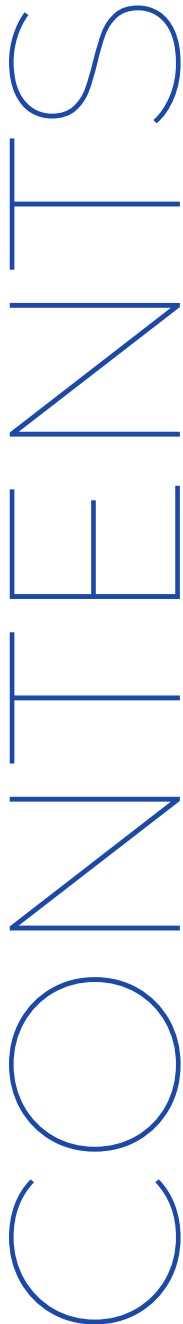
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# Subcontracted, Not Second-Class

A REPORT ON THE STATE OF SUBCONTRACTED  
WORKERS AT DULLES (IAD) AND NATIONAL  
(DCA) AIRPORTS

2022

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# INTRODUCTION

There are more than 5,000 subcontracted service workers at Northern Virginia's two airports, Dulles International Airport (IAD), also referred to as Dulles, and Ronald Reagan Washington National (DCA), also referred to as National. They include wheelchair attendants, baggage handlers, terminal cleaners, cabin cleaners, and non-TSA security. Their employers are not required to provide them with paid sick days or health insurance. As a result, many do not get paid sick days or health insurance from their employers. This creates a crisis for the largely Black, Brown, and immigrant workforce performing critical jobs who must choose between taking care of themselves or their children and getting paid. Just 3.5 days of unpaid sick time is equivalent to a family losing a month's worth of groceries. Subcontracted IAD and DCA employees are living in one of the most expensive areas in the nation while making less than the Washington, D.C. minimum wage. Many have lost their lives due to COVID-19 and/or the lack of access to health care.

The Metro Washington Airport Authority (MWAA) can set a standard to ensure that all airport workers have paid sick days and employer-provided health insurance. The Authority has the ability to set such a standard that would allow workers to protect themselves, their families, and airline passengers.

# THE DELEGATION

The Virginia Interfaith Center for Public Policy (VICPP) is the commonwealth's oldest and largest faith-based network advocating economic, racial, and social justice in Virginia's policies and practices.

Access to paid sick days and health care has long been a priority issue for VICPP. In 2018, the organization worked in coalition with fellow advocates and mobilized historic religious support for Medicaid expansion. In 2019, VICPP helped enroll new participants. In 2021, VICPP helped expand Medicaid prenatal coverage to 6,000 undocumented Virginia residents.

For the last three years, VICPP has been working with the Virginia Coalition for Paid Sick Days to create a statewide paid sick day standard in Virginia. In 2021, the General Assembly approved paid sick day coverage for 30,000 home care workers, but a full standard has yet to be enacted statewide.

Consequently, when VICPP learned that subcontracted workers at airports were seeking paid sick days and health care coverage, its leadership wanted to learn more. VICPP believes all workers deserve paid sick days, livable wages, and affordable health care.

# THE DELEGATION

On August 11, 2022, subcontracted airport workers from DCA and IAD met with faith-rooted leaders and community members from the Northern Virginia area to listen to workers, learn of their need for paid sick days and health care, and develop ways the faith community can support their congregants and neighbors. The members of the faith delegation were:

- Brooke Taylor (United Church of Christ),
- Rev. Tara Spuhler McCabe (Presbyterian),
- Rev. Dr. Art Cribbs (United Church of Christ),
- Anne Murphy (Catholic),
- Debra Allen (Christian, non-denominational),
- Clayton Sinyai (Catholic),
- Hillary Horn (Jewish), and
- Karen Menichelli ( Jewish).

Workers have asked that their names be kept private to prevent possible retaliation. Workers mentioned in the report will be identified only by their job titles and places of work (IAD or DCA).

# WORKER CONCERNS

Workers seek paid sick leave, affordable employer-provided health insurance, and a pathway to a livable wage stemming from their right to live in dignity as they keep the global economy running. The following are the concerns expressed to the delegation.

## Paid Sick Leave

“I have worked at Dulles a long time. Recently, I was diagnosed with breast cancer. I was finally able to get surgery and should have stayed home for a long time to heal. But I couldn’t afford to take days off without pay. I came back to work after 15 days, and I was in so much pain. I have children and a family to provide for. Without health insurance and paid sick days, it’s impossible.”

SK., IAD, wheelchair attendant (*translated into English*)

Nationwide, those making the lowest wages are the least likely to have paid sick days, and the workforce at IAD and DCA is no exception. This means workers must constantly decide whether to work while sick or stay home and not get paid and potentially not be able to pay rent or buy food. All airport workers, regardless of their positions, deserve paid time off when they are sick.

As a Presbyterian Ministry, PCUSA- which is a partner in the National Council of Churches- recognizes the responsibility as disciples of Jesus Christ, the One who came “that all may have life, and have it abundantly,” that we are witnesses and advocates with Christians and all who strive, work, and deserve life abundantly. As a Christian, this never means simply more money. It means a life where mothers, fathers, sons, daughters, and all of humanity are able to work at their best without fear of losing a job and sacrificing their health. In listening to employees from IAD and DCA, I learned that personal sacrifices have been made beyond what needs to be expected so that our airplanes are safe, our luggage is routed to where it needs to be, and a person is able to be transported respectfully from one gate to the next. The total health and well-being of a person’s heart and body are essential to having a strong and vibrant work environment. Anyone in a position to raise wages and provide affordable health care for employees would benefit from weighing the outcomes of work performed out of fear versus work done out of abundance, respect, and opportunity.

**REV. TARA SPUHLER MCCABE (PRESBYTERIAN)**

# WORKER CONCERNS

## Health Insurance

“In my job, I work long hours and don’t have paid sick days or affordable employer-provided health insurance. If I want to get it, it’s very expensive. Every day this impacts me because I have to keep putting off care like dental work and regular checkups. I also have a chronic condition that is very painful – sometimes it flares up and I just have to limp through it. Even though I need medical care, it’s too expensive without insurance. It’s more painful to lose the pay than to work through the pain.”

SH., IAD, baggage encoder

Everyone needs affordable health care. Virginia (and the U.S.) has a patchwork of health care coverage, including Medicaid, Medicare, and employer-provided health insurance. However, many contracted workers at Dulles and National lack health insurance. Research by **32BJ SEIU** found that one contractor operating at DCA and IAD provided health insurance benefits to just 17 out of 313 bargaining unit employees (5%). Health insurance plans often come with premiums and deductibles that workers cannot afford, leading them not to use employer plans. An airport-wide requirement for employers to provide quality health insurance plans – similar to policies adopted at other airports across the country – is urgently needed.



During the listening session, I was entrusted with the sacred stories of men and women who are employed at companies that are contracted by airlines and the Metropolitan Washington Airport Authority (MWAA). I was reminded of the scripture selection from Luke that I heard proclaimed in my church last Sunday: “...much will be required of the person entrusted with much, and still, more will be demanded of the person entrusted with more.” (Luke 12: 48) Several people shared stories of their personal experiences as workers at Dulles International Airport and Reagan National Airport. A common thread in all the stories was the commodification of staffers by employers. Most are hourly paid employees with virtually no employee benefits such as employer-provided health insurance, paid time off for illness, or bereavement leave

Workers are uniting to advocate for themselves. They want fair treatment as loyal and reliable employees. They are asking for health insurance and paid time off for themselves and to protect their colleagues and the public who they serve through their jobs.

**ANNE MURPHY (CATHOLIC)**

# WORKER CONCERNS

## Livable Wages

“Recently, I lost my 26-year-old daughter-in-law to COVID-19. She left behind a child who is only four years old. Before she died, my son called me, but I couldn’t get off of work until my shift was over. I finished at 5 A.M. and rushed to see her, but she had passed moments before, at 5:25. I did not get to see her before she died. The saddest part is that I have had to keep working anyway because I need to make money. Even though I work incredibly hard, I still couldn’t afford to pay for all of her funeral costs. It was not my employer but many people in this room (fellow airport workers) who helped me pay.”

Y., DCA, Non-TSA security *(translated into English)*

Northern Virginia is the most expensive place to live in Virginia and one of the more expensive in the nation. Workers and their families need wages that can allow them to pay for housing, food, transportation, and child care. According to **Living Wage for Us**, a sustainable wage in this area for a single person is \$31.66. The current base wage rate set by MWAA is \$14.25/hour. Although the base wage is set to be \$15.00/hour in January of 2023, unless MWAA amends its policy there will be no further wage increases. International airports that serve the nation’s capital must make paying living wages a priority.

Listening to the stories of airport workers yesterday was an eye-opening experience for me. Many shared heartfelt testimonies about how inadequate wages and benefits negatively affect their lives. It was heartbreaking listening to Y. share the intimate details of having to stay at work while their loved one was dying from COVID-19. They could not afford to miss the day's wages. Nobody should have to choose between their job and caring for their family.

Airport workers do not receive employer-provided health insurance, paid sick days, or a pathway to livable wages. This leads workers to sacrifice their well-being in order to survive. Workers who have been deemed "essential" should have the ability to care for themselves and their families with dignity. Airports, and their contractors, must commit to comprehensive compensation packages for their employees.

**BROOKE TAYLOR, MDIV. (UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST)**

# RECOMMENDATIONS

The Metropolitan Washington Airport Authority has the power to establish policies for the airlines and businesses that operate at the two Northern Virginia airports. Essential workers at IAD and DCA need and deserve affordable employer-provided health insurance, paid sick days, and a pathway to a livable wage. The delegation and VICPP recommend that MWAA implement policies to ensure all essential airport workers can live and work with dignity.

## NEXT STEPS

The delegation and VICPP agree to:

- Share the report and recommendations with MWAA.
- Seek meetings with the MWAA board members.
- Educate the broader community about their neighbors' working conditions through forums and the media.

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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All 32BJ SEIU members who attended the delegation and whose bravery and impact inspired this report.

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