



LA 31 Team 1: Garry Brown, Laurie Chess, Shelley Lewis, Jason Peltz, Stephanie Wallace

Research Subtopic:

Who is most impacted by low wages at present? What are the demographics and other characteristics of this group? What are the biggest challenges these groups face as a result of their economic status? How does it affect their quality of life?

We interviewed Vicki Meath, Executive Director of Just Economics.

Vicki shared many stories about how poverty and low wage jobs are affecting people across the spectrum, including those with college degree. Asheville's tourism based economy is especially prone to breed low wage jobs. She shared her personal story of overcoming poverty and the tough choices she had to make as a mother. Over the next several years, Just Economics hopes to: increase number of certified anchor institutions to include Asheville City/Buncombe County Schools and Contractors and Mission Hospital. Increase community awareness and leadership development. Increase number of certified businesses from 300 to 400. Increase economic impact to \$1 million.

We conducted a follow-up interview with Cynthia Grady, Director of HR for Asheville City Schools and Benefits Specialist, Brenda Rhinehart.

Brenda shared information about salary scales & benefits. All teaching assistants have college degrees and are paid minimum salaries above living wage. Some non-degreed personnel are paid about \$10/hr; only some have benefits (cafeteria workers, custodians). She asserted that no employees were paid less than living wage. When we met briefly with Cynthia, she seemed unaware that Just Economics had started a conversation with Asheville City Schools. We shared information with her.

OUR FINDINGS:

Women tend to be hardest hit in terms of earning a living wage. In many cases, this is due to the additional burden and expenses associated with childcare. Healthcare, housing and transportation costs often play into this hardship. In addition, they often lack experience and/or education that would land them a more flexible and higher paying job. This cycle is often seen in many entry-level, light industrial and unskilled labor jobs. Women hold a majority of these jobs, the majority of which do not pay a living wage. In some cases, it is easier and cheaper not to work versus working in a job that pays less than a living wage. Supplemental benefits such as onsite childcare, bus passes, tuition reimbursement, paid sick days and health insurance would create a much needed safety net for these women.

IMPLEMENTATION PHASE:

Our research showed that it could be easy to target a certain industry (i.e., daycare) or group (teachers) or institution (Asheville City/Buncombe County Schools) to investigate why wages are depressed and what could be done about it. However we feel this is too limiting. While targeting a small industry/group/institution would make for a tidy project in that it would yield reportable data and concrete reports, to do so would not do much for the community as a whole.

Through our research we have identified an issue – that women and children are disproportionately affected by the impact of low wages. Implementation of a plan to address the issue can take a myriad forms, as discussed above. Rather than choosing a particular implementation project, we feel the data we gathered should be interspersed with the findings of the other sub-groups. Our hope is that by doing so, a larger impact on the community will be achieved.

Perhaps a community survey of businesses that do not provide living wages or supportive benefits to women could be part of a project. Perhaps the effect of lower wages for women and their effect on children appears in one industry so much that it would benefit the entire community to address that industry. We do not know. What we do know is that we have identified a group that is very much affected by this issue. When we examine the issue with the findings from the other sub-groups, implementation should become clearer so that a worthwhile effect on our community may be achieved.