



Struggling to Make Ends Meet: A Report on Superior Health Linens Workers

**A Public Panel Report
August 2007**

Panel Participants

**Scott McDonell, Dane County Board Chair, Panel Convener
Kathleen Falk, Dane County Executive, Panel Co-Chair
Tim Gruber, Madison Alderperson, District 11
John Hendrick, First Vice Chair, Dane County
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Panel Summary

According to workers of Superior Health Linens who testified at a public panel on June 27, 2007:

- **Superior Health Linens fails to pay family wages, even to long term workers.**

Superior workers who testified had wages that ranged from \$7.95/hr to a high of \$10.25/hr. Workers and their families have been forced to rely on food banks or sometimes go hungry, work second jobs when they are able to, and either rely on family members for child care or are unable to find affordable child care.

- **Superior's low wages prevent workers from participating in the Company's health insurance plan, leading to deferred or delayed care, medical debt, and reliance on publicly funded care.**

Most workers were uninsured, leading to delayed or deferred medical care, or reliance on school "health days" and publicly funded medical insurance for their families. For one worker the lack of health insurance led to an added financial burden when her wages were garnished after she was unable to pay for an emergency room visit.

- **Superior uses fear and intimidation as a management tool.**

Supervisors or leads rely on direct and implied threats of discipline or firing to coerce workers whose behavior and conduct appears to be well within reason. One worker reported that when she was five months pregnant supervisors made threatening comments about firing her because she was going to the bathroom too frequently. Another worker was threatened with discipline when he explained that he could not perform overtime on very short notice due to family responsibilities.

- **Conditions at the Company pose concern for worker health and safety and the health of workers' families.**

Workers inside the plant related that the bathrooms are very dirty, there is no place to shower, and that very high heat becomes a concern in the summer since the plant's doors are kept shut and there is no air conditioning. All workers agreed that there is no supervisory or management training on the potentially dangerous equipment in the plant. Rather, workers report spending a "few minutes" training other workers on equipment.

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Introduction

Superior Health Linens has been at the center of controversy for over a year, with allegations circulating about poverty wages, lack of health insurance, and a work environment in which fear has been fostered. The company, which provides health care linen services to nursing homes and hospitals, is based in Dane County, as are several of its customers.

Over the past year findings from several government bodies confirmed that there were significant problems at the company's Madison plant, ranging from health and safety problems to violations of the County's Living Wage ordinance and workers' rights to organize. Dane County, following its own investigation of the company last summer, opted to contract with a more socially responsible linen provider instead of with Superior.

However, our concern about the situation at the company has only increased with time, as claims about fear, intimidation and harsh working conditions continued to surface in newspaper articles.

On June 27, 2007 a public panel was convened by Dane County Chairman Scott McDonell, and Co-Chaired by County Executive Kathleen Falk, to allow workers to speak directly to concerned politicians in front of community members. All Superior workers present were invited by the Chair to address the panel.

Our review of the information that workers submitted through oral and written testimony indicates:

- Superior workers have been unable to support their families on the wages they receive from the company
- Superior workers have been unable to afford the company's health insurance plan, and so were left uninsured or dependent on public programs
- Working conditions continued to pose health and safety concerns
- The company has responded to workers with a combination of threats and intimidation

Much of what we heard is consistent with the findings of Dane County's audit of the company last year.

We believe that this report will be especially enlightening for Dane County area customers, many of whom are not-for profit nursing homes, hospitals and care centers. As not-for-profit, charitable institutions, they have a mission of caring for all members of the community, and understand the harm that is done to us all when workers cannot support their families and do not have access to affordable health care.

We call upon the customers of Superior to assume their role as leaders, helping us ensure that all members of our community are treated fairly, and with dignity and respect.

Failure to Pay Family Wages

Superior Health Linens fails to pay family wages, even to long term workers who have devoted more than 5 years to the company. Superior workers who testified had wages that ranged from \$7.95 an hour to a high of \$10.25 an hour. Many spoke of the lack of consistent wage increases, with some long-term workers going years without a raise. Several workers mentioned that two recent increases given by the company to all Madison workers (one last year, the other this spring) were the first they had had in several years. They also noted that the raises came in response to worker organizing.

Carlos Torres, who has worked at the company for over 8 years, and is the father of a toddler and a baby, spoke of his family's desperate circumstances as he attempts to support them on \$9.95 an hour, or \$1200 a month (after taxes and deductions).



We have to go to food pantries to make it. It's really difficult. I come home tired, I don't make enough, and sometimes I just feel so useless.

The salary is not enough to support my family. Because my wife has medical problems she can't work. Right now I am the only support for my family. My rent is \$665 per month. Then there are baby supplies. And gas is so expensive. The only thing I bring home is about \$1200 per month. We have to go to food pantries to make it. It's really difficult. I come home tired, I don't make enough, and sometimes I just feel so useless.

Other workers try to hold down a second job to make ends meet. Superior's long shifts and its demands that workers perform overtime on short notice make it hard, however, to keep a second job.

Sometimes I have to work a second job to pay all my bills. But it's really hard to go to a second job right after a 10 ½ hour shift at the plant. (Alejandro Osorio-Canales)

Sometimes the supervisor says, "you should be able to stay here and work a little longer," and you answer "no, I have a different [second] job to go to." They say, "where do you want to work, do you want to work here or at your other job?" It's not fair. If we work two jobs it's because we have a family. (Leonardo Nunez)

Hired at \$6.45 an hour, Imelda Gutierrez now earns \$7.95 an hour, doing some of the heaviest work in the plant, folding heavy blankets and towels. At the time of the panel she was on extended unpaid maternity leave because she could not find affordable child care for her baby.

I worked one day [following the end of her maternity leave] and then I asked for more leave. What could I do? Nobody is able to take care of my child. Although my husband has a union job, our life is still difficult. There are so many bills to pay. Diapers alone cost \$40 per week. They just increased our rent by \$15 a month.

Living Without Affordable Health Coverage

Very low wages prevent Superior workers from participating in the Company's health insurance plan. None of the workers who testified had health insurance from the company. The one person who did have subsidized employer insurance received it through her spouse, who had a union job at Meriter Hospital. Workers who are uninsured have denied themselves care, have gone into medical debt, or rely on publicly funded health and dental care.

Graciela Hernandez, who earns one of the higher wages of \$10.25 an hour, explains that although she and her husband both work at Superior, together they cannot afford the health insurance for them or their daughter. Graciela, who was taken to the emergency room with a kidney infection, ended up being sued by the hospital in small claims court because she could not pay the bill. Her wages were then garnished.

I work in the clean room where we put together surgery packets for the hospitals. We need medical insurance. I have a daughter who is 8 years old. We don't have any insurance for her. We can't take her to the dentist either. Once or twice a year, her school has a "health day" and there is someone there who checks her teeth.

I just finished paying a hospital bill of \$3500. I had a serious infection where I had to go to the emergency room. The hospital sent it to collections because I just couldn't pay the bill. They garnished my wages to pay the bill. They took something like \$150 from each paycheck until the bill was paid.

Carlos Torres is one worker whose wife and children receive publicly funded health care. He, however, remains uninsured. He did not go to the doctor when he was pricked by a needle at work, and lives in fear of becoming ill because he is the sole bread winner for the family.

About a year and a half ago, I was stuck by a needle that was in the dryer filters. I told my supervisor, I said, look I just had a prick



I just finished paying a hospital bill of \$3500. I had to go to the emergency room.... I just couldn't pay the bill. They garnished my wages to pay the bill.

cleaning the dryer filter. He took a yellow piece of paper and took my name... What happens in the long run if I have been infected? Who's going to take care of me or pay for expenses? They never sent me to the doctor. I don't have health insurance. Thank God my kids and wife have health insurance through the government. But not me. It's really tough. What would happen to my family if I got sick?

Alejandro Osorio-Canales does not have health insurance and puts off getting medical attention, even when he knows that he should get help.

Without health coverage, when I get sick I just have to take care of myself. Last winter I had a really bad cough for over a month. I didn't try to get medical help because the emergency room costs too much.

Guadalupe Carillo is one of the several longer-term workers who have never been able to afford health care from the company.

I return home with backache every day. I would like to have health insurance for my children. But it's too expensive. ... They just don't treat us well."

Imelda Gutierrez noted that her husband's union job at Meriter Hospital, which provides affordable health insurance, was a major relief for them.

I just had my baby at Meriter. My husband works at Meriter in housekeeping, so we both have insurance. If it wasn't for his health insurance, we could not have insurance because Superior's is too expensive for us.

Fear and Intimidation: A Management Tool

Workers relate that fear and anxiety is always present, with management responding to many situations with threats or attempts to coerce workers. This occurs even when worker requests or actions are completely reasonable given the circumstances. The reliance on coercive tactics is indicative of a general lack of respect for workers.

When I was five months pregnant they didn't let me go to the bathroom. And when I had to go, they would say, "Well if you have to go to the bathroom, why don't you just leave your job?" How can they tell that to a pregnant woman? How can they think of

firing someone over that? (Imelda Gutierrez)

Today they were trying to make me afraid. Because supposedly the conveyor broke down where the clothes come out [so the work had not been completed]. A supervisor asked me to stay longer, just right before the end of my shift. I told him I couldn't stay. I have my kids and my wife to take care of and I have to be there at a certain time. "I am going to lodge a complaint against you," he said. (Carlos Torres)

In addition, the company has created specific fear around union organizing. The company's settlement with the National Labor Relations Board on 21 charges of violating worker's rights last year has not, according to all the workers, decreased that fear.

We need to improve things, but many of my co-workers are afraid to speak up. My co-workers think that when the supervisors figure out that they support the union, the company will come down on them.

Very underhandedly the management approaches people and says, "You know, the union really isn't going to help anything, the union doesn't really work".

Health and Safety Concerns

Conditions at the Company pose concerns for worker health and safety and the health of worker's families.

Superior workers clean health care linens that are soiled with human body fluids and feces. They are therefore at risk of exposure to blood borne pathogens, particularly if they work with soiled linens or encounter improperly discarded sharps.

Workers spoke of their concerns about company practices and conditions that put them and potentially their families at risk of infection.

According to Carlos Torres,

I worked in soil, sorting clothing. I worked there for four months [before he was moved to the dryers]. (...)When one picks [sorts]



When I was five months pregnant they didn't let me go to the bathroom. And when I had to go, they would say, "Well if you have to go to the bathroom, why don't you just leave your job?"

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there are gloves, excrement, blood, hypodermic needles, everything. And it flies over peoples heads, it's all over the place. And now that I work with the dryers I still see gloves and needles.
...

When the union stepped in, that's when management told us to put on things to protect ourselves.

Superior workers inside St. Mary's Hospital wear their work clothes home, despite the fact that their work involves collecting and loading soiled linens.*

Says Graciela Hernandez, whose husband works for Superior at St. Mary's,

I don't like him coming home and touching our daughter. He works in the same clothes that he wears home. I don't think he should be wearing the same clothes home after he wears them to work to pick up dirty clothes and linens.

Leonardo Nunez, who works with Graciela's husband inside St. Mary's Hospital for Superior was also worried about the potential of infecting his family.

We can't take off our [work] clothes at the end of the day. We can take disease and illness home.

All workers who testified also shared the opinion that the bathrooms at the plant itself were "very dirty," posing a risk of worker-to-worker transmission of illnesses.

The company seems to be slow to respond to other health and safety related needs.

While Carlos Torres reported (as noted above) that he was never sent to the doctor following a needle stick, Imelda Gutierrez also experienced a slow response to her request for a change of work assignment when she was pregnant.

When I was five months pregnant I asked for a change of position but my supervisor was unwilling. No one wanted my post because

*We have learned that soon after the panel was held the company began to offer protective coverings to workers inside St. Mary's Hospital.

the work was too heavy. They waited two months, until I was 7 months pregnant, to change my position.

Many workers also raised the issue of extremely high temperatures inside the plant during the summer months.

It's very hot inside the plant. If it feels like 90 outside, it feels like 110 inside. ... We walk out covered in sweat.

The plant is like an oven, the heat just never lets up. We have fans, but all they do is blow hot air around. So it's better if we don't even use them.

Workers' description of a lack of training on equipment particularly troubled the panel.

When asked whether workers received training from supervisors or management on how to operate their equipment safely and properly, all workers replied that they had not. Instead, they agreed that it was typical for workers to train new employees themselves. Some reported that they "spent a few minutes" doing this. Workers also expressed uncertainty about whether supervisors even knew how to operate the machines.

Conclusion

The testimony we received points to on-going problems at the company that we believe demand a concerted and urgent response. Very low wages, reliance on public and private assistance to make ends meet, going without medical care or having wages garnished to pay off medical debt when one is already on the cusp of poverty: these are the realities of Superior Health Linens workers lives.

But while low wages and lack of access to health insurance have significant impacts for workers and the larger community, workers' descriptions of the fostering of fear by management is more disturbing still. Superior's management has responded with threats when workers expressed needs related to families or second jobs that meant they could not feasibly perform overtime on short notice. Management answered a pregnant woman's need to visit the bathroom with implied threats of firing. Workers report that management informs workers that unionization will be useless, while workers fear retaliation if they are openly pro-union.

Taken together, the low wages, lack of access to affordable health care, slow response to workers' health related needs, and cultivation of fear are indicative of the company's disrespect for workers and refusal to acknowledge their basic human dignity.