

Child care on the third shift ^[1]

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EXCERPTS:

Losia Nyankale, a server at Luna Grill and Diner near DuPont Circle in Washington, wanted to tell people gathered Tuesday afternoon at the National Press Club how close to impossible it is to find, keep and pay for safe, high-quality child care when you have unpredictable hours, an ever-changing schedule and make \$2.77 an hour plus tips as a restaurant worker.

But Nyankale, 29, wasn't able to make it. She had to work the lunch shift.

I spoke with her by phone after her shift ended, and long after the nonprofit Restaurant Opportunities Centers United and nine other groups had presented a new report, "The Third Shift," on the difficulties that low-wage restaurant workers have finding, keeping and paying for child care.

A few years ago, Nyankale was working at a restaurant in Maryland. She had the night shift, when entrée prices tend to be steeper, restaurants busier and the tips generally more generous than during the day. "Most restaurants expect you to be available for at least some night shifts," she said.

But, newly separated from her children's father, it was close to impossible to find someone who could look after them until her shift ended at midnight. When she finally found someone she felt she could trust, it required a 30-minute drive north of her D.C. apartment to drop them off, then an hour commute south to work.

She'd get off work at midnight. Pick her kids up at 1 a.m. and get home at 1:30 a.m..

Then her car broke down and, strapped after rent and child care ate up most of her income, she couldn't afford to repair it.

The hour drive turned into a three-hour bus and Metro ride. When a snowstorm hit and shut down the Metro and she couldn't get to the babysitter or work, the restaurant cut her hours. "Some weeks, I made \$60, and all of that went to the babysitter," she said.

She lost her apartment and wound up in a homeless shelter.

In many ways, Nyankale's story is typical.

In the report, paid for by the Ms. Foundation, a survey of 200 mothers working in restaurants in five cities- including Chicago, D.C., Detroit, Los Angeles and New York- found that mothers spent about 35 percent of their weekly wages on child care.

Fewer than 7 percent received a federal subsidy designed to help low-wage workers pay for child care, which can cost more than some low-wage workers earn.

Half of the mothers in the survey reported having unpredictable, erratic schedules, many with last-minute shift changes, which made it difficult to find and keep stable child care for their children.

And their inability to find reliable child care kept the mothers from working the better shifts that could boost their income and family well-being.

More than 90 percent said they had no paid sick days - which is hardly a surprise since only a handful of jurisdictions require it. But time off without pay to care for a sick child can mean bills that go unpaid or, the report noted, and punishment at work.

The report does note some bright spots: a restaurant in North Carolina that gives workers a say in scheduling, pays a living wage and pools tips among all workers so no shift is more lucrative than another, and a child care center in Tennessee that is open 24 hours.

But the big picture is sobering: tipped restaurant servers experience poverty at three times the rate of the rest of the workforce, the report notes, and use food stamps at twice the rate.

Nyankale has since found work at the Luna Grill, gradually moving from part-time to full-time work and worked with her employer to only work the day shift while her children, now 4 and 5, are at child care and school.

She is one of the few who do receive a child care subsidy, though she only found out about it from a social worker at the shelter. "I'm grateful for it," she said. "But most low-wage jobs in restaurants and retail have crazy hours. With a voucher or without a voucher, it's hard to find anybody who can watch your children after 6 or 7 pm."

Trying to live a sane life when work demands crazy hours is exactly the reason why Saru Jayaraman, co-founder of the restaurant workers'

group, and the others behind the report, including Family Values @ Work, Wider Opportunities for Women and the National Women's Law Center among others, are pushing for a higher minimum wage - the federal minimum for tipped workers has been frozen at \$2.13 an hour since 1991 - paid sick days, better access to child care vouchers, more child care providers that stay open during "non-traditional" hours, licensing and training the informal family or friends who now provide most of that off-hour care and giving restaurant workers more control and predictability over their schedules.

Members of the National Restaurant Association have lobbied against paid sick days and testified before Congress against raising the minimum wage and the tipped minimum wage, saying they would create hardships, particularly on small businesses in a struggling economy.

Jayaraman disagrees.

"The restaurant and retail industries are now the two fastest growing and largest private sector employers in America," Jayaraman told me. "The unpredictable hours are becoming even more erratic with 'just in time' and 'on call' scheduling. The move to more part-time, temporary work means more people have to piece together more erratic, part-time jobs. One in 12 workers work in restaurants. One in eight or nine work in retail. We're talking hundreds of millions of workers and their families. We've got to address these issues now before it really explodes."

With that, Jayaraman, author of "Behind the Kitchen Door" about low-wage restaurant workers' lives, ran off to find her own child out in the hall. She'd brought her to the press conference Tuesday, she said, because her own child care had fallen through.

-reprinted from the Washington Post

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