

Testimony of John Boardman
Executive Secretary-Treasurer, UNITE HERE Local 25

CHAIRPERSON ELISSA SILVERMAN AND THE COMMITTEE ON LABOR AND WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT
BUDGET OVERSIGHT
Thursday, May 28, 2020, 9AM
Online Via Webex

Good morning Councilmember Silverman, members of the committee, and thank you for holding this hearing. My name is John Boardman, and I am the head of UNITE HERE Local 25. I'm here representing 7,200 hospitality workers in the DC region. The first and most important thing for you to know is that about 98% of our membership is currently laid off. Many of our members are in dire, frightening financial circumstances because of the economic fallout from COVID-19. Working people in this city are hurting, scared, and struggling. We need a budget that, that first and foremost, meets their basic needs.

The Mayor's budget, in many respects, is helpful. It by and large avoided cuts to major programs on which our members rely, and overall was less austere than we feared. But this is a time when working people in this city are under indescribable pressure. There are a few areas, over which this committee has oversight, where this budget could go farther in easing it.

The first relates to the DOES hiring freeze. While prior to the pandemic, many of our members had jobs that paid middle-class wages and guaranteed them healthcare, most of them increasingly rely on government services like Unemployment Insurance (UI). The individuals we have been in conversation with over at UI have been doing incredible work to make sure our members, and countless others, get paid. But it's no secret that our UI system as a whole is already struggling to cope with the huge volumes of weekly claims coming in, not to mention longstanding issues with language access.

This budget should make their jobs easier, not harder. We're concerned that a hiring freeze that affects critical programs like UI, or, for that matter, any personnel who handle healthcare initiatives, will impede the city's ability to deliver critical services to those who need them. While some observers have noted that this budget makes few cuts to services themselves, we know firsthand that services only exist by the grace of the people who staff them. Those workers deserve support, and may not be able to keep up with demand given their current staffing levels.

On that topic, one of the most challenging components of the proposed budget was the freeze on cost-of-living raises for public sector workers. Without getting into the weeds, I think it's important to note that these workers – the majority of whom are women of color -- are literally saving lives every day, and deserve to have a voice in their future. The city should not impose unilateral cuts on their pay or benefits; these issues must be resolved in the context of negotiations, which did not appear to have taken place when the budget was released.

I want to end by thanking the committee, the staff over at DOES, and many of my fellow panelists for the tremendous efforts you are exerting to keep District residents safe and afloat. Your work is invaluable. Thank you and I am happy to answer any questions.