

'Bill of Rights' Urged For Household Employees

By NANCY TREJOS
Washington Post Staff Writer

Many domestic workers in Montgomery County are underpaid, work long hours and receive inadequate health care benefits and retirement provisions, according to a survey commissioned by the Montgomery County Council.

The majority of the workers, most of them Hispanic, work as housekeepers or nannies and do not get paid vacations, overtime pay or sick leave, according to the survey, which was released yesterday at a news conference at the council office building in Rockville.

The Montgomery County Council's Health and Human Services Committee commissioned George Washington University master of public policy candidates to conduct the survey in response to complaints from immigrant advocacy groups that household employees were being exploited. The researchers surveyed hundreds of workers over three weeks in March and April and based their findings on responses from 286 employees.

CASA of Maryland, an immigrant advocacy group, has led an effort to urge council members to consider a workers' "bill of rights" that would require employers to pay a minimum wage of \$10.50 an hour and provide health insurance, paid sick days and paid holidays. No council member has introduced such legislation. Several County Council candidates joined CASA at the news con-

ference to pledge their support for such a bill.

"Women who watch Montgomery County children and clean Montgomery County homes face an extraordinary level of abuse in the workplace," said Kim Propeack, advocacy and organizing director for CASA.

County Council President George L. Leventhal (D-At Large) said the study exposed many problems but also left questions unanswered. He has asked the Montgomery County Commission for Women, a county department, to make recommendations in October on how to proceed.

"I'm willing to consider some expansion of the county government's role in protecting exploited workers," he said. But, "there are some very complex legal and constitutional issues."

Leventhal and council Vice President Marilyn Praisner (D-Eastern County) outlined those issues in a written statement. One problem, they said, is that regulating private-sector wages, benefits and vacations would be a major shift in policy.

Nonetheless, Leventhal said the survey provided useful information. The average domestic worker is an unmarried, 37-year-old Hispanic female with two children and a ninth-grade education, the study found. Most work in Silver Spring, Bethesda, Rockville and Gaithersburg. More than half — 56 percent — do not speak English.

The average hourly salary for do-

Domestic Workers Underinsured

Health insurance among Montgomery County workers who live in their employers' homes vs. those who live elsewhere.

HEALTH INSURANCE

Live-ins:

Health insurance: **38%**
No health insurance: **62**

Live elsewhere:

Health insurance: **16**
No health insurance: **84**

SOURCE: George Washington University Research Team, survey commissioned by the Montgomery County Council

mestic workers who live with their employers is \$6.29, slightly more than the state's minimum wage of \$6.15. Those who do not live with their employers make an average of \$9.79 an hour. Live-in domestic workers tend to work longer hours than those who do not live with their employers — an average of 58 hours a week vs. 39, the study found.

Antonia Menjivar, 29, a mother of two, arrived in the United States from El Salvador in 2003 to work for a World Bank official. She said she worked from 7 a.m. to 9 or 10 p.m. most nights with no breaks. She earned \$450 a month and had no medical insurance, she said. She left the job after two years and has since gotten a new job.

"I hope my story serves a purpose and helps other abused women," she said in Spanish.