

Testimony of David R. Jones
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State Assembly Standing Committee on Codes
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Thank you, Mr. Chairman, for holding this hearing on a crucial element of public safety in our city, the working conditions and training of licensed private security guards.

The Community Service Society has taken a keen interest in the plight of private security guards, as a growing subset of this city's working poor. As a 160 year-old organization that centers its work on the needs of low-income New Yorkers, the plight of private security guards represents a growing dilemma for our city: mostly men, overwhelmingly Black and Latino, whose wages and benefits are insufficient to maintain a quality of life.

CSS recently produced a report commissioned by Local 32BJ of the Service Employees International Union, and titled *Shortchanging Security*, that focused on the working conditions of New York City's 63,000 private security guards. The report is titled *Shortchanging Security* because both the public and the

security guards are ill-served by present arrangements.

Security guards provide the first line of defense for tenants and visitors in office buildings as well as retail stores, schools, and religious institutions. The public might take it for granted that the firms supplying security guard services provide workers with an adequate wage, benefits such as health care, and sufficient training to competently respond to emergencies; given the significance of the responsibilities of these workers. For the most part, this is not the case.

Who are these people paid to guard the city's most precious real estate? Over eight in ten are male and mostly men of color. A majority - 56 percent - are African-American. Another 21 percent are Hispanic. Over a quarter of the city's guards have not completed high school, though more than a third have attended some college or hold four-year degrees.

Almost 95 percent of the security guard workforce in New York City is non-union. Most security guards are poorly paid. The median hourly wage for guards in the New York City area is \$10.14, only 55 percent of

the median for all workers in the metropolitan area, \$18.39.

And few receive benefits on the job. Most non-union guards labor without a single day of paid sick leave. Given their economic situation, this means they have no choice but to come to work sick.

The training they receive is minimal. Required guard training is limited to 16 hours on-the-job training and an eight-hour annual course. But in our focus groups we found that some firms do not even provide their workers with this minimum mandated by state law. In some cases, "training" proved to be a farce, with guards receiving certificates of completion just for showing up and paying a fee.

These non-union guards provide security at many of New York City's most famous and valuable landmark buildings considered prime terrorist targets, such as the Empire State Building.

Imagine if you are in a large office building and you're having a heart attack, or a fire breaks out, or you're stuck in an elevator. Would you want to depend on a security guard who is virtually untrained, someone without health insurance, who may have come to work sick? Is this the person we want as a lifeline?

In focus group sessions, non-union guards described the training they received as minimal or non-existent. They reported that supervisors often blamed frontline workers for security lapses, contributing to a sense of fear for their job security. Lack of training and lack of support, they told us, undermined their ability to serve the public.

The result is a workforce with low morale and high turnover. And because they are being shortchanged, so is public safety.

These guards are part of the city's working poor. They live from paycheck to paycheck. They cannot afford the health care they need even if offered as a benefit by an employer. Yet they often earn too much to qualify for public benefits such as food stamps or Medicaid.

In sharp contrast to non-union guards, members of Local 32BJ reported that their wages, health benefits, and pensions were sufficient to give them a sense that they could support their families. They received adequate training and enjoyed sufficient job security to allow them to approach their work with confidence and professionalism.

The implications for the public are obvious. We need guards who are paid enough to care about their jobs and are trained to handle challenging situations. When people have a stake in their work, they are motivated to do it well. And given our experience on September 11, 2001, we must take the necessary steps to protect not just property but New Yorkers who should go to work confident that every effort has been made to create a safe environment in the workplace.

Another point I'd like to make is that this is an occupation that should be valued. And it is a sector in which we can easily raise standards. The security industry could become a source of good jobs for New Yorkers who lack a college degree, a critical need in our city, where manufacturing jobs are melting away. These jobs cannot be easily outsourced overseas. They would help to fill a significant gap in the city, particularly for less educated men of color who today experience high rates of unemployment.

And the benefits of collective bargaining for these workers cannot be overstated. Our research clearly points this out. The disparity in pay and benefits between union and non-union workers is irrefutable. The existence of living wage jobs in the

unionized sector demonstrates that the path to creating a safer environment for millions of New Yorkers runs through a union shop.

While government cannot dictate collective bargaining in the private sector, it can make certain that union labor is used at government facilities. We also believe legislation mandating a family-sustaining wage for guards and enforcement of effective training requirements is urgently needed.

Thank you.