

Bill would protect domestic workers

■ County Council measure requires contracts for wages and overtime

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Two Montgomery County Council members introduced a bill Tuesday that would require signed contracts for domestic help to make sure housekeepers, nannies and baby-sitters receive fair wages and overtime and are reimbursed for out-of-pocket expenses spent on the family.

The bill is the result of three years of lobbying by a coalition of groups representing immigrants, women, Christians and Jews.

Councilmen Marc Ehrlich (D-At Large) of Takoma Park and George L. Leventhal (D-

At Large) of Takoma Park touted the bill as the first of its kind in the nation at a news conference Monday.

People who work in homes more than 29 hours a week would be allowed to negotiate their contracts with their employers. The county's consumer protection division would have a sample contract available for download, they said.

The exact number of domestic workers in the county is unknown. A 2006 study by George Washington University commissioned by the council three years ago was unable to determine the number, but Leventhal estimated that "tens of thousands" probably work as domestic help in the county as housekeepers, live-in nannies, baby-sitters, or elderly care assistants.

The study had showed that domestic workers were at risk of abuse because they

were employed within homes instead of within public view. The study showed many domestic workers were required to work more than 40 hours a week with no overtime, were not allowed to have locks on their bedroom doors and often paid out of their own pockets for food and other family expenses without being reimbursed.

The bill does not address the issue of illegal immigrants working as domestic help because immigration law is an issue for the federal government to address, not the county, Leventhal said.

"All our constituents deserve basic protections, basic rights," Leventhal said.

Other council members have expressed concerns about the bill and how it would be implemented, said Council President Michael J. Knapp (D-Dist. 2) of Germantown.

Councilwoman Duchy Trachtenberg (D-At Large) of North Bethesda said the county needs to do more to educate immigrants about labor laws.

"It's complicated," Trachtenberg said. "Having great passion for women's rights, great compassion for immigrants, in my opinion this bill raises concerns about immigration status. The issue with this is it requires people to acknowledge their legal status."

But immigrant advocates at Monday's press conference said they did not think that would be an issue because they already have to provide documentation to employers.

"A lot of us work in homes without any fair wage and without any fair treatment," said Hermina Servat, who serves on a women's justice committee of advocacy group Casa of Maryland.