



Jewish Federation[®]
OF GREATER PORTLAND



February 23, 2021

TO: Chair Power, Vice-Chair Wallan, and Members of the House Subcommittee on Civil Law
RE: House Bill 2205, The Just Enforcement Act

The Jewish Federation of Greater Portland strongly supports HB 2205 to give workers the power to enforce their rights at work.

Intro: The Jewish Federation of Greater Portland (JFGP) is the primary fundraising and organization umbrella for the local Jewish community. The JFGP supports a variety of programs for people in need on a nonsectarian basis, locally and around the world. These programs include care for the elderly and vulnerable; educational opportunities; counseling and vocational services; rescue, relief and resettlement programs; cultural and enrichment opportunities, and much more. Constituent organizations of the Federation include all Synagogues and most of the Jewish service non-profits in the Portland Metropolitan area. The JFGP's policy arm, the Jewish Community Relations Council, has been active for more than five years in advocating for legislation to curb wage theft and exploitation of workers.

Why do we need the Just Enforcement Act? Every worker deserves to be paid for a fair day's work and have their rights protected no matter where they work or how much they make.

Over the past few decades, our state agencies charged with enforcing important labor protections have experienced a steady decline in funding and resources, while the size of Oregon's workforce has grown. Compounded by the COVID-19 pandemic, wildfires, and an economic crisis those agencies have been overwhelmed by complaints to which they do not have the capacity to respond.

Furthermore, a lack of outreach, accessible information and a fear of retaliation for speaking out has left Oregon's most vulnerable workers - those in agriculture, manufacturing, retail, and other low-wage industries - with little trust in the system that exists to protect them.

The JFGP community includes people from all walks of life – Democrats, Independents and Republicans; wealthy entrepreneurs to middle class workers to poverty-stricken families that depend on social safety net services; multi-generational Portland families to recent immigrants, and people of virtually all racial and national origins. Our support of HB 2205 is based on a consensus of the representatives of this broad community – from those who are victims of dishonest wage practices themselves, to honest business organizations that would prefer not to compete with employers who cut corners on worker compensation, worker safety, and worker opportunity by violating our laws. We support this legislation because:

- Even when the state does enforce workplace laws, companies rarely face penalties. In claims brought to the state between 2006 and 2019, only 1% of Oregon businesses found guilty of wage theft ended up paying penalties imposed by the state.

- Wage theft is a nationwide problem that affects every industry. In Oregon alone, wage theft claims submitted by workers between '06 and '19 amounted to more than \$50 million.
- Workers most acutely affected by wage theft are more likely to be womxn, immigrants, and BIPOC workers who work in low-wage, and labor intensive industries - as well as rural communities with high need for immigrant work-force, including farm-labor, processing plants, meat packing plants, and frozen foods.
- While many complaints go uninvestigated, companies that are doing right by workers are at an economic disadvantage for choosing to follow the law. JEA would create a culture of compliance to level the playing field for small, medium, and large businesses who follow the law.
- When workers do find the courage to speak up at work, they often face retaliation from employers. During COVID-19 a national survey found that Black workers were twice as likely to have experienced or witnessed retaliation for raising COVID-19 safety related concerns in their workplace, and twice as likely to have those issues remain unresolved.
- Workers who face sexual harassment or discrimination at work overcome fear and risk retaliation to come forward. When state agencies do not have capacity to take on their cases, they are often left with no other avenues to address the harm done to them.

The history and struggles of Jewish communities here and elsewhere mirror the current struggle of many BIPOC and immigrant communities. Members of those communities comprise a large portion of essential and frontline workers- and are also most impacted by the crises of COVID, wildfires and the economic downturn. These crises have laid bare the problems that already existed in our workplaces.

- While Latinx people make up 13% of the state's population, they have experienced more than 30% of COVID-19 infections.
- Throughout the pandemic, our state agencies received record numbers of reports of workplace abuse and health and safety violations. During 2020, OR OSHA received complaints from 23 of the 35 largest workplace COVID outbreaks but were only able to investigate two. OR OSHA received ten times as many complaints as they do in a normal year.
- Immigrant workers disproportionately make up the workforce in industries that have seen the most widespread workplace outbreaks of COVID-19.

The Just Enforcement Act would provide workers with a voice in their workplace and create a revenue stream for state agencies to increase enforcement capacity. Providing an avenue for workers to partner with trusted community organizations to file suits on the state's behalf would allow workers who fear speaking out alone and risking their jobs to have the community at their backs while they do so. The Jewish Federation of Greater Portland urges you to support HB 2205.

Signed,

The Jewish Federation of Greater Portland

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