



Building a Social Services Ladder to Career Advancement

A report by Sierra Lewandowski, Lina Moe, and James A. Parrott

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Sierra Lewandowski is a research assistant at the Center and a graduate student in public and urban policy at the Milano School of Policy, Management and Environment.

Lina Moe is a research associate at the Center and a graduate student in economics at the New School for Social Research.

James A. Parrott is Director of Economic and Fiscal Policies at the Center for New York City Affairs at The New School.

Cover Design by **Ana Holschuh**.

Photography by [Christina @ wocintechchat.com](mailto:Christina@wocintechchat.com)

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Center for
New York City
Affairs

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Center for New York City Affairs
72 Fifth Avenue, 6th floor
New York, NY 10011
212-229-5418
centernyc@newschool.edu
www.centernyc.org

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1. Introduction

New York City has long contracted with nonprofits to provide essential social services to a broad swathe of New Yorkers. Social service sector nonprofits have typically faced significant workforce retention and recruitment problems, and before the pandemic frequently were unable to fill positions altogether. The resulting discontinuities in service delivery staffing stemmed from the high-stress nature of these jobs, inadequate and unequal wages and benefits, and limited career advancement prospects.

Building internal structures within social service nonprofits for staff promotion would allow workers to advance within their fields and stabilize the workforce. A social services job ladder, therefore, would benefit workers engaged in this sector, the New Yorkers they serve, and the City government that relies on them. A robust career ladder would also help address stark pay disparities currently facing workers in this the sector and ensure investment in a workforce composed largely of women of color.

While the pandemic has understandably focused the attention of City government and nonprofits on communities affected by the public health emergency and economic dislocation, the crisis also makes clear the need to appropriately invest in essential social service workers whom we rely so heavily on, not only in emergencies but also day in and day out. The economic impact of the pandemic has made City and State government budgets tighter than ever. Yet when we emerge from this crisis, valuing and investing in the essential social services workforce should be a top priority. The City has developed an initial stage of a Social Services Career Ladder Program (SSCLP) that was set to launch in the fall of 2020 but has been delayed due to the pandemic. This report reviews pre-pandemic staffing trends and challenges in the nonprofit social services sector and makes the policy case for a sector-wide social services career ladder that will be essential in post-pandemic New York.

In City Fiscal Year 2020, the City of New York contracted out \$5.1 billion in social services to nonprofits in a wide range of program areas, including services for the homeless, children in foster care, seniors, and youth programs. These contracts also include mental health services, AIDS-related services, and employment programs.¹ (See Appendix Figure 1.) Employing nearly

¹ We refer to this grouping as “social services,” these are services funded under contracts administered by the Departments of Social Services (DSS), Homeless Services (DHS), Health and Mental Hygiene (DOHMH), Youth and Community Development (DYCD), Department for the Aging (DFTA), and Administration for Children’s Services (ACS.) We exclude Head Start, childcare, and home health services from this total. Childcare and Head Start services have recently been put under the administration of the Department of Education and an Early Childhood Career Ladder is already in place. We exclude home health services that are provided by social services nonprofits since these services are funded under Medicaid, and the home health aide workforce is fairly distinct

60,000 nonprofit sector workers, the workforce engaged by these City contracts is predominately made up of women (67 percent) and persons of color (68 percent).

While social services employment has grown in the past decade, wages across the industry remain low. Employment in City-contracted social services has increased faster than overall private sector job growth in the past decade, reflecting the importance of providing expanded social services across a range of program areas to the city's population. Yet despite the high average level of education of its workforce (63 percent of the workforce has at least a four-year college degree), the sector has relatively low salary levels. Even with funding increases provided through the City budget in recent years, inflation-adjusted median wages grew much more slowly in social services over the past decade than for the private sector overall in New York City. Additionally, there exist pronounced pay disparities along lines of race within the social services sector between workers with bachelor's degrees in similar occupations.

Raising the compensation of nonprofit workers would aid retention and recruitment. Equally important is the need for the sector to provide opportunities to redress pay disparities between employees of color and white employees. Organizations should analyze pay disparities among their staff and commit to closing these gaps. City contracts can also support racial equity. In addition, installing sufficient supports for women of color with bachelor's degrees to attain master's degrees (an education level where pay disparity disappears between women of color and white women in the social services sector) would be another important step. Establishing a sector-wide career ladder is key to systematically providing greater education and career advancement opportunities for the City-funded social services sector, for those seeking to move up to better-paying jobs that require a master's degree, and for entry-level workers committed to pursuing careers in nonprofit social services. A social services career ladder will not only aid retention and recruitment but will likely also improve the quality of service delivery and support the City's objectives of alleviating poverty and enhancing broader economic opportunities.

2. What is a career ladder and why is it important?

The social services sector must organize to support and invest in its workforce. To do this, a sector-wide career ladder should be implemented for City-contracted social service nonprofits.

from the broader nonprofit social services workforce. Home health aide (and personal care aide) services, particularly that part under the Consumer Directed Personal Assistance Program (CDPAP), have expanded rapidly in recent years. In many cases, the "employers" under CDPAP home health aides are just fiscal intermediaries. As the City's Independent Budget Office has noted, the growth in home health care services employment accounted for nearly a quarter of all private sector job growth in 2017 and almost a third of private job gains in 2018. New York City Independent Budget Office, *Past as Prologue: Revised Histories and Extraordinary Trends in the New York City Economy*, May 2019.

Given the City’s funding role in the social services, such a career ladder requires active support and financing from the City.

A career ladder functions by establishing “explicit pathways” for entry-level workers to be promoted to mid- and higher-level positions within an organization. Each “rung” of the ladder coincides with a designated position title and specific levels of responsibility, authority, and/or compensation. Career ladders help to codify consistency across job titles, qualification requirements, and pay, while making transparent to staff the organizational norms for advancement.² While the social services sector comprises a diverse range of jobs, enacting a sector-wide job ladder would provide clear guidelines for advancement and assist with retention, recruitment, development, and occupational advancement within the diverse sector of social service nonprofits.

According to the New York City Labor Market Information Service (LMIS) “Social Services Career Ladders Report” of January 2018, hiring managers identified the unmet “desire to obtain career advancement” as among the greatest reasons for staff turnover.³ The LMIS report details the possibility of career ladders for specific program areas within social services nonprofits. In homeless services, for example, three tiers of employment are identified: “intake worker”; “case worker, employment/housing specialist” (job descriptions constituting a single tier); and “supervisor, director.” These employment levels correspond to specific occupational responsibilities, experience and educational requirements, and bracketed pay. The LMIS report suggests the need for increased tuition and test preparation support so that entry- and mid-level workers can advance to higher tiers of employment.

Well-managed organizations make employees aware of advancement opportunities through the career ladder. In addition, detailed understanding of a staffer’s specific growth potential in an organization helps increase individual levels of retention and satisfaction. Investing in professional development through training, transparency, and programming will also assist with overall organizational productivity. A career ladder can improve workplace culture, staff morale, and service offerings. Investing in the “quality of jobs” also promises to translate into an increase in the “quality of services” provided by nonprofit organizations.⁴

While the career ladder should be enacted sector-wide, it must be responsive to individual organizational needs and offerings. The social service nonprofit sector is extremely diverse. Organizations vary in their program areas, capacities, governing structures, and development supports for staff. The most common programs offered within the sector include foster care

² Fitzgerald, Joan. *Moving Up in the New Economy*. A Century Foundation Book. 2006, p. 1.

³ Bui, Ofonama. *Social Services Career Ladders Report*. New York City Labor Market Information Service. 2018, p. 13.

⁴ Fitzgerald, p.19.

services, youth development, childcare, senior services, supportive housing, health and mental health services, domestic violence and assault services, and economic development. Many organizations provide multi-service offerings, though some focus on single services. The enactment of a career ladder must prioritize adaptability to ensure the successful implementation across diverse organizations.

3. Sector-wide challenges

Nonprofit organizations have long faced difficulty maintaining staff. Staff turnover harms an organization's ability to provide high-quality support to those who rely on imperative social services. High rates of turnover among social service nonprofit staffers are often the result of inadequate wages, stress and burnout, a lack of training, and a desire for advancement.⁵

Because entry-level salaries often are inadequate, qualified and dedicated workers are less likely to remain in the social services without the prospect of future training, development, and increased earnings. Competitive wages offered in City agencies providing social services positions or in private sector jobs in other industries pull dedicated staff members from the nonprofit social services sectors. The high-stress environment and trauma-informed work of social service nonprofits also pose challenges to providing sufficient staff support and structures that might mitigate burnout. Turnover places additional pressure on employers to continuously operate a recruitment process.

High turnover diverts resources away from direct services and to the taxing process of recruitment and training new staff members. Dedicating staff time to interviewing and bringing on-board new staffers reduces organizational productivity. Where market shortages of skilled workers exist, organizations may experience long-term vacancies for weeks to months at a time. Unfilled positions burden current staff members by demanding they take on additional responsibilities, adding to the already high levels of burnout and stress. A career ladder, and sufficient investment in advancement opportunities, will help mitigate staff turnover and ensure the highest service quality of social service offerings.

Retention and recruitment challenges in the sector not only affect social service organizations, but those who rely on their services. Staff turnover, specifically those tasked with direct-service and case management support, can destabilize the delicate trust-based relationships built with vulnerable populations, and staff shortages can impede an organization's ability to serve the individuals that need their help. The City must commit to the adequate funding of these imperative services.

⁵ Labor Market Information Service. *Social Services Career Ladder Report*. January 2018, p. 9

4. The New York City social services workforce—characteristics and earnings

Over the past decade, New York City’s social services sector has grown to meet an increasing range of service needs, from youth programs to homeless and domestic violence services. Between 2006/08 and 2016/08, New York City’s private social services employment grew by 21 percent from 47,500 to 57,600.^{6 7} (.)Even leaving aside the child care industry and home health aide occupations, social services jobs grew 50 percent faster than overall New York City private sector jobs. (See Figure 1.)

The broad social services sector, corresponding to the Social Assistance sector in Census or Labor Department employment data, comprises many types of jobs, from counseling and therapists to home health aides and childcare workers. Within the social services sector there are differences in the organizational structures and potential career ladders for those working in individual and family services, for childcare providers, and for home health aides.

Figure 1
New York City social services and private employment, 2006/08 and 2016/18

| | 2006/08 | 2016/18 | % change |
|-----------------------------------|-----------|-----------|----------|
| Social Services* | | | |
| Full-time | 37,322 | 44,543 | 19.3% |
| Part-time | 10,222 | 13,034 | 27.5% |
| Full- and part-time employment | 47,544 | 57,577 | 21.1% |
| All NYC Private Employment | | | |
| Full-time | 2,567,132 | 2,904,590 | 13.1% |
| Part-time | 633,179 | 743,946 | 17.5% |
| Full- and part-time employment | 3,200,311 | 3,648,536 | 14.0% |

* excludes child care sub-industry, and all home health care and personal care aide occupations

Source: Authors’ analysis of American Community Survey 2006/08 and 2016/18 3-year samples. IPUMS USA, University of Minnesota, www.ipums.org.

⁶ Employment estimates are based on wage and salary workers, 18+, in pooled ACS three-year samples, 2006-08 and 2016-18, with the two sets of three-year pooled data indicated here as 2006/08 and 2016/18. Employment is defined by place of work not residence of worker. Steven Ruggles, Sarah Flood, Ronald Goeken, Josiah Grover, Erin Meyer, Jose Pacas and Matthew Sobek. IPUMS USA: Version 10.0 [dataset]. Minneapolis, MN: IPUMS, 2020. <https://doi.org/10.18128/D010.V10.0>

⁷ The nonprofit social services sector is part of the private sector but not all organizations providing private social services are nonprofits (some are for-profit). Since the available government employment data are for the “private social services” sector, we use that term in describing the employment and wage data. Most of the employees in private social services are employees of nonprofit organizations.

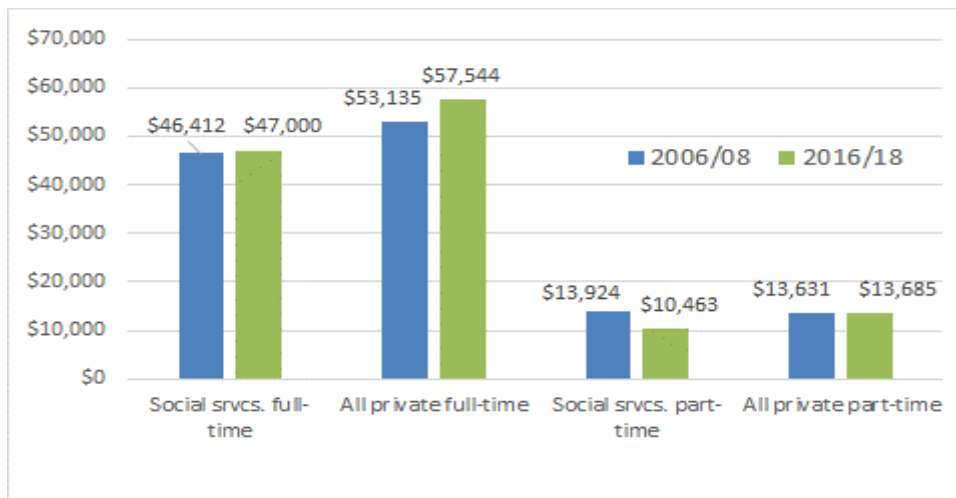
Thus, as noted earlier, for the purposes of this report, we separate the data for these workforces. When referring to “social services,” we are focusing on workers in individual and family services and setting aside childcare workers and home health aides. On the one hand, childcare providers already have a career ladder specific to their profession’s advancement pathways. (See the discussion below of the Early Childhood Education Ladder.) On the other, home health aides constitute such a large and fast-growing occupation that they require specialized analysis.⁸

The narrower remaining pool of social services workers in our analysis, and for whom the job ladder we propose would be dedicated, has itself grown by 21 percent from 2006/08 to 2016/18, with full-time employment growing by 19 percent and part-time employment growing by 28 percent. Slightly over three-quarters (77 percent) of all social services jobs are full-time, a little bit less than the 80 percent full-time share for all New York City private sector jobs.

Real wages for full-time private social services workers have remained basically flat over the past decade in New York City, meaning that wages have not kept up with the rise in the metropolitan area’s Consumer Price Index. Full-time social services workers experienced a small 1.3 percent inflation-adjusted increase in median annual earnings from 2006/08 to 2016/18. By comparison, full-time workers across all New York City private industries have seen an 8.3 percent increase in median annual earnings over that period. (See Figure 2.)

Figure 2

Median real full-time annual wages are well below all private sector levels and rose much less over the past decade



Source: Authors' analysis of American Community Survey 2006/08 and 2016/18 3-year samples. All wages in 2018\$ adjusted using NYC metro area CPI Index. IPUMS USA, University of Minnesota, www.ipums.org.

⁸ See, for example, training programs offered through Cooperative Home Care Associates, chcany.org

Pay for part-time social services workers has fared even worse than for full-time workers over the past decade. The number of part-time jobs in social services rose by 28 percent from 2006/08 to 2016/18, but inflation-adjusted annual earnings fell by 25 percent. In contrast, the annual median pay for part-time workers in the broader private economy was unchanged over this period. In part, the faster job growth and reduced pay for part-time social service workers results from the increase in workers engaged in providing after-school and other youth services programming. The median annual pay for social services part-timers was only \$10,500 during the 2016/18 years.

While this report focuses on full-time workers and their paths for professional advancement and more equitable pay, because of the increase in share of part-time workers in the private sector, we also offer some insights into the demographics of this growing part-time workforce. Moreover, converting part-time positions to full-time, where appropriate, would itself contribute to a career ladder and economic stability for workers.

Figure 3 compares the demographic breakdowns for social services workers to all New York City private sector workers. Overall, full-time social service workers are overwhelmingly women (66 percent), a much greater share than the 44 percent female share of all private jobs. The social services workforce (female and male) is also disproportionately comprised of persons of color (68 percent), compared to 59 percent for all private sector workers. Black workers are more highly represented in social services than in the city's private economy overall. Black workers comprise one in three full-time social services workers, nearly twice their share of the city's full-time private workforce (17 percent). Latinx workers are comparably represented in social services and the overall private sector (25 percent in each). As with white, non-Hispanic workers, Asian and others are under-represented in social services (nine percent) compared to their 18 percent share in the broader private sector. The social services workforce has a dramatically higher share of women of color employed full-time (46 percent) compared to the overall New York City private sector (26 percent). (See Figure 3 below, showing social service versus private employment comparisons, in addition to Appendix 2 for a more detailed demographic table.)

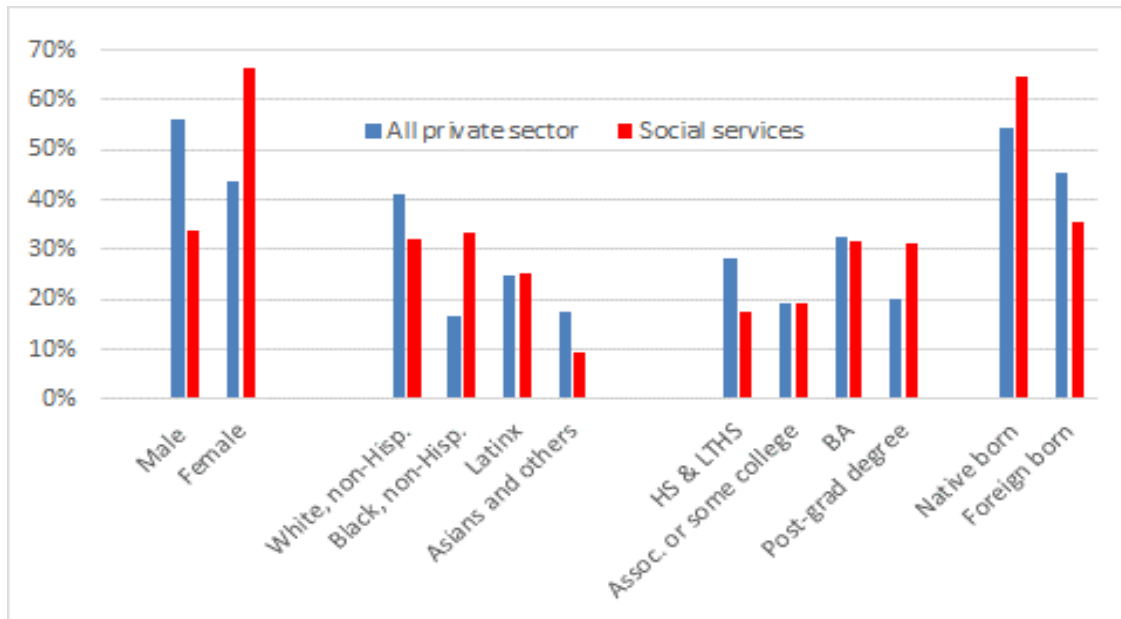
The New York City social service workforce tends to be more highly educated than the city's overall private sector workforce. While the social services sector has about the same share of full-time workers with a four-year college degree as the overall private workforce (32 vs. 33 percent), social services has a much higher share of workers with a post-graduate degree (31 vs. 20 percent). Over a quarter (28 percent) of all private sector workers have a high school diploma or less compared to less than one-in-five (18 percent) of social service workers.

In the past decade, the private social service workforce has continued to have higher employment growth among workers of color (+25 percent) compared to white workers (+14 percent). At the

same time, among full-time social services workers, relative employment growth among more highly educated workers has lagged behind that in the city’s private sector overall (+25 percent growth of workers with a four-year college degree or better versus +34 percent growth for the city overall).

Figure 3

Compared to all full-time private sector workers, full-time social services workers are more likely to be female, black, highly educated, and native-born



Source: Authors’ analysis, American Community Survey, 2016/18. IPUMS USA, University of Minnesota, www.ipums.org.

Pay shortfalls and high precarity

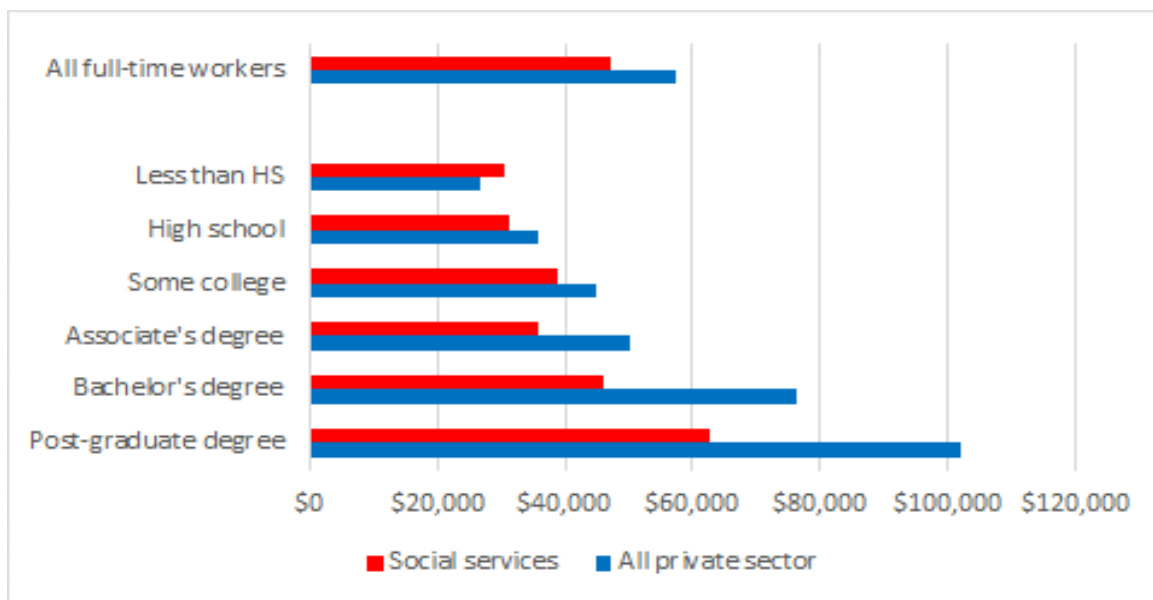
Though employment in the social services industry has increased in significance in New York City over the past decade, these jobs are relatively low paid. Median annual pay for full-time social service workers is \$47,000, which constitutes about 60 percent of what the United Way calculates is necessary for basic necessities for a family of four in New York City.⁹ The \$47,000 median pay level is 18 percent less than for all full-time private sector workers. By education level, median annual pay for only those with less than a high school diploma is higher in social

⁹ The ALICE budget for family of four in NYC is \$73,596. See United Way, ALICE: A Study of Financial Hardship in New York, 2018 Report. As used by the United Way, ALICE is an acronym standing for Assets Limited, Income Constrained, Employed.

services. Above that level, full-time workers in the private sector overall see an increase in their pay differential over social services workers as education rises, with the pay for social services workers with a bachelor’s or a post-graduate degree nearly 40 percent less than for their private sector counterparts.

Figure 4

Median annual pay for all full-time social service employees is 18 percent below median pay in New York City’s private sector; the social services pay shortfall is more than twice that at bachelor’s and post-grad degree levels



Source: Authors’ analysis, American Community Survey, 2016/18. IPUMS USA, University of Minnesota, www.ipums.org.

Over the decade 2006/08 to 2016/18, indicators of financial hardships among social services workers have increased in New York City. The share of both full-time and part-time social services workers receiving SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, formerly known as food stamps) rose from 9 to 15 percent, greater than the increase for private workers, which went from seven to 12 percent. Nearly one in five (19 percent) full- and part-time social services workers lives in a household with income less than 200 percent of the federal poverty line, an income level considered to be inadequate in New York City. The share below 200 percent of poverty rose from 16 percent a decade ago while for the overall private sector, workers in households below 200 percent of poverty held steady at 19 percent over the past decade.¹⁰

¹⁰ Authors’ analysis. American Community Survey, 2016/18. IPUMS USA, University of Minnesota, www.ipums.org.

Comparing nonprofit social services workers' pay to comparable public sector and private hospital employees

The wages of public sector social services workers (those employed in City, State, or Federal agencies) or those in similar occupations working in other private sectors, such as voluntary hospitals, provide important comparisons for understanding the lagging wages of workers in the nonprofit social services industry. The median wage for full-time public sector social services workers is \$54,400, 47 percent greater than the median wage for private sector full-time social services workers. As noted earlier, over the past decade, full-time yearly earnings for public sector social services workers increased 10 percent, while those in the private (largely nonprofit) sector have remained almost static, rising only one percent.¹¹

Figure 5 includes three social services occupations of professionals (counselors, social workers, and social service assistants), as well as three non-professional occupations (office and administrative support workers; janitors and security guards; and food preparation and service workers).

Figure 5

Median annual pay in social services lags pay for comparable occupations in the government sector and in private hospitals

Median annual wage, full-time workers (\$2018)

| select occupations | Govern- ment | Private hospitals | Social Services | ratio gov't. to social services | ratio priv. hosp. to social services |
|----------------------------|-----------------|----------------------|--------------------|------------------------------------|---|
| Counselors | \$65,000 | \$61,275 | \$40,850 | 1.59 | 1.50 |
| Social Workers | \$57,000 | \$62,775 | \$47,081 | 1.21 | 1.33 |
| Social service assistants | \$52,084 | -- | \$36,619 | 1.42 | |
| | | | | | |
| All office & admin support | \$52,313 | \$43,943 | \$35,744 | 1.46 | 1.23 |
| Janitors & security guards | \$44,000 | \$35,744 | \$26,000 | 1.69 | 1.37 |
| Cooks & food serv workers | \$32,000 | \$31,659 | \$26,156 | 1.22 | 1.21 |

Source: Authors' analysis, American Community Survey, 2016/18. IPUMS USA, University of Minnesota, www.ipums.org.

In both sets of comparisons, full-time private social services industry wages lag behind their counterparts in the public sector and in hospitals. Counselors in the public sector earn 1.6 times what their counterparts in the private social services sector do, while counselors working in private hospitals have median earnings one-and-a-half times more than their nonprofit social services counterparts. Considerable wage differentials are also higher for office workers, janitors

¹¹ Ibid.

and security guards, and food service workers in the public sector and in private hospitals than in private social services.

These glaring pay disparities cannot be explained by differences in education. Counselors working in private hospitals with at least a bachelor’s degree were paid \$76,600, more than 1.5 times what their counterparts with the same educational credentials earn in the private social service industry (\$49,000). Similarly, highly educated social workers, with a bachelor’s or post-graduate degree, earn \$56,500 in private hospitals compared to \$47,800 from private or non-profit social service employers.

Racial wage disparities within the social services sector

Significant pay disparities that fall along racial lines exist among workers in the private social service sector. Examining median earnings for workers in different demographic groups reveals two important trends: first, wage disparities fall along race and gender lines among social service workers with similar education credentials; and second, these wage disparities appear to diminish with greater education, providing strong support for the case that a career ladder can help women of color achieve professional advancement and pay equity, at least within the nonprofit sector.

Figure 6 shows annual earnings for full-time counselors and social workers together (these two similar occupational categories are combined here to increase statistical reliability), where racial pay gaps exist for both public and private workers who have bachelor’s degrees. While those

Figure 6
Racial Pay Gaps Close for Highly Educated Social Services Workers

| Counselors & Social Workers combined | | |
|---|--------------------------|-----------------|
| Full-time workers | Median ann. wage, \$2018 | |
| | Gov't | Social Services |
| B.A. degree | | |
| Whites | \$60,000 | \$50,000 |
| Persons of color | \$52,313 | \$41,850 |
| <i>ratio white/persons of color</i> | <i>1.15</i> | <i>1.19</i> |
| M.A. degree | | |
| Whites | \$72,509 | \$52,313 |
| Persons of color | \$71,145 | \$52,313 |
| <i>ratio white/persons of color</i> | <i>1.02</i> | <i>1.00</i> |

Source: Authors’ analysis, American Community Survey, 2016/18. IPUMS USA, University of Minnesota, www.ipums.org.

counselors and social workers with a bachelor’s degree working for government earn about \$10,000 more annually than their counterparts in the private social services sector, white workers in the social services sector earn 19 percent more than their person-of-color counterparts within the social services sector. A similar racial pay gap exists for public employees, with white workers earning 15 percent more than persons of color.

Comparing the median earnings of public and private counselors and social workers shows that the racial pay gap largely disappears for both private and public workers in going from the bachelor’s degree level to the master’s degree level. Within the nonprofit social services sector, whites and persons of color who are counselors and social workers with a master’s degree have similar median annual earnings (\$52,313). Within the government sector, white workers in this category have annual earnings only two percent higher than persons-of-color. Thus, persons of color with a bachelor’s degree have a strong incentive to seek further education at the master’s level, both to increase their pay and to achieve pay equity with their white counterparts.

Additionally, the pay levels shown in Figure 6 also indicate the incentives that nonprofit professionals have in moving laterally into government employment where their earnings would be from \$10,000 to \$20,000 higher.

Figure 7 shows the median ages for counselors and social workers along the same lines (race, education level, and public vs. private sector of employment) as in Figure 6. Median ages are higher for those counselors and social workers in the public sector than in the private sector. This

Figure 7

Median ages for counselors and social workers in the social services sector are lower than for their counterparts in the public sector

| Counselors & Social Workers combined | | |
|---|------------|-----------------|
| Full-time workers | median age | |
| | Gov't | Social Services |
| B.A. degree | | |
| Whites | 45 | 36 |
| Persons of color | 43 | 36 |
| ratio white/persons of color | | |
| M.A. degree | | |
| Whites | 40 | 37 |
| Persons of color | 44 | 38 |

Source: Authors’ analysis, American Community Survey, 2016/18. IPUMS USA, University of Minnesota, www.ipums.org

may indicate movement to the public sector as workers gain experience in the nonprofit sector and seek better compensation. The age differential may also account for some of the pay premium enjoyed by public sector workers.

5. Perspectives from the field

To inform this report, the Center for New York City Affairs conducted over a dozen interviews with policy analysts, directors, and human resource leaders across the social services nonprofit sector to better understand the unique challenges facing their organizations.

The interview subjects outlined their organizations' services, structures, and employment levels. Social service leaders oversee a range of staff sizes, from 18 to over 4,000. Those interviewed represent a diverse list of services and program areas: foster care, homeless services, supportive housing services, behavioral and residential health services, intellectual and developmental disability services, family services, youth services, mental health and hygiene services, health and wellness centers, substance abuse clinics, child care services, home care services, arts programming, senior services, economic development programming, sexual assault and domestic violence support services, education services and college access support, and professional development and empowerment services. Some organizations focus on a single service and program area, often from a single location. Larger organizations tend to offer a range of program areas and services and often operate across boroughs and in multiple physical locations. All the interview subjects described a range of employment opportunities and staff levels existing in their organizations, including those providing administrative or janitorial, direct-service and case management, and supervisory and managerial roles.

In the interviews, the directors and management of these organizations were asked about retention and staff turnover. Across the board, they underscored the difficulty of retaining staff. While they indicated that retention levels vary between programs and departments, large rates of turnover were identified as a consistent hinderance to all organizations, and a problem that many assume will only increase.

They further understood these high turnover rates to be the result of low pay and insufficient benefits, workload stress, and a lack of advancement prospects. While many employed in the social services sector are mission-driven and passionate about the important work provided by their organizations, far too many feel properly supported or compensated for their labor. As positions increasingly turn over, remaining staffers face the additional burden of operating a near-incessant recruitment process, adding to high-stress work environments, threatening delicate relationships established with those receiving social services, and hindering overall

service quality. While many interview subjects voiced a desire to expand their organizational supports for their staff, opportunities for investment remain limited by resources.

Nearly all individuals spoke to consistent budgetary constraints and what one individual called “gross underfunding.” Many organizations are dependent on annual funding from external private grants to augment their City contracts. Whereas some interview subjects spoke to a strong need for internal growth, such as the expansion of program areas, budgets often inhibit these enhancements. For career advancement, the number of available positions, particularly at higher levels of employment are similarly constrained by funding and budgets. While many organizations spoke to the need for additional staff at all levels of organizations, insufficient funding leads to increasing burnout and high caseloads for current staffers. Individuals also spoke to the need for updated technological supports for staff to better track casework between caseworkers and across the department. Increased funding would provide many organizations with the necessary relief to employ sufficient numbers of staff, invest in technology systems for increased efficiency, and allow for improved compensation for their current staff.

Those interviewed indicated that their organizations could not offer competitive wages to individuals, particularly those with Master of Social Work degrees, but also entry-level workers. In a competitive marketplace, interview subjects indicated the difficulty of both recruiting and retaining staff at low-salary levels. They described how, as a result, their organizations lose employees to similar jobs offered by City agencies, where pay and benefits are better. As the work of social services is often extremely taxing, organization leaders explained the desire of staffers to feel sufficiently supported and invested in. Many individuals employed in social service organizations are connected to the communities in which they serve; some have personally benefitted from the social services they now provide. Organization leaders characterized current staffers as a few paychecks away from the populations they serve. Ensuring adequate and livable wages, and sufficient benefits, is understood to be necessary to retain employees in the sector, provide the greatest quality of service to communities, and to ensure that individual staff members feel properly valued in the important work they are providing.

The interview subjects also spoke to the labor-intensity of work in the social services sector, specifically for staff employed in case-management and direct-service roles; this may cause significant burnout or steer individuals away from service work. They discussed an increasing need seen in communities for social services and indicated that caseloads in some areas appears to be increasing. Individual employees are often responsible for carrying significant emotional burdens associated with working closely with vulnerable clients. Some organization leaders indicated that inadequate internal management may further exacerbate stress in the workplace for individual staffers. Without sufficient trainings and preparedness at the supervisory level, lower-level staffers may experience limited institutional support in adequately managing the stress and pressures of their work. Some leaders emphasized the necessity of establishing a positive

environment at work, where staff culture is appreciative, communicative, and ensures staff feels supported. Many praised the dedication and passion of their staff, and their consequent willingness to endure great burdens to satisfy the mission of their organization. However, proper internal structures, such as management and adequate staffing, are necessary to mitigate the potential burnout of even the most dedicated staffers.

Those representing some organizations spoke to turnover resulting from a lack of advancement opportunities. Smaller organizations are often constrained by a limited number of staff positions for an entry- or mid-level employee to advance into, particularly when executive positions are held by long-term employees. Those from larger organizations spoke of information gaps that may limit an individual from understanding the necessary advancement process. Though most organizations have a centralized job posting server, few send an updated list of job postings directly to staffers. Without the help of a centralized human resources, entry- and mid-level staffers may not be aware of advancement opportunities they could be qualified for and interested in. Despite having an interest in internal promotion, many interview subjects described a lack of structure to better ensure the retention and advancement of low-level employees. Some organizations, however, do actively encourage the advancement of current staff members by distributing weekly emails summarizing available organization-wide positions. Further, some organizations give priority to any job applicant who utilizes an internal link, guaranteeing them an interview when applying from within.

When high rates of turnover exist in an organization, leaders discussed the additional stress of continuously recruiting and bringing new staff on board. For some organizations, staff positions may sit vacant for months at a time, forcing current staff members to assume the workload of vacant positions. This problem was seen to be most common in the lowest-paying and part-time positions, which workers may quit with little to no notice. Further, representatives of some organizations spoke of a limited applicant pool for vacant positions, particularly for more specialized roles requiring advanced experience or degrees. The recruitment process not only takes staff energy, and involves administrative hurdles, but further eats away at time otherwise dedicated to providing direct services.

The scale of each organization allows for different capacities for staff support and advancement. Larger organizations, often with a designated human resources department, are better equipped to offer staff professional development, training, and internal advancement opportunities. Some organizations provide tuition assistance for full-time employees and reimbursements to staff for attending external career development trainings. For smaller organizations, budgetary constraints and an inability to provide the flexibility to pursue training programs or academic degrees often limit such offerings.

The information provided by these social service leaders makes clear that the career ladder project must be structured in a way that responds to the unique constraints and needs of organizations and their staff. Finally, the career ladder project should build off of the success found in current advancement offerings from a variety of organizations within the city.

6. Existing career ladders in related fields

Early Childhood Career Ladder (ECCL)

In 2015, following the allocation of \$2.5 million in the FY 2016 adopted New York City budget, an early childhood career ladder (ECCL) was established with the assistance of the Mayor's Office of Labor Relations. In collaboration with New York City's Day Care Council and DC 1707 (now part of DC 37), the union representing childcare workers, the career ladder project began enrolling workers in CUNY and certain private higher education institutions to pursue degrees, complete certification programs, or finish undergraduate or graduate-level coursework.

The early childhood career ladder has successfully established clear pathways for advancement within the field. Uncertified and assistant teachers are able to utilize the ECCL to earn necessary degrees and training to move into higher-level positions, such as certified instructors and lead teachers. With tuition assistance, those employed in early childhood education are able to develop professionally and further contribute to the organization. Ultimately, the early childhood career ladder has helped to establish an explicit pipeline of advancement, ensuring passionate staffers are retained and properly invested in.

As of Spring 2018, 98 percent of individuals enrolled in the ECCL were Black, Latinx, Asian or multiracial. For a sector disproportionately composed of women of color, these supports additionally enable underrepresented workers entry into higher positions of authority and compensation. The ECCL ensures greater racial equity within the early childhood sector, and across positions of leadership in the deliverance of imperative City services.

The early childhood career ladder makes flexibility central. CUNY is responsive to life commitments and scheduling needs of student workers by offering evening courses, robust advising services, and financial support for tuition and registration fees. The ECCL prioritizes accessibility and ease for student workers. Maintaining flexibility and establishing coordination between CUNY programs was essential to offering easy transitions for workers returning to school. Beverly Falk, the Director of Graduate Programs in Early Childhood Education at CUNY, articulated the need for advancement opportunities and increased staff retention in

nonprofits, and the need for “every agency’s involvement” to address the current deficits in the sector to better “support children and families” in New York City.¹²

DC 37 Educational opportunity program

District Council 37 (DC 37) of AFSCME, the largest public sector labor union in the city, provides both education funding and training and development programming for its members. Full-time workers are eligible to apply for tuition assistance funding for completing coursework at accredited institutions and covering costs related to test preparation for professional licenses and certification programs. These benefits are available to members through DC 37’s Health & Security Plan Welfare Benefits, funded in part by annual City contributions. In addition, DC 37 offers prep course workshops for those seeking their Licensed Master Social Worker (LMSW) and certification courses for individuals working in trauma-informed service areas such as child welfare and violence prevention. These training program offerings are funded through annual grants awarded by the Consortium for Worker’s Education. Workers are able to take advantage of a variety of skill development training offerings throughout the year.

Social Service Employees Union Local 371, a part of DC 37, additionally offers its own programming and support to members. Those employed in social services are able to access \$600 annually in tuition assistance to support coursework, licensing preparation, and other school-related expenses. Additional financial supports are available to those pursuing master’s-level social work degree. In-house trainings also are offered through Local 371 to further the professional development of staff and help individuals earn continuing education units. These supports seek to instill a sense of validation and commitment to the social services workforce.

United Neighborhood Houses scholarship assistance

United Neighborhood Houses (UNH), a network of over 40 settlement houses in New York City, offers a fairly comprehensive in-house tuition assistantship program as well as training and development for employees. Tuition support, in the form of cash assistance scholarships, have helped enable workers to pursue degrees while maintaining employment. The application process is overseen by UNH. The cash assistance, contingent on degree-enrollment, can support student-workers in tuition, transportation, childcare fees, administrative fees, food, housing, or other needs. Additionally, UNH has implemented in-house staff development and training

¹² Beverly Falk. Phone Interview. March 11th, 2020.

opportunities for workers and covered the expenses of commuter-based training. These offerings have aided staff retention and improved career advancement opportunities for employees.

Administration for Children's Services training and development

The City's Administration for Children's Services (ACS) offers core training and development opportunities for its employees. ACS has established a partnership among its James Satterwhite Institute and CUNY's School of Professional Studies and Silberman School of Social Work to offer coaching and intensive training for staff. Entry-level workers who provide direct service or serve as child protective specialists are able to develop skills through ACS in-house training. Entry-level employees are also able to enroll in supervisorial training.

New York State child welfare workers incentive scholarship

New York State's Higher Education Services Corporation operates a scholarship program to support child welfare workers. This program, providing tuition assistance awards exclusively to current child welfare agency employees, encourages individuals to pursue an associate's, bachelor's, or master's degree in a field relevant to child welfare work. Tuition assistance supports advancement and education development of those who intend to continue serving in the sector.

7. Initial stage for a Social Services Career Ladder Program (SSCLP)

In 2015, the City's adopted FY 2016 budget allocated \$5 million to support the advancement of nonprofit workers in New York City. Half of the \$5 million was allocated specifically to the social services sector workforce. Initially administered by the Department of Small Business Services (SBS), administrative oversight of the social services career ladder was later transferred to the Mayor's Office of Workforce Development. Working together, CUNY's Office of Continuing Education and Workforce Development, the Center for New York City Affairs, and the Mayor's Office of Workforce Development have developed an initial stage of the Social Services Career Ladder Program (SSCLP) that was set to launch in the fall of 2020 but has been delayed due to the pandemic.

The initial stage was intended to offer tuition reimbursement for eligible applicants working toward completion of their degrees. They were to be available to workers in organizations

contracting with ACS, DFTA, DOHMH, DYCD, DSS, and SBS. Additionally, financial assistance was to be made available for individuals working toward the completion of the licensing portion of their Master of Social Work degree.

CUNY institutions were to provide college course and related instructional programming for the SSCL. Workers intending to pursue educational offerings through CUNY would be able to take advantage of academic advising and degree guidance. This was intended to ensure support for those working toward degree completion, particularly those who have been out of academia for some time.

The SSCLP seeks to emulate the success of the early childhood career ladder (ECCL) project established in 2017 for childcare workers. Its success will require buy-in and oversight from organizations within the sector. The Center for New York City Affairs has helped to identify social services leaders to establish a functioning steering committee drawn from programs and nonprofits across the sector. This group is intended to inform future offerings, advocate for the sector's needs, and serve as an intermediary between frontline workers and City government.

The development of a full-blown career ladder for social service nonprofits is contingent on increased unity within the sector. A steering committee, composed of leaders and directors from across the, must articulate the needs of the workforce and develop relevant design elements within programs to best serve workers. In addition, an advisory group of frontline workers should help inform the implementation of the ladder and serve as direct representation of worker's perspectives. These sector-based organizations will play an instrumental role in the development of a program that is reflective and responsive to worker needs.

The City must additionally work in consultation with CUNY and the sector to develop appropriate supports and "rungs" within its contracts. Correlating advancement with levels of employment across the sector will ensure individuals can better utilize these supports in their individual career development. City contracts should reflect the various needs from across the sector, with the operational elements necessary to roll-out programming at CUNY. The City should further demonstrate its commitment to this imperative workforce by providing funding toward these advancement supports to strengthen the sector.

Needs of Frontline Workers

Flexibility: To ensure the success of social service workers returning to school for career advancement, flexibility must be built directly into the program. For many workers, balancing work, family, and personal commitments may significantly restrict free time and availability for courses. For that reason, Beverly Falk, the Director of Graduate Programs in Early Childhood

Education at CUNY, recommends that classes be made available in the evening, on weekends, online, or in multiple locations. Drawing on experience with the ECCL, Josh Wallack, the Deputy Chancellor for the Early Childhood Education Program at the City's Department of Education, similarly emphasized the importance of flexibility in the development of educational programming.¹³

Counseling: A career ladder project should also prioritize academic advising for workers. Staff who have been out of school for years or even decades, may find that academic requirements, program structures, and curriculum demands may have significantly changed. To ensure a successful transition back into an educational program, informed faculty counseling is key. Advisors must be experienced in navigating administrative hurdles. Even if degree programs cannot alter their academic requirements, the establishment of easy communication channels between university staff and working students about their progress will help keep students on track. Academic advising might take the form of regular check-ins to determine academic struggles and assess the availability of wrap-around services, like tutoring and support for English Language Learners.

Structural support: As Beverly Falk points out, low-level but experienced workers are often held back by a lack of educational attainment that is the product of low-resourced communities and schools. These workers may face additional barriers to returning to and being successful in school. Academic staff can support students by developing clear pathways and messages. Communication between departments and administrative offices can mitigate misinformation or time wasted for workers navigating the career ladder program. Additionally, staff should collaborate with workers, knowing their educational histories and current skillsets, to provide guidance, establish educational goals, and select advancement tracks. Empathetic and knowledgeable staff will be instrumental in supporting frontline workers in their transition back to education.

8. Conclusion

The establishment of a sector-wide social services career ladder is essential to address vexing recruitment and retention issues, sector pay disparities, and to invest in a vital workforce providing essential services to the City. The implementation of a successful career ladder depends on strong leadership from the sector, and active support, including funding support, from the City. While the Covid-19 pandemic crisis commands the immediate attention of the City and the social services sector, when the public health challenges ease, attention should return to the unfinished business of launching the Social Services Career Ladder Program, and then nurturing a phased expansion. The need will certainly remain and there should be even

¹³ Wallack, Josh. Remarks at Day Care Council of New York City, Annual Conference. February 27th, 2020.

greater public commitment to invest in a dedicated workforce made up of predominantly women of color long denied access to pay equity and career advancement opportunities.

Through its perennial push for cost of living adjustments and its persistent advocacy for government to fully fund contracts for social services delivery, the sector has long demonstrated its commitment to greater investments in its workforce. The sector should continue its efforts to come together in the pursuit of increased workforce development and career advancement for its staff. In addition, the social services sector should further commit to redressing pay inequities experienced in the sector between racial groups. While the social services career ladder and supports for educational attainment represent a meaningful step toward mitigating pay gaps, the sector must be resolute in addressing inequities in compensation for workers of color within the sector. Increased investment will only result if the sector remains focused on advancing the needs of its workers as the best means to provide high quality social services delivery.

In addition, New York City and its municipal leaders must further commit to funding the development of this essential workforce. Given the limited budget resources available for City-funded programs, strategic investment in the social services sector is all the more significant. As the City continues to rely on this sector to house, heal, and service vulnerable New Yorkers, it must invest in social services to address pay disparities in a workforce predominantly comprised of women of color, and to ensure the highest quality of service. As Covid-19 and its aftermath continue to ravage the city, the population dependent on the social service workforce will only grow.

The recent success of the nonprofit Early Childhood Education (ECE) sector in achieving contracting reforms and starting pay salary parity with public school ECE teachers is encouraging for the prospects of establishing a robust SSCLP. As in that case, the involvement of a committed and politically powerful union partner could make a meaningful difference in the broader social services sector.¹⁴ District Council 37 recently expanded its organizing in the ECE sector and was laying the groundwork for a broader social services organizing campaign when the economy closed down in March, as the pandemic took hold. A strong union ally able to effectively mobilize the workforce in communities throughout the city, and one with a track record of supporting their membership in attaining additional education and skills to advance within their respective fields, would be an invaluable partner in gaining the support of elected officials to make needed investments in the social services workforce and their career advancement opportunities.

¹⁴ For a discussion of how ECE starting pay salary parity was achieved in New York City, see James A. Parrott, *The Road to and From Salary Parity in New York city: Nonprofits and Collective Bargaining in early Childhood Education*, Center for New York City Affairs, January 2020. <http://www.centernyc.org/salary-parity-in-nyc>

Appendix Figure 1

New York City Social Services Contracts, Adopted FY 2020 Budget

| Object code | Program area | # of contracts | \$ amount of contracts |
|---|---|----------------|------------------------|
| <i>Homeless services</i> | | | |
| 650 | Homeless Family Services | 431 | \$1,332,780,429 |
| 659 | Homeless Individual Services | 138 | \$685,348,457 |
| <i>Child welfare services</i> | | | |
| 642 | Childrens Charitable Institutions | 70 | \$488,785,847 |
| 643 | Child Welfare Services | 341 | \$357,657,991 |
| <i>Health and mental health services</i> | | | |
| 655 | Mental Hygiene Services | 474 | \$649,804,571 |
| 651 | AIDS Services | 117 | \$261,558,454 |
| <i>Youth services</i> | | | |
| 695 | Education & Recreational for Youth Programs | 725 | \$545,753,379 |
| 678 (pt) | DYCD services | 517 | \$198,681,784 |
| <i>Services for the elderly</i> | | | |
| 678 (pt) | Dept. for the Aging services | 1334 | \$280,453,754 |
| <i>Employment and workforce services</i> | | | |
| 662 | Dept. of Social Services Employment Services | 74 | \$150,164,130 |
| 678 (pt) | Small Business Services workforce development | 8 | \$20,850,926 |
| <i>Other social services</i> | | | |
| 649 | Non-grant charges subsidiary to public assistance | 64 | \$40,008,479 |
| 616 | Community Consultant Contracts | 94 | \$32,287,270 |
| 641 | Protective Services for Adults | 10 | \$25,697,792 |
| 648 | Homemaking Services | 9 | \$21,201,069 |
| 678 (pt) | Office of Criminal Justice services | 1 | \$3,246,015 |
| 678 (pt) | Office for People with Disabilities services | 2 | \$91,150 |
| Subtotal, Social Services except child care and home care | | 4,409 | \$5,094,371,497 |
| <i>Child care and home care services</i> | | | |
| 652 | Day Care of Children | 687 | \$849,826,817 |
| 653 | Head Start | 89 | \$150,684,110 |
| 647 | Home Care Services | 118 | \$90,903,328 |
| Subtotal, Child care and home care | | 894 | \$1,091,414,255 |
| TOTAL All NYC Contracted Social Services | | 5,303 | \$6,185,785,752 |

Source: New York City, Adopted FY 2020 Budget, Office of Management and Budget, Expense Revenue Contract Report, June 2019.

Appendix Figure 2

Private Non-Profit Social Services compared to all NYC private employees

| | | All industries | | | | | | Private Social Assistance (excluding child care and home health aides) | | | | | |
|------------------------|---|------------------------|-----|------------------------|-----|------------------------|-----|--|-----|------------------------|-----|------------------------|-----|
| | | % within each category | | % within each category | | % within each category | | % within each category | | % within each category | | % within each category | |
| | | Fulltime | | Parttime | | All | | Fulltime | | Parttime | | All | |
| All NYC wage workers | | 2,904,590 | | 743,946 | | 3,648,536 | | 44,543 | | 13,034 | | 57,577 | |
| Sex | Male | 1,630,553 | 56% | 300,131 | 40% | 1,930,684 | 53% | 14,968 | 34% | 4,051 | 31% | 19,020 | 33% |
| | Female | 1,274,037 | 44% | 443,815 | 60% | 1,717,852 | 47% | 29,575 | 66% | 8,983 | 69% | 38,558 | 67% |
| Race-ethnicity | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| | White, non-Hispanics | 1,198,784 | 41% | 245,302 | 33% | 1,444,086 | 40% | 14,238 | 32% | 4,285 | 33% | 18,523 | 32% |
| | Male | 693,262 | 24% | 101,306 | 14% | 794,568 | 22% | 4,959 | 11% | 1,115 | 9% | 6,074 | 11% |
| | Female | 505,522 | 17% | 143,996 | 19% | 649,518 | 18% | 9,279 | 21% | 3,169 | 24% | 12,448 | 22% |
| | Black, non-Hispanics | 480,404 | 17% | 142,775 | 19% | 623,179 | 17% | 14,848 | 33% | 3,767 | 29% | 18,615 | 32% |
| | Male | 229,591 | 8% | 57,332 | 8% | 286,923 | 8% | 4,807 | 11% | 1,346 | 10% | 6,152 | 11% |
| | Female | 250,813 | 9% | 85,442 | 11% | 336,256 | 9% | 10,041 | 23% | 2,421 | 19% | 12,463 | 22% |
| | Hispanics | 715,546 | 25% | 212,693 | 29% | 928,238 | 25% | 11,304 | 25% | 3,609 | 28% | 14,913 | 26% |
| | Male | 431,819 | 15% | 86,238 | 12% | 518,057 | 14% | 3,875 | 9% | 1,070 | 8% | 4,945 | 9% |
| | Female | 283,726 | 10% | 126,455 | 17% | 410,181 | 11% | 7,430 | 17% | 2,539 | 19% | 9,968 | 17% |
| | Asians and others | 509,857 | 18% | 143,177 | 19% | 653,034 | 18% | 4,153 | 9% | 1,374 | 11% | 5,527 | 10% |
| | Male | 275,881 | 9% | 55,255 | 7% | 331,136 | 9% | 1,328 | 3% | 520 | 4% | 1,848 | 3% |
| | Female | 233,976 | 8% | 87,922 | 12% | 321,897 | 9% | 2,825 | 6% | 853 | 7% | 3,678 | 6% |
| Educational attainment | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| | <HS | 262,616 | 9% | 101,895 | 14% | 364,511 | 10% | 1,271 | 3% | 1,724 | 13% | 2,995 | 5% |
| | HS | 555,490 | 19% | 182,410 | 25% | 737,901 | 20% | 6,626 | 15% | 3,167 | 24% | 9,793 | 17% |
| | Some College | 367,214 | 13% | 163,606 | 22% | 530,820 | 15% | 5,559 | 12% | 1,995 | 15% | 7,554 | 13% |
| | Associates | 185,912 | 6% | 51,485 | 7% | 237,397 | 7% | 3,034 | 7% | 1,185 | 9% | 4,219 | 7% |
| | BA | 944,558 | 33% | 160,565 | 22% | 1,105,123 | 30% | 14,163 | 32% | 2,747 | 21% | 16,910 | 29% |
| | Post-grad degree | 588,800 | 20% | 83,985 | 11% | 672,785 | 18% | 13,890 | 31% | 2,216 | 17% | 16,106 | 28% |
| Nativity | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| | Born in US | 1,584,207 | 55% | 404,839 | 54% | 1,989,047 | 55% | 28,810 | 65% | 8,427 | 65% | 37,237 | 65% |
| | Foreign born | 1,320,383 | 45% | 339,107 | 46% | 1,659,490 | 45% | 15,734 | 35% | 4,607 | 35% | 20,340 | 35% |
| | Receives Food stamps | 272,820 | 9% | 161,958 | 22% | 434,778 | 12% | 4,964 | 11% | 3,706 | 28% | 8,670 | 15% |
| | Household below 200% of federal povertyline | 372,822 | 13% | 322,619 | 43% | 695,441 | 19% | 4,929 | 11% | 6,208 | 48% | 11,136 | 19% |

Source: Authors' analysis of American Community Survey 2016/18 3-year sample. IPUMS USA, University of Minnesota, www.ipums.org.