Testimony Presented to Philadelphia City Council

Committee on Children and Youth and Education

by Donna Cooper, Executive Director

Public Citizens for Children and Youth

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Councilwoman Gym, thank you for holding this hearing today about the impact of unpredictable work schedules on children and families in our city. I am Donna Cooper, Executive Director of Public Citizens for Children and Youth (PCCY).

PCCY is the only advocacy organization in our region of Southeastern Pennsylvania that works on the whole child. As you know we deliver free health care services to children. In fact, beginning March 26th we will enable over 800 children to get free dental care as part of our Give Kids a Smile Week of service. We organize this free care because far too many children of working parents do not have dental insurance coverage or the co-pays for dental coverage make the cost of such care prohibitive. How does that connect to why we are here today? Quite directly. In order for parents to make dental or doctor appointments for their children, they need to know their work schedules. It’s as simple as that.

Our job at PCCY is to do what we can and encourage elected leaders to do what they can to adopt the policies that ensure every child, rich and poor can thrive. That's why we have long been advocates for workplace policies that enable parents to be both good, productive workers and responsive, responsible parents.

We are here today for the very simple fact that when a parent's work schedule varies by shift, raising healthy, stable children becomes much more difficult. For families of limited means, the impact on children can be particularly burdensome and harmful.

The good news is that most workers in this great city and our great nation can balance work and family because of our national norm of predictable work schedules. In fact, in the vast majority of workplaces, both employers and employees benefit from a commonsense approach to scheduling that gives employees reasonable notice for their shifts. In fact, it’s sort of H.R. 101; predictable schedules are a work place best practice that increases employee retention, boosts worker productivity, and drives down the cost of hiring and training. On top of that they are, of course, an essential ingredient for any family friendly company.

I commend you for kicking off the discussion about a troubling anti-family norm that is far too common place in our food service and retail sectors where the poorest workers must juggle changing work and family circumstances and have the fewest resources to do so.

The good news is that a study conducted in Philadelphia among service employees found that 66 percent of all workers got their schedules at least a week ahead of time. And the largest share (38%) got their schedules at least 2 weeks ahead. But that still means that 34% had a week or less notice of their schedule. That means that thousands of employees in these sectors don't know from one day to the next what their schedule will be. In fact, while management in these sectors typically knows their schedules a month in advance, the front line workers can't plan for their children's doctor visits, child care and other essential responsibilities of being a parent.

The Philadelphia civic, child advocacy and business community routinely bemoans the challenges faced by our school district. But it’s a bit unclear how the district is supposed to boost student performance when they are saddled with the impact of family unfriendly workplace practices that esteemed researchers have found to be negatively associated with young children’s cognitive outcomes (Han 2005) and behavior problems (Joshi & Bogen 2007).

Those findings make complete sense. For decades now we've known that stable and nurturing relationships with caregivers are crucial to the long-term development and well-being of young children. When attachment patterns are broken by endless turnover of caregivers, no matter how well-meaning they are, children will not form the necessary trusting relationships that will enable them to grow, learn and develop.

Simply put, when a parent cannot predict their work schedule they cannot put their child in consistent child care. As a result, the development of young children can be stunted; the inconsistencies in a child's child care undermine their cognitive and emotional development. With predictable schedules some of these interruptions can be avoided.

Not only does the lack of a predictable schedule make critical child bonding with caregivers impossible, it also largely precludes the enrollment of children in high quality child care. The state requires parents using subsidized child care to maintain 20 hours of regular work. When hours and schedules fluctuate causing the parent's income to change, a parent’s capacity to maintain their eligibility for these critical early learning supports for their children is put at risk.

Let me explain how this works. I ran the city's largest welfare to work program, where nearly 5,000 single mothers were helped to enter the labor force and achieve a family sustaining wage. Among the top reason that the women we helped lost their jobs was the inability to manage the weekly changes in child care arrangements needed to contend with unpredictable employer scheduling practices. Now nearly 20 years later, it is long past time for those employers who vocally demand that single mothers get off welfare and become role models for their children by entering the workforce, to end the very practices that cause responsible mothers to quit or lose their jobs because of workplace practices that make it impossible for them to arrange reliable child care for their children.

When employers don't provide reasonably predictable schedules for employees, parents and their children miss pediatric appointments. Already far too many children miss school because of treatable chronic illnesses like asthma that flare up when doctor appointments are missed. With reasonable notice of a work schedule, a parent can negotiate with their children's health care provider for appointments. Without such schedules, appointments aren't made or if they are made, they are missed. Not only does that harm children, it shifts the cost of unpredictable schedules right on our health care systems. We regularly hear from pediatricians, including those at CHOP and St. Chris, that children miss appointments because parents do not have notice of their schedules.

Of course there is another untenable impact of unpredictable scheduling and irregular hours for parents attempting to learn a skill, a trade or get a degree so they can get a better job. We all know that it's very hard to juggle parenting and a job without a schedule. Add to that the need to plan for school and education and the house of cards simply collapses. Let's be very clear, if our goals for upward mobility for this city where poverty is the norm for nearly half the population is post-secondary training, then our fate is sealed. It's not possible for a parent to add school to the mix without a predictable schedule.

For employers who lament the shortage of qualified workers, or for those who decry the number of families who rely on food stamps, it's time to remove every barrier to post-secondary training. Chief among those barriers for parents is unpredictable schedules that make enrollment in training impossible.

The fact is that other cities and states have found a workable solution for employees and employers. And they are not just one-off locations. The entire state of California – the sixth largest economy in the world with a GDP that is larger than India, Italy or Brazil – has already passed a law that ensures employers tell employees their schedules in advance. So, too, have Oregon, New York City, Seattle, and San Francisco. Each of these states and localities approach the scheduling requirements differently. Some mandate a fourteen-day notice of schedules, others ten days, still others one week. Other localities solve the problem by requiring that employers pay hourly workers more for the absence of predictability.

We can learn from these states and cities how to appropriately balance the role that government can play to reinforce positive workplace norms with the obvious needs of private employers. Obviously this is possible, since not one of the places with these laws in place has come to a grinding halt and none have had an exodus of retail or food service jobs. Amazon is not fleeing from Seattle and neither is Apple, who only three years ago expanded into Seattle.

In fact, the changes you are discussing here today effect a very small segment of the workforce. Although the number of employers and employees will be small in comparison to the overall economy, the impact will be a godsend to these families enabling them to enter and remain in the labor force as better parents and more responsible employees.

Private companies may argue that they need to adopt new scheduling software, retrain their managers, or otherwise expend resources to make predictable schedules possible. In fact, these companies are already spending large sums of money recruiting and replacing workers because their outmoded anti-family-friendly workplace scheduling practices cause unusually high levels of churn among their hourly workers.

The Bureau of Labor Statistics estimates that the turnover rate among hourly workers is 4.5% per month or 54% annually. While the cost of replacing an hourly worker is less than replacing a professional or manager, the cost is not insignificant. Kronos, a workplace analytics firm estimates that the cost of turnover in the hourly wage sector is $1,500 per hire. This includes costs such as managers’ time, training, and paperwork for exiting. Other companies that have studied the problem peg the number higher, at $2,000 to $4,500 per hire. For the average national food service chain it costs a minimum of $12,000 a year or as much as $36,000 a year. Avoiding some or all of that cost through predictable schedules seems like a better deal for business owners, and their employees.

Suffice to say it is not at all a stretch to suggest that companies will save money by adopting predictable scheduling. Further, for the national chains impacted by what you propose, the expense of new scheduling systems have already been borne by the company – so expanding the practice to Philadelphia spreads the cost of that upgrade across the company and essentially brings down the cost per unit sold for the franchisees.

I want to close by calling attention to that fact that employers in other cities, fighting similar measures as those discussed here today, rely on the tired old argument that workers will be harmed when the government attempts to lean in on their behalf. They said that when OSHA laws were passed, when minimum wage laws were first passed and they will say that as this bill is discussed. They will try to make the case that somehow with a predictable schedule an employee can never call in sick so they can take their child to the doctor, ask their boss for a day off to go see their child in their school's play, let their supervisor know they need to change a shift to meet with their child's teacher or see their kid win a playoff.

I hope that you as members of City Council will actively rebuff these arguments and that our corporate sector will not stoop to such obvious falsehoods. To suggest that workers lose all flexibility when the government mandates predictable schedules will only be true in the very same workplaces that today fire parents who ask their employers for flexibility needed in the regular course of parenthood. The government cannot turn a family-hostile employer a family friendly workplace. But the government can level the playing field in these sectors so that there is no competitive disadvantage for employers who want to retain good parents as their workers.

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