

Testimony on Fair Workweek Legislation Before Joint Committee on Labor and Workforce Development

Good afternoon. My name is Jeremy Thompson. I'm a Senior Policy Analyst with the Massachusetts Budget and Policy Center. MassBudget is an independent, non-partisan research nonprofit focusing on policy solutions that improve the lives of low- and middle-income people in Massachusetts.

Among these policies are so-called "**fair workweek**" laws, which a number of states and cities have enacted in recent years – covering nearly two million workers.¹ I want to thank the Chairs of the Joint Committee on Labor and Workforce Development, Senator Jehlen and Representative Brodeur, for inviting me to testify today.

Fair workweek laws seek to address a growing problem in the workplace: the adoption of practices that prevent many workers from enjoying stable, secure schedules. Workers in low-wage service occupations like food service, retail, and hospitality often have shifts assigned to them less than one week in advance, and their schedules can fluctuate wildly from one period to another.² Many work consecutive shifts with little time for rest in between, including so-called "clopening" shifts – in which someone closes a store or restaurant at night and has to open it the next morning.³ And workers don't have much bargaining power – most have no say in their schedules.⁴

These unstable scheduling practices affect household finances, health, and family well-being.

The impacts of unstable scheduling on household finances

First, the economic and financial impacts. Because we're talking primarily about low-wage service workers paid by the hour, time literally is money. When employers change or cancel shifts, it leads to significant income volatility.

Daniel Schneider of the University of California at Berkeley and Kristen Harknett of the University of California at San Francisco run the SHIFT project, which has been publishing groundbreaking studies on the relationship between work schedules, worker health, and family well-being. Their 2017 study of retail and fast-food workers found the following:

- Half of the workers surveyed said their household incomes vary from week to week⁵, with the typical worker experiencing a swing in earnings of 34% over the course of a month.⁶
- This income volatility is much more prevalent among employees whose workweeks vary than among those with more stable workweeks.⁷ It is also more prevalent among the households of Black and Latinx workers.⁸
- Households with volatile incomes were more likely to experience financial stress than households with stable incomes. Specifically:
 - Nearly four out of 10 households with income volatility report having trouble paying bills.

- About a quarter had to use a payday lender or pawn shop.
- And more than six out of 10 lack confidence in their ability to come up with \$400 in case of an emergency.⁹

Unstable schedules can also lead to poverty and hunger. Able-bodied adults without dependents have to work an average of at least 20 hours per week in order to receive more than three months of food stamps¹⁰ – a benefit that keeps millions out of poverty each year.¹¹ If their employers cut their hours suddenly, workers risk losing this crucial support.

The impacts of unstable scheduling on health and family well-being

Besides causing economic and financial hardship for workers and their families, unstable schedules can also lead to negative physical and mental health outcomes. A paper published in the American Sociological Review in February, also by Schneider and Harknett, found that the more unstable a worker's schedule is, the more likely the worker is to report psychological distress, poor sleep quality, and unhappiness.¹²

Finally, unstable schedules can hurt family and child well-being, as they make it challenging for working parents to arrange child care, and to monitor homework and participate in bedtime routines – all of which are important for healthy child development.¹³

Benefits of fair workweek legislation

As evidence of these problems has grown, so has research showing the benefits of fair workweek practices – and not just for workers. Fair workweeks can also be better for businesses, as they have been found to boost employee morale and increase sales and labor productivity. A randomized controlled study found that stable scheduling increased sales by seven percent and labor productivity by five percent.¹⁴

This legislation can ensure that workers, families, and businesses benefit from fair, healthy schedules. Thank you for hearing my testimony.

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Sources and Notes

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- ² Susan J. Lambert, Peter J. Fugiel, and Julia R. Henly, “Precarious Work Schedules Among Early-Career Employees in the US: A National Snapshot,” August 27, 2014, p. 13. [https://cpb-us-w2.wpmucdn.com/voices.uchicago.edu/dist/5/1068/files/2018/05/lambert.fugiel.henly_precarious_work_schedules.august2014_0-298fz5i.pdf]
- ³ Daniel Schneider and Kristen Harknett, “Consequences of Routine Work-Schedule Instability for Worker Health and Well-Being,” *American Sociological Review*, Vol. 84 (February 2019), p. 99.
- ⁴ Schneider and Harknett 2019, p. 99.
- ⁵ Daniel Schneider and Kristen Harknett, “Income Volatility in the Service Sector: Contours, Causes, and Consequences,” July 2017, p. 5. [https://assets.aspeninstitute.org/content/uploads/2017/07/ASPEN_RESEARCH_INCOME_VOLATILITY_WEB.pdf]
- ⁶ Schneider and Harknett 2017, p. 4.
- ⁷ Schneider and Harknett 2017, p. 6.
- ⁸ Schneider and Harknett 2017, p. 5.
- ⁹ Schneider and Harknett 2017, pp. 8-9.
- ¹⁰ Massachusetts Department of Transitional Assistance, “Able Bodied Adults Without Dependents (ABAWD) work program rules.” [<https://www.mass.gov/service-details/able-bodied-adults-without-dependents-abawd-work-program-rules>]
- ¹¹ Liana Fox, U.S. Census Bureau, “The Supplemental Poverty Measure: 2017,” p. 29. [<https://www.census.gov/content/dam/Census/library/publications/2018/demo/p60-265.pdf>]
- ¹² Schneider and Harknett 2019, p. 103.
- ¹³ Lambert, Fugiel, and Henly, p. 6.
- ¹⁴ Joan Williams et al., “Stable Scheduling Increases Productivity and Sales,” p. 28. [<https://worklifelaw.org/publications/Stable-Scheduling-Study-Report.pdf>]