

Tabled Information - Reference 140/13(H) - Muriel Tuniho

LIVING WAGE SUBMISSION TO WELLINGTON CITY COUNCIL

Kia ora koutou. My name is Muriel Tunoho and I am the National Coordinator of Health Care Aotearoa, a national network of primary health services serving low-income populations. In Wellington City the Newtown Union Health Service and Ora Toa are members of our organisation.

Healthcare Aotearoa is part of the living wage movement and our submission is focussed on this issue. Because a living wage is a health issue – in fact it is a matter of life and death.

It is well known that poverty, including low wages take years off a person's life.

In New Zealand, we generally enjoy good and improving health.

But our good health is not evenly spread.

A disproportional amount of illness, hospitalisations and early deaths occur amongst people on low incomes, and in the Maori and Pacific communities.

We also know that action taken by government and society really matter. Between the late 1980s and the late 1990s improvement in life expectancy for people on low incomes, Maori and Pacific did not improve.

This was a period where benefits were reduced, unemployment was high, and wage growth for low income workers nearly stalled.

We are now in a similar period – alarming figures released last year by the Ministry of Social development show New Zealand has reached the highest level of household income inequality ever in our history. Wellington, which has the highest median wage in the country, is also one of the top areas for income inequality.

We are now the most unfair our society has ever been. This unfairness is also seen in the way health services are delivered.

When compared with other similar countries, low income people in New Zealand have worse access to health care than people in UK, Canada, Australia, Netherlands ...only better than America which is the world's basket case in access to care.

This unfairness, in household inequality and access to healthcare will impact on the life chances of poor people and people on low wages. It will mean they will experience more illness, and earlier deaths. This is unacceptable.

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Health Care Aotearoa has a long and proud history dedicated to achieving equity. Because of this and as a worker in the health system and vulnerable communities for many years, it is difficult to stand aside and watch.

Knowing our history and the health impact of this unfairness, it is every bit as real as watching a silent bus crash, but this bus holds the lives of thousands of people.

The solutions/ the treatment is not easy. First we need to get the diagnosis right.

We need to consider “Why are people on low wages dying earlier?”

A group of the wisest people in global health got together a couple of years ago and came up with this diagnosis:

“This unequal distribution of health-damaging experiences is not in any sense a ‘natural’ phenomenon. It is the result of a toxic combination of poor social policies and programmes, unfair economic arrangements, and bad politics”.

So what then is the treatment?

We don't yet have a cure for this, but some treatments help a lot.

We need to act on those things that we know.

We need to make a living wage as non negotiable in our political system as high inflation, GDP growth.

We also need to rebuild the institutions that support low income workers.

We also need to acknowledge **what we don't know** and collectively problem solve.

We do not currently have global solutions for a fair economy, a fair society, and a sustainable planet.

But we can act locally with solutions that deliver a decent income for people in Wellington.

As a health organisation, supporting our members serving many vulnerable communities, we support the living wage.

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We are very concerned that low income workers are currently on a dying wage and this is ethically and morally unacceptable.

We urge the Wellington City Council to:

- Support the principle of the living wage.
- Implement a living wage for Wellington City Council employees and through its procurement policies for employees of those organisations it contracts to for services.
- Work with the Living Wage Wellington Coalition to see how we can make Wellington a living wage city together.