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Chicago Park District Workers and Allies Demand Higher Pay, Fair Contract at District Budget Hearing

Chicago, IL – Chicago Park District workers spoke at the November 15 Budget Hearing to demand meaningful wage increases and a fair contract.

Through their union SEIU Local 73, workers have been in contract negotiations with the Park District since June fighting for competitive pay increases for all titles, including longevity pay; a \$20/hr minimum wage; more monthly (full-time) positions; health insurance for all; and a fair and transparent promotions process.

The District has proposed a paltry wage increase equating to 40 cents to 90 cents per hour and has pushed back on Local 73's proposals to expand benefits to help with staff retention. Starting pay at the Park District begins at \$16.24/hr for a Recreation Leader and \$16.77 for a Lifeguard.

"Our parks cannot be accessible and supported if the workers who run them are struggling to make ends meet. The cost of living has dramatically increased over the past few years, and we cannot survive with a 40 cent raise increase. We, the Park District Employees, want to see our needs addressed in this budget: we need competitive pay increases across all titles. We are essential employees and the Park District must respect us, protect us, and pay us," said Parris Purdis, Labor Foreman at Pulaski Park.

Community leader Sylvia Jones presented a community petition with 1,200 signatures from park patrons in solidarity with Local 73's demands.

"Our community relies on our park system for so many reasons: recreation, fitness, senior programs, childcare, and violence prevention. And yet, even as we see staffing shortages affecting these positions, Park District management has proposed just pennies in pay increases for these workers, despite a budget surplus. We urge you to make the livelihood of these workers a priority in your budget for 2024 and beyond," said Jones.

Since the last round of contract negotiations in 2019, the cost of living in Chicago has dramatically increased, and workers' purchasing power has declined. Low wages have driven the staffing crisis, resulting in pool closures over the summer and fewer services available to park patrons.

“Low pay and disrespect from the District are driving talented staff away. My park was forced to cut our programming in half when one of our two instructors left. We used to take 24 kids in our swimming classes; now, due to short staffing, we only take 16 per class, and our waitlist includes 20-30 people. Citywide, our parks are severely understaffed, and we can't fill positions,” said Lydia Vega, Supervisor at Eckhart Park.

“The severe shortage of lifeguards has led to overwhelming coverage issues. Even on extremely hot days, our beaches were understaffed because we were forced to send our guards to cover other sites. The shortage affects us year-round since we don't have enough staff to always provide three levels of swimming classes. We've had to deal with complaints from parents about the quality of our classes because there aren't enough instructors for the size of the class,” said Coral Rubio, Lifeguard at Kosciuszko Park

“There were two suicide attempts at Osterman Beach alone this summer. As Lifeguards, we should not have to deal with mental health crises. Some of the lifeguards on staff are young teenagers. Can you imagine what seeing these unfortunate incidents can do to their development? We need more than a 40 cent wage increase for all Park District workers; we need competitive pay now,” said Mariana Rubio, Lifeguard at Kosciuszko Park

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SEIU Local 73 represents more than 34,000 workers, primarily in public service and publicly funded positions in school districts, municipalities, social service agencies, and many other job classifications in Illinois and Indiana. We are dedicated to improving the lives of workers and their families.