In effect for just six months, the Family Healthcare Update to the Living Wage Ordinance has already led to significant progress on the main goals of the policy:

- Improve access to family healthcare
- Improve passenger service, safety, and security
- Strengthen our economy and our communities

“Being healthy is especially important at the airport—not just for myself, but for the passengers that I serve.”

—Ana Rodriguez, LAX Wheelchair Attendant
Airline service workers play a critical role in airport operations, with responsibilities for security, safety, and passenger service that shape the experience of travelers at LAX.

Before the Los Angeles City Council—led by Councilmembers Janice Hahn and Bill Rosendahl—took action, the lack of healthcare for airport workers contributed to an unstable, poorly trained workforce with a high rate of turnover.

The dependence of airlines and their contractors on public programs to provide healthcare for their workforce resulted in significant public costs. Uninsured workers and their family members turned to taxpayer-funded programs and facilities for their emergency care, and went without cost-saving preventive care.

In the first six months since the council unanimously approved the Family Healthcare Update, an estimated 5,500 airline service workers and family members have gained access to affordable health coverage provided by LAX employers.\(^1\) Thousands more will likely be covered as employers complete enrollment in health insurance plans.
Ana Rodriguez has screened passengers and luggage and searched planes for dangerous items like weapons or bombs for the last ten years. She is currently a wheelchair attendant for elderly passengers and passengers with disabilities. “Plane search is something you have to do very carefully. And wheelchairs too. You have to be careful because if you’re not, passengers could get injured. I like both jobs, because I feel like I’m doing important work.”

Before the Family Healthcare Update, Ana delayed seeking medical treatment because she could not afford the high out-of-pocket costs that came with the limited coverage her employer provided. In 2007, Ana suffered a miscarriage. She experienced bleeding for four weeks before she finally saw a doctor about it and found out about the miscarriage. “I hoped it would just go away. I couldn’t afford to go in for a check up.” When she saw the doctor, Ana was anemic because of the extensive blood loss. She had to undergo emergency surgery and hospitalization.

After receiving a medical bill of $24,000, Ana learned that her benefits would only cover about half of the cost. Three years later, Ana is still struggling to pay off the bill. With her take-home pay averaging $1,200 per month, she barely has enough to pay for food, rent, and her daughter’s college tuition. She had to move to a lower-rent apartment to save money.

I found out it was an infection that I might have gotten from a passenger at the airport. I know that infections travel both ways, and I’m happy that now I can stay healthy and keep from passing something along to the passengers and others at the airport.”

“I hoped it would just go away. I couldn’t afford to go in for a check up.”
Improving Passenger Service, Safety, and Security

LAX is the world’s sixth busiest airport and a high risk target for terrorist attack, so service, security and passenger safety are of critical importance. Airline service workers guard access points, manage and control crowds, conduct cabin searches, handle baggage and assist elderly passengers and passengers with disabilities.

Airline service workers are the first and last point of contact for most passengers at LAX. Their knowledge, professionalism, and commitment to great service improves LAX’s image at a time when the airport has been subject to frequent criticism of the quality of the passenger experience.

Family healthcare for airport workers is critical for professionalizing this workforce, as employees see their positions as jobs for the long term. As turnover rates go down, employers will retain more experienced and well-trained workers. Workers report that morale has already gone up, as airline service workers become full partners in the airport community.
Jose Hernandez is a wheelchair attendant at LAX. He is responsible for assisting elderly passengers, and passengers with disabilities who require transportation by wheelchair. “I really enjoy my job taking care of the passengers and making them comfortable.”

Before Jose had healthcare coverage, his wife, Elena, relied on overburdened county facilities for her medical care. After her mammogram showed an abnormality, Elena was referred to a county hospital in Sylmar. “The first time we went there it took almost 48 hours. Even with a referral, it takes a very long time to see a doctor. The hospital was far from our home, and when we went, it would take the whole day.”

Elena started a new job, which meant she no longer qualified for the county services. “As soon as I got coverage for my family, my wife went immediately to the doctor and we found out that she has cancer.”

Elena now has access to treatment that could save her life. She is receiving radiation treatments and is scheduled for surgery.

Being able to get critical care for his wife's cancer, and to manage his own health problems, has changed the way that he views his job at the airport. “Now that we have good benefits, this is really a job that I want to keep. I can’t give up the healthcare coverage.” He says many of his co-workers feel the same way, and that this is particularly important in his line of work.

“The passengers I’m assisting need all of my attention, and I always try to focus 100 percent when I’m helping them. Now that I know the doctors are taking care of my wife, I can concentrate better at work. It’s better for the passengers to have experienced people taking care of them. And, when the passengers are happy, that’s good for the airlines and the airport, too.”

“I've always taken pride in my work helping passengers. Now that we have good health benefits, this is really a job that I have to keep. My family and my passengers are better off.”
Strengthening the Economy

LAX is an economic engine for the entire Los Angeles region, contributing an estimated $60 billion to the economy annually, and providing 59,000 jobs. The quality of jobs at LAX has a direct effect on the economic stability of workers and their families, and on state and local budgets as well.

Because of the new healthcare coverage for airline service workers and their families, an estimated $30 million in public costs will be saved over five years. This includes costs for public programs such as Medi-Cal, care for the uninsured at county facilities, and other costs. As other groups of airport workers gain access to family coverage, these cost savings will be even higher.

Families without coverage are at higher risk of an economic crisis caused by medical bills, such as bankruptcy or home foreclosure. When they don’t have to worry about paying unaffordable out-of-pocket costs or going into debt for expensive prescriptions and critical medical care, workers can devote their resources to meeting their families’ needs.
Freddie Shelby has worked at LAX for over thirteen years, assisting passengers and transporting baggage. Before the Family Healthcare Update, Freddie had two surgeries for conditions that he believes would not have become as serious had he been able to see a doctor sooner. When he didn’t have healthcare coverage, Freddie relied on underfunded county facilities that struggle to care for millions of uninsured residents.

Freddie has had surgery for colon cancer, and he has had his gall-bladder removed. “They say early detection is the key. If I had had good insurance coverage, I believe my surgeries could have been prevented, saving me pain and the county money.” says Freddie. The test that showed Freddie had gallstones wasn’t performed until years after he first felt the symptoms. “And I didn’t get the surgery until a year after they found the stones.” By that point the gallstones had begun to hurt his liver, and his gallbladder was so badly damaged that it had to be completely removed.

“I work hard at a full-time job to support myself. I don’t like having to depend on public services. I do my job professionally, and I’m glad I’m finally getting healthcare that recognizes that.”

Now that he has coverage through his employer, Freddie has access to treatment that could save his life. Freddie currently has lymphoma, which requires regular monitoring. “Our health plan will make a huge difference for me. I know I can get in to see a doctor right away, get my lymphoma monitored, and the co-payments are affordable. It feels like it’s a new day.”

“I work hard at a full-time job to support myself. I don’t like having to depend on public services. I do my job professionally, and I’m glad I’m finally getting healthcare that recognizes that.”
Building Healthy Communities

An estimated 5,500 airline service workers and family members now have access to quality, affordable medical benefits from Kaiser Permanente. Their health plan includes low co-payments and no deductibles, which is crucial to making the plan accessible to this low-wage workforce. Airline service workers are overwhelmingly women and people of color, and most live in communities with some of the lowest rates of health coverage in L.A. County.

Ensuring healthcare coverage for the families of workers at LAX can help improve the odds of a successful future for the children in those families. Studies have shown that children with access to health insurance have lower rates of illness, better cognitive development and higher educational attainment.⁶
Julio Topete

works in cargo security guarding cargo planes and ensuring that no unauthorized personnel, vehicles, or cargo items are admitted into the cargo area.

A recent series of events forced Julio to experience the stark difference between having health insurance and not having it. His 17-year-old son, Carlos, became sick with severe heart palpitations and was having trouble breathing. Julio and his wife, Rosa, took Carlos to the community clinic that they had come to rely on when they did not have health insurance.

“We were terrified. Just looking at him you could tell he was really in pain, and it really looked like it could get worse.”

After waiting for over eight hours, they finally saw a specialist for Carlos’ heart. But he said Carlos needed to see a pediatric specialist, which the clinic did not have. “I didn’t know what to do, so we brought him back home. We felt we couldn’t do anything.”

Desperate, Julio decided to take his son to Kaiser Permanente, hoping that the new insurance had already started. The hospital agreed to see his son, and the doctors quickly began examining Carlos and running tests. Carlos was diagnosed with a cardiovascular disorder and was given medicine and medical advice about his heart palpitations that helped put his family at ease.

“The medicine is really making a huge difference, and my son is feeling much better,” says Julio. “The biggest difference for me is peace of mind. Just knowing that if something happens, we can get help means that I don’t have to worry like before. It helps to know that we won’t go into debt and lose everything if one of us gets sick. Being able to go to a hospital where I know they’ll take care of my family feels really good. It means more to me than money.”

“Being able to go to a hospital where I know they’ll take care of my family feels really good. It means more to me than money.”
Los Angeles Leading the Way

In 1997, Los Angeles led the nation as one of the first major cities to adopt a living wage ordinance. With the Family Healthcare Update, the city has again created a successful model for communities across the country to follow.

Thousands of workers and their families have gained affordable coverage, improving their lives, their communities, and airport safety and security. The Family Healthcare Update has saved millions of taxpayer dollars at a time when local governments can least afford the cost of caring for the uninsured. With family healthcare coverage has come greater economic stability for thousands of working families in Los Angeles, strengthening the economy for us all.
The healthcare coverage that Beatriz Barajas receives through her husband Elpidio, a wheelchair attendant at LAX, has made a huge difference in her life. Three years ago, she began to experience blurry vision, memory loss, splitting headaches, and convulsions. After a year of trips to the emergency room, Beatriz was diagnosed with a brain tumor. “When I didn’t have health insurance, things were very hard. I was having to call ‘911’ all the time because my vision would go blurry, and I was forgetting things. After about a year, the people in the hospital were sick of me. They were escorting me out when a nurse went out of her way to comfort me and told me she would schedule an appointment for me to see a specialist. Only then did I finally find out it was a brain tumor.”

Unable to afford regular doctor visits, Beatriz was left to participate in an experimental treatment program at the Harbor-UCLA Medical Center. She was prescribed medication, but the specialist said that the tumor could not be removed. Now that she has coverage through Elpidio, she can go to a personal physician and specialist. Her medication, which used to cost over $800 a month, now costs her $10 per month.

Her husband Elpidio is very happy that he is now able to provide health coverage for his wife and two of his children. Beatriz’ children have recently suffered from depression related to her health problems. “Now I can take them to specialists,” says Beatriz, “And my husband can focus on his work. Having healthcare coverage is my only hope right now, for my life and theirs.”

“Having healthcare coverage is my only hope right now, for my life and for my children.”
Endnotes

1 LAANE analysis of health plans covering 2,700 airline service workers, combined with statistics on living wage
worker family size and insurance coverage detailed in Examining the Evidence, Fairris, David et al, LAANE, 2005.


3 Martin, Hugo. “Los Angeles International is rated one of the nation’s worst airports for customer satisfaction.” Los
Angeles Times February 27, 2010.


5 Estimate based on cost data from two studies: Zabin, Carol et al, The Hidden Public Costs of Low-Wage Jobs in
California, prepared for the National Economic Development and Law Center, May 2004; Gerald F. Kominski et al,
The Cost of Insuring California’s Uninsured, UCLA Center for Health Policy Research, May 2005. Costs were inflated
to 2009 dollars using the CPI.

6 Hadley, Jack, Sicker and Poorer: The Consequences of Being Uninsured, The Kaiser Commission on Medicaid and
the Uninsured, 2002.