



# Airport Service Workers Deserve Good Jobs

By Karla Walter and Aurelia Glass March 2023

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## Introduction and summary

Airport service workers—including cleaners, wheelchair agents, baggage handlers, ticketing agents, caterers, concessions workers, passenger service agents, and lounge workers—are at a breaking point. Although they have provided essential services throughout the pandemic and are supporting the safe return to normalized travel, these workers are typically paid substandard wages and receive few benefits. Now, airport workers across the United States are calling on Congress to require major airports—which receive billions of dollars in federal support every year—to ensure that passenger air travel employers provide good jobs with the family-sustaining compensation necessary to maintain their health and well-being.<sup>1</sup> Doing so would improve the lives of these essential workers; boost equity in a federally supported sector; and support safe and efficient airport services across the country.

U.S. airport workers face many of the same challenges plaguing Americans across the economy, such as growing inequality, occupational segregation, and inadequate compensation. However, for airport service workers, these problems are compounded by subsidized industry employers—including airlines, airports, and contractors—that have drastically cut wages and benefits in recent decades.<sup>2</sup>

Today, median wages for many airport service workers, including cleaners, wheelchair agents, ticketing and check-in agents, and baggage handlers, fall below the private sector median of \$20.40 per hour. For example, according to 2015–2019 American Community Survey data, the median earnings for aircraft cleaners are just \$13.99 per hour.<sup>3</sup> Much of the workforce does not receive employer-provided health coverage, and for those that do, the insurance is often unaffordable.

Moreover, these low wages have a disproportionate impact on people of color, who are highly represented in airport service occupations. The majority of workers in several service occupations are Black or Hispanic—or both—compared with 28.7 percent across the private sector workforce.<sup>4</sup>

For the full report, please visit <https://www.americanprogress.org/article/airport-service-workers-deserve-good-jobs/>.

This report supports the case for raising standards for these workers by:

- Providing new analysis on low pay and occupational segregation in the national aviation industry
- Explaining how the federal government provides billions of dollars in funding for airports every year
- Detailing state and local efforts to raise standards for essential airport service workers
- Surveying existing evidence that raising standards for airport workers will improve their lives and result in good value for the public

Low industry wages and inadequate benefits do not harm only workers. Coupled with the tight labor market and high turnover, airline and airport employers are failing to maintain a well-qualified workforce, thereby harming the American public as well. Labor instability and inexperience in the industry are reducing airport safety and security and leading to travel slowdowns.<sup>5</sup>

Airport and airline service workers are relied on to be part of the response to emergencies such as extreme weather, active shooter situations, and terrorist attacks.<sup>6</sup> And although air industry employers have received billions of dollars in pandemic assistance to cover payroll costs, in recent months many passengers have missed flights and been left without critical assistance due to the failure of airlines to retain enough wheelchair attendants.<sup>7</sup>

A better way forward is possible. For nearly a century, federal policymakers have enacted standards to ensure that recipients of government spending pay fair wages, provide benefits, and support equitable access for workers from all walks of life.<sup>8</sup> In 2021, President Joe Biden increased the contractor minimum wage to \$15 per hour—indexed to inflation, this rate rose to \$16.20 in 2023—strengthened job security for contracted service workers, and called on all government agencies to review their procurement practices to support equity for all workers performing government services.<sup>9</sup>

However, the patchwork of protections for workers whose jobs are funded through government support is uneven. While workers in jobs funded through the federal contracting system enjoy numerous protections, these policies do not apply to service jobs performed on properties receiving federal grants, loans, loan guarantees, and other federally enabled spending programs. As a result, federal law leaves airport service workers unprotected. For example, the Center for American Progress' analysis found that the majority of workers employed nationwide as aircraft cleaners, as well as more than one-third of baggage handlers and ticketing agents, earn hourly wages below the 2023 contractor minimum wage.

In the absence of federal action, cities and states are fighting to raise standards for airport workers. For example, wheelchair attendants and baggage handlers at New York’s John F. Kennedy Airport are paid a minimum of \$18.00 per hour and receive benefits.<sup>10</sup> And in March 2022, the City Council of Atlanta helped airport cleaners at Hartsfield-Jackson Atlanta International Airport win a more than decade-long fight for wage increases.<sup>11</sup>

Yet in other jurisdictions across the United States, the lack of consistency across federally subsidized airports harms workers. Major hubs, such as Charlotte Douglas International Airport in Charlotte, North Carolina, have no airport-specific pay standards for most airport service workers.<sup>12</sup> Even across jurisdictions that have enacted airport worker standards, minimum pay standards vary considerably, and most communities have not taken action to require provision of health care and other essential benefits.

In summer 2022, Sen. Edward Markey (D-MA) and Rep. Chuy García (D-IL) introduced the Good Jobs for Good Airports Act to establish pay, benefits, and labor standards for airport service workers—including cleaners, wheelchair agents, baggage handlers, concessionaires, and security personnel.<sup>13</sup>

Strong, federally mandated floors would help uphold equity and fair standards across the country; ensure that the government stands by its commitment to not subsidize poverty wages; and increase safety and efficiency across the national aviation system by supporting a well-qualified workforce.

## Endnotes

- 1 Passenger air travel employers include airports and passenger airlines, as well as firms with contracts and leases to provide onsite services and concessions. U.S. Government Accountability Office, "Airport Infrastructure: Information on Funding and Financing for Planned Projects" (Washington: 2020), available at <https://www.gao.gov/assets/gao-20-298.pdf>; Rebecca Kanable, "Airport Workers Say Federal Funding Should Come with Wage and Benefit Assurances, Some in Congress Agree," *Aviation Pros*, October 7, 2021, available at <https://www.aviationpros.com/airports/article/21241507/airport-workers-say-federal-funding-should-come-with-wage-and-benefit-assurances>; Michael Sainato, "Airport workers ramp up pressure for a living wage and union rights," *The Guardian*, April 8, 2022, available at <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2022/apr/08/airport-workers-union-wages-conditions>; Good Jobs for Good Airports Act of 2022, S. 4419, 117th Cong., 2nd sess. (June 16, 2022), available at <https://www.congress.gov/bills/117th-congress/senate-bill/4419>.
- 2 Miranda Dietz, Peter Hall, and Ken Jacobs, "Course Correction: Reversing Wage Erosion to Restore Good Jobs at American Airports" (Berkeley, CA: UC Berkeley Center for Labor Research and Education, 2013), available at [https://laborcenter.berkeley.edu/pdf/2013/restore\\_good\\_jobs\\_american\\_airports.pdf](https://laborcenter.berkeley.edu/pdf/2013/restore_good_jobs_american_airports.pdf); Brian Callaci, "Fissuring in Flight: Consolidation and Outsourcing in the US Domestic Airline Industry, 1997-2018" (Washington: Communications Workers of America, 2020), available at <https://cwa-union.org/sites/default/files/20200108-fissuring-in-flight.pdf>.
- 3 This analysis covers workers who reported working 50 to 52 weeks the preceding year within survey waves from 2015 to 2019. For more details, see Methodology.
- 4 A majority of baggage handlers, passenger attendants, and aircraft cleaners analyzed in this sample identified as either Black or African American or Hispanic or Latino, or both, based on the authors' calculations using data from Steven Ruggles and others, "Integrated Public Use Microdata Series, Version 12.0, U.S. Census Data for Social, Economic, and Health Research, 2015–2019 American Community Survey: 5-year estimates" (Minneapolis: Minnesota Population Center, 2022), available at <https://doi.org/10.18128/D010.V12.0>.
- 5 Ian Duncan, "TSA asks office staff for help, offers bonuses and mandates overtime to keep airport checkpoints moving," *The Washington Post*, June 9, 2021, available at <https://www.washingtonpost.com/transportation/2021/06/09/tsa-checkpoints-summer-travel/>; Robert Silk, "Groundworker shortage a problem for airlines," *Travel Weekly*, September 4, 2021, available at <https://www.travelweekly.com/Robert-Silk/Groundworker-shortage-a-problem-for-airlines>.
- 6 California Assembly Select Committee on Local Emergency Preparedness, "Active Shooter Emergency Response: Lessons Learned from the LAX Shooting" (Sacramento, CA: 2014), available at <https://www.assembly.ca.gov/sites/assembly.ca.gov/files/Active%20Shooter%20LAX.pdf>.
- 7 See, for example, Nate Morabito, "3 women abandoned by airline wheelchair workers at CLT Airport," *WCNC Charlotte*, June 9, 2022, available at <https://www.wcnc.com/article/news/investigations/airline-wheelchair-workers-abandoned-3-women-at-charlotte-airport/275-012eba4d-8a3e-4d07-9a2f-30ed81ac5257>.
- 8 Karla Walter, "Ensuring Government Spending Creates Decent Jobs for Workers" (Washington: Center for American Progress Action Fund, 2018), available at <https://www.americanprogressaction.org/article/ensuring-government-spending-creates-decent-jobs-workers/>.
- 9 The White House, "Executive Order on Increasing the Minimum Wage for Federal Contractors," April 27, 2021, available at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/presidential-actions/2021/04/27/executive-order-on-increasing-the-minimum-wage-for-federal-contractors/>; The White House, "Executive Order on Nondisplacement of Qualified Workers Under Service Contracts," November 18, 2021, available at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/presidential-actions/2021/11/18/executive-order-on-nondisplacement-of-qualified-workers-under-service-contracts/>; The White House, "Executive Order on Advancing Racial Equity and Support for Underserved Communities Through the Federal Government," January 20, 2021, available at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/presidential-actions/2021/01/20/executive-order-advancing-racial-equity-and-support-for-underserved-communities-through-the-federal-government/>.
- 10 Port Authority of New York and New Jersey, "Amended Rules for Implementation of Minimum Wage Policy for Non-Trade Labor Service Contracts – LaGuardia Airport, John F. Kennedy International Airport and Newark Liberty International Airport," October 15, 2018, available at <https://www.panynj.gov/content/dam/airports/index/amended-wage-rules.pdf>.
- 11 Steve Gehlbach, "Atlanta airport cleaners to get raises after 13-year battle over minimum wage," *WSB-TV*, March 31, 2022, available at <https://www.wsbtv.com/news/local/atlanta-airport-cleaners-get-raises-after-13-year-battle-over-minimum-wage/H3JXWOSIVRHFVKH634YGK-KKQZQ/>.
- 12 See, for example, *South Charlotte Weekly*, "Charlotte airport workers protest for better wages and benefits," December 9, 2022, available at [https://www.thecharlotte-weekly.com/southcltweekly/charlotte-airport-workers-protest-for-better-wages-and-benefits/article\\_dd10b17c-77be-11ed-994f-73faa5292fb3.html](https://www.thecharlotte-weekly.com/southcltweekly/charlotte-airport-workers-protest-for-better-wages-and-benefits/article_dd10b17c-77be-11ed-994f-73faa5292fb3.html).
- 13 Good Jobs for Good Airports Act of 2022; Sen. Edward Markey, "Senator Markey and Rep. Garcia Introduce Legislation To Boost Pay, Benefits For Nation's Airport Workers," Press release, June 16, 2022, available at <https://www.markey.senate.gov/news/press-releases/senator-markey-and-rep-garca-introduce-legislation-to-boost-pay-benefits-for-nations-airport-workers>.