

STRONG UNIONS, STRONGER COMMUNITIES

PROFILES OF COMMITMENT

10 members of the Washington Federation of State Employees/AFSCME making a difference every day.



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INTRODUCTION

Across the country, Americans are working longer hours for less money and fewer benefits, despite being more productive than ever. No matter how hard people work, many are finding it more and more difficult to get by and provide for their families, much less take a day off when they are sick or save for retirement. All the while, a handful of CEOs and those who are already rich have seen their salaries and wealth skyrocket.

This is not by accident. Big corporations and the wealthy – along with the politicians who do their bidding – have rigged our economy and our political system against working people.

However, when working people have the freedom to join strong unions and negotiate a fair return for their work, they have the power to help everyone succeed – whether or not they belong to a union.

For instance, when unions are strong, wages are stronger – and not just for union members. When union density was at its height in the middle of the 20th century, so was the middle class. However, [as union density has shrunk since the 1970s, a larger share of income has gone to the top 10 percent](#). According to the Economic Policy Institute, “By most estimates, declining unionization accounted for about a third of the increase in inequality in the 1980s and 1990s.”

Today, union members continue to negotiate for better wages and conditions that have a ripple effect in local economies. But the work does not stop there. Through collective bargaining, union members are scoring victories that help entire communities – like safer nurse staffing levels that help patients and smaller classroom sizes that help students. Together with community partners, unions are also using their collective voice to advocate for policies that benefit all working people – like affordable healthcare and great public schools. Finally, unions are using their resources to provide communities with direct support – whether that is making sure children have access to counselors and drinking water at school or training is available for good jobs.

Put simply: When unions are strong, communities are stronger.

This report looks at numerous case studies where members of labor unions have used their freedom to join strong unions and collective voice to fight for improvements that benefit all working families in communities throughout America. From helping hospitals and airports prepare to respond to the Ebola virus to helping high school students start careers in nursing, labor unions and their members are helping communities across the country prosper.

Over the past several years, corporate special interests have launched unprecedented attacks against the freedom of working people to form strong unions, most recently urging the U.S. Supreme Court to take up a case called *Janus v. AFSCME*, which would further benefit the corporations, wealthy special interests and politicians that have rigged the economy against working people.

The aim of these special interests is clear. In a 10-page fundraising letter from the State Policy Network, a group of conservative think tanks, CEO Tracie Sharp [recently wrote](#) that the goal of the network’s \$80 million campaign was to “defund and defang” unions.

The American people, however, support labor unions by growing margins. According to a [recent Gallup poll](#), more than three in five Americans approve of unions, including 42 percent of Republicans. This is up by five points from 2016 and is the highest percentage since 2003.

The strength of labor unions is critical to fixing the rigged economy and political system by helping working families get ahead. The case studies included in this report are just a few examples of the many ways strong unions are making our communities and our country stronger.

GIVING A VOICE AND EMPOWERMENT TO DISABLED PEOPLE

Brian-Keith Jennings is an adult training specialist at Lakeland Village in Medical Lake, outside Spokane. State employees at that “campus of caring” train, educate and provide health care for about 210 individuals with intellectual disabilities.

Brian-Keith is one of the state employees we may never see but whose work we couldn't live without.

He's making a difference. He gives dignity to those he cares for.

“We want our residents to be as independent and self-sufficient as possible,” Brian-Keith says.

“They are no different than us,” he adds.

With new technology, he's giving residents a voice.

Using iPads with a program called “Talk Tablet,” he teaches residents how to express themselves - how to say they're hungry, thirsty or uncomfortable.

“When they're able to communicate like that, they're able to express themselves...,” Brian-Keith says.

“It just gives them control and they feel empowered because they can be heard now. Before we were trying to assist and maybe it's not what they wanted. Now when they have a voice, they can say, “Hey, this is what I would like or this is what I'm feeling.”

“It gives them a sense of pride and control because they are getting their needs met.”

For Brian-Keith, it's personal.

“I have a son with autism and I treat everybody the same way I would want him to be treated,” Brian-Keith says.



SHE WORKS FOR THE VICTIMS OF VIOLENT CRIME

Mariah Low is a forensic scientist for the Washington State Patrol Crime Lab in Marysville.

She's one of the state employees we may never see but whose work we couldn't live without.

Day in and day out for the past 11 years she's processed evidence in cases of crimes against persons, ranging from sexual assaults, homicides, assaults, domestic violence, robberies and burglaries.

"We do a lot of work for the victims," Low says.

"Sometimes some of the cases are extremely difficult to deal with emotionally," Low adds. "We see some pretty brutal stuff."

She's also worked on other cases we all remember:

Low helped identify one of the national symbols of the 9/11 terrorist attacks - the flag that flew at Ground Zero, but disappeared for 14 years until it was turned in to an Everett fire station.

And she was part of the team that worked around the clock to help identify the remains of victims from the 2014 Oso Landslide that killed 49 people, "so we could get closure for the families," Low says.

Even though she can make more money in the private sector, Low says she sticks to the Crime Lab, "to see a case through to fruition, being able to finish a case and actually provide the investigators with valuable information that either keeps the case going, re-opens it or closes it."



PARK RANGER WHO HELPS FAMILIES HAVE FUN

Tom Riggs is a park ranger at three beautiful state parks in Southwest Washington: Battle Ground Lake State Park, Beacon Rock in the heart of the Columbia Gorge and Paradise Point on the Lewis River north of Vancouver.

Tom is one of the state employees we may never see but whose work we couldn't live without.

For 22 years, he's welcomed campers and worked to keep each park in tip-top shape. During the summer months Tom can be found on his patrol bike. "I can cover more ground and talk to more people that way than patrolling in a truck," he says.



There are challenges. In a sign of the times, homeless citizens who can't afford permanent housing find campsites an affordable alternative. Tom says it's tough "seeing people on the edge of society and having limits on what I can do help them."

But he relishes the "authority to do what we can for all the customers" who come to the park for a picnic, a weekend or a vacation.

Attention to the basics is key: clean bathrooms, garbage hauled away, roads clear of leaves and debris.

"It's about keeping the park looking nice so that people can see it as a nice place to be...where people can come and have a nice time," he says.

"My favorite part is I get to help people have fun," Tom says.

Washington state employees like Tom Riggs are the public servants who work for us everyday.

DEVOTED TO 94 VULNERABLE ELDERLY, DISABLED SHE LOOKS OUT FOR

Monique Romans is a social worker in the Home and Community Services branch of the state Department of Social and Health Services in Everett.

Monique is one of the state employees we may never see but whose work we couldn't live without.

Despite a caseload of 94, she goes to work every day devoted to the elderly and disabled folks she watches out for in Adult Family Homes, assisted living facilities - even a secure dementia unit in Mill Creek.

"I make sure they're not getting abused, that they're safe, they're well taken care of and they have a care plan that is good for them and their family....," Monique says.

"I want to just see our folks get supported who are struggling with disabling conditions - mental, emotional and physical."

Like many state social workers helping vulnerable adults and children, Monique faces the challenge of high caseloads.

"I have a master's degree in social work, so I can go a lot of other places, but I want to be right here," she says.

She loves the time she gets to spend with the elderly and disabled people she looks out for.

"I let them know that they're heard and let them know I'm trying to help keep them safe," Monique says.

"That fulfills me."



MAKING A DIFFERENCE FOR UW STUDENTS, RESEARCHERS

As a custodian at the University of Washington Health Sciences Center in Seattle, **Netzereab Seare** makes sure that five floors of his assigned building are clean and safe for the students, researchers and doctors who use the facility.

Netzereab, who's worked at the UW for 28 years, is one of the state employees we may never see but whose work we couldn't live without.

UW custodians like him do a lot more than clean restrooms. They make sure that labs where UW researchers have achieved miracles over the years are spic and span.

"Without us, their lab might not be a lab," he says.

Netzereab must finish cleaning the labs before students and researchers arrive so they can work undisturbed.

"All of our work is related to them," he says. "We are really close to the people in the offices and labs."

But UW custodians cover a lot of ground. It's been known for years they're short-staffed. But their devotion, especially to students, some of whom are their own children, only grows.

Do he and his co-workers feel appreciated? "Yes we do, 100 percent, we make a difference," Netzereab says.

"The heart of the job at the U Dub is the cleaning. We are doing all the cleaning so people are safe



SAVING KIDS BY HELPING PARENTS RECOVERING FROM ADDICTION

Charles Loeffler is a social worker in the Children's Administration branch of the state Department of Social and Health Services. He works out of DSHS office on Harrison Street near the Seattle Center.

Charles is one of the state employees we may never see but whose work we couldn't live without.

He works with families in Family Treatment Court. The parents are all in various stages of recovery from addiction. Social workers like Charles provide "intensive" services to the families.

Some days Charles may be on the road five to eight hours - and may see things none of us could ever handle. "You see the worst and the best all at the same time," Charles says. But he also sees hope.

"The No. 1 thing is the resilience," Charles says. "It can be really hard to hear the stories that these kids have gone through...sharing the difficulty that they have seen. But it is so gratifying to see how well the kids can bounce back when they get the care that they need when they have people who are looking out for them. It's incredible."

Sometimes there are setbacks. Parents relapse, for instance. But Charles stays on the job because he makes a difference.

"The most rewarding part of my job would be seeing parents make real, substantive changes in their lives, seeing someone go from the deepest throes of addiction into a life of recovery -- and from a place where they could not take care of themselves let alone their kids -- to becoming fierce advocates for their families and gaining skills that they never thought they would have," Charles says.

Washington state employees like Charles Loeffler are the public servants who work for us everyday.



PROTECTING THE SAFETY, HEALTH & SECURITY OF WORKERS

As a trainer at the state Department of Labor and Industries, **Imelda Ang** empowers the agency's employees to have the best customer service skills. That's important because L&I staff are on the frontlines helping workers and businesses in the overall mission to protect the safety, health and security of Washington's 2.5 million workers.

"It's wonderful day for me is going home knowing that I helped the people who help people," Imelda says.

Imelda is one of the state employees we may never see but whose work we couldn't live without.

Imelda's service has a ripple effect in the agency that helps workers and employers experiencing dire emergencies.

L&I workers like those in the Division of Occupational Safety and Health sometimes face high workloads and a recruitment and retention crisis among safety inspectors, for instance. There's stress. But trainers like Imelda have their backs.

"Who takes care of those individuals who provide those services to the community at large?" Imelda says. "Well, I'm part of that infrastructure.

"So when we have our trainings at L&I, we want to make sure that we convey we are a community, that in our community, diversity is our strength."

Imelda says "inclusion" and "cultural competence is important in serving the people who rely on us for our critical services."

"What they (L&I employees) are doing with their customer service out there really starts in the work-



COMMUNITY CORRECTIONS OFFICER PROTECTING OUR NEIGHBORHOODS

As a DOC Community Corrections Officer at the Marysville Field Office, **Joel Eskes** has been protecting us for 32 years.

He is one of the state employees we may never see but whose work we couldn't live without.

Joel supervises about 35 to 40 felony offenders who've come out of prison on post-release supervision. They may have been convicted for such things as robbery using a deadly weapon.

Joel enforces court orders, makes sure offenders comply with post-release conditions, checks for outstanding arrest warrants and issues warrants when necessary.

Joel faces risks.

"I've been doing this a long time and there's always that little bit of doubt," Joel says.

"When we do those warrant checks, those are our high-risk situations. And the high-risk offenders are your people addicted to heroin or meth (methamphetamine)," he adds.

Joel sees success stories.

"When somebody gets clean...that can be rewarding - you can see them live a normal life, a more stable life," Joel says. If they get off alcohol or drugs and can get a decent job, "the odds of them making it are way greater," he adds.

Washington state employees like Joel Eskes are the public servants who work for us everyday.



PROTECTING US FROM NUCLEAR WASTE

Eddie Holbrook is an environmental specialist with the state Department of Ecology in Richland. He keeps us safe as he inspects the Hanford nuclear reservation and other sites.

Eddie is one of the state employees we may never see but whose work we couldn't live without.

Eddie is one of our dedicated Department of Ecology employees who protects us from the dangers of mixed radioactive and chemically hazardous waste at Hanford, commercial sites and facilities run by the Navy. That includes appropriate oversight for the safe management and disposal of hazardous materials at the Richland low-level radioactive waste disposal site.



"Most of the facilities that we look at are not your typical mom-and-pop shops," Eddie says. "They're large, complicated facilities that take a couple of weeks to parse through and figure out."

There may be day care centers, or homes or businesses that might be harmed if the hazardous waste doesn't stay where it's supposed to be, Eddie says.

Ecology inspectors like him "make sure the waste stays where waste is supposed to be - in the drums, in the tanks, finding its right disposal path and making sure nothing gets lost in the management out there (Hanford)," Eddie says.

"It's a big site, it's complicated. There are hundreds of cleanup activities going on each day. And to ensure oversight, especially as a state employee, my No. 1 obligation to the people of Washington is to keep them safe. Keep waste out of the Columbia River, out of the air and out of the ground."

Washington state employees like Eddie Holbrook are the public servants who work for us everyday.

INSTILLING “POSITIVE PERSONAL POWER” TO SAVE YOUTHFUL OFFENDERS

Victoria Nanney was a juvenile rehabilitation counselor assistant at Naselle Youth Camp in Southwest Washington until she retired earlier this year. For nearly 30 years, she helped young male offenders - many “so damaged...so destroyed” - to find the skills and “positive personal power” to turn the corner and become productive members of our community.

Victoria is one of the state employees we may never see but whose work we couldn't live without.

She helped new residents transition into the rustic Naselle campus and get the academic, vocational and job skills to make it in life and get out of a life of crime.

While at Naselle these young men: go to work fighting fires; or set up mobile lunch counters to feed first responders and rescuers during emergencies like the 2014 Oso landslide; or get up at 5 a.m. to save fish suffocating in a hatchery emergency.

“I really think Naselle's a special place and the experience kids have there they will take with them,” Nanney says. “They may not change immediately, but the change is there.”

Those like Nanney make a difference in the lives of these young men. Many of these teens come in believing they're losers. But many call or write years later to let Nanney know the change did happen and they're making it in business and family life.

“Most what we hear back from kids is, ‘You taught me to like what I do and taught me to be proud of me and what I do,’” Nanney says.

Washington state employees like Victoria Nanney are the public servants who work for us everyday.



Helping heal mentally ill patients

Darren Kistler is an institution counselor at Western State Hospital in Lakewood. There he works to remove the stigma often attached to mental illness. He helps his patients realize they're not bad people -- they just have a bad disease that can be treated.

Darren is one of the state employees we may never see but whose work we couldn't live without.

His civilly-committed patients have been deemed to be a danger to themselves or others, or gravely disabled. "They're people who have pretty chronic illnesses that require a longer-term treatment," Darren says.



He leads his patients through a number of therapeutic classes to give them coping skills, social skills and other skills "so they can return to the community."

Darren says he makes a difference by "providing a sympathetic face and someone who understands what they're going through."

Sometimes patients may become combative or upset or depressed and difficult to reach, he says. But there is more progress than there are setbacks.

Darren says "it's a blessing, a real privilege to work" with his patients - and to see them ready to leave the hospital and return home.

"I feel rewarded," Darren says. "I really like to reflect back to them the progress that I've seen in them, encourage them to continue...."

"It's a little battle in one person's life, but it's helpful to the community and to the family, the services we've provided to them."

Washington state employees like Darren Kistler are the public servants who work for us everyday.

