

Friends of Youth — How competitive are our wages?

Friends of Youth's current leadership has repeatedly touted "competitive" wages and compensation practices as a strength of the agency. However, in conversations amongst our coworkers, we noticed most of us did not feel as though our compensation was keeping up with either the cost of living or the job market. After hearing testimonials from three of our coworkers earlier this month about their experiences with compensation at FOY ([English](#) | [Spanish](#)), we wondered what we would find if we further explored the issue. Here is what we learned.

Frankly, our pay just isn't that competitive. Despite the Executive Leadership Team's insistence on the agency's investment in pay increases, **these investments have not put our agency's pay on par with our other agency counterparts.** New Horizons Ministries, a Seattle-based non-profit, raised their base pay for all positions to \$26/hour in May of 2023. Effective January 1, 2024, the lowest paid positions at [Youthcare](#) and [Plymouth Housing](#) — both unionized with OPEIU8—scale between \$23.69-28.88 and \$29.02-32.06, respectively.

Outside of human services work, **ample entry-level employment opportunities are available to employees with higher pay than FOY direct service positions.** As a member of our organizing committee quipped: "I make more as a dog walker." A barista at a Seattle Starbucks earning \$27/hr is paid more than a case manager or even a Masters-level therapist at FOY. Regardless of FOY leadership's insistence that the agency offers competitive compensation, direct service employees, who are more in touch with the job market than executive leadership earning six figures, know this to be an inaccurate representation.

Our programs remain **plagued by understaffing with direct service positions remaining difficult to fill** and retain. Even after the agency's investments in direct service staff compensation, Youth Specialists hired in 2023 expressed to organizing committee members that if they had been unable to negotiate their pay (significantly exceeding that of fellow Youth Specialists with years of seniority), there is "absolutely no way I would have taken the position." Due to chronic understaffing, programs struggle to maintain operations and retain staff, and employees working overtime become more susceptible to burnout.

Frontline staff provide an invaluable service to our programs, while in some cases making a scarcely livable wage. The pay increases that most direct service employees have received at irregular, multi-year intervals have failed to keep up with cost of living in King County, which is the highest in our state. According to the [MIT Living Wage Calculator](#), the minimum "living" wage in King County is \$22.77 hourly for single adults working full time and \$43.01 for a single adult with a dependent, higher than FOY's lowest paid positions. The median income in Redmond and Kirkland, where the FOY main office is located, is \$146,500 annually. Now in 2024, earning a current Youth Specialist rate of \$21.00/hour (roughly \$43,680/year) is not only well below the MIT-calculated livable wage in the county, but also qualifies for tax credit housing in the 45% AMI bracket—meaning that FOY employees [compete for the same low-income housing resources as our clients](#).

Friends of Youth's compensation practices have been far from transparent, and lacking in accountability to our employees. A select example of this is the agency's implementation of pay scales. In 2021, FOY's Compensation Taskforce recommended "An interdepartmental effort to develop pay grades and pay ranges for all positions, that recognize tenure, performance, lived experience, and provide a more equitable and competitive compensation structure," as reported in an agency-wide email from then-CPO DeAnn Adams. In early 2023, FOY confirmed the implementation of pay scales to determine compensation, which was briefly alluded to in the March 2023 newsletter by CFO Hala Nuemah. However, no communication was ever sent out by executive leadership detailing the procedural implementation of pay scales at FOY, nor a confirmed set of factors that would be considered when bumping up employees' pay within the scale for each position category.

Instead, middle management made announcements in early 2023 to individual programs explaining the proposed process. Employees were told that all wages agency-wide would first be adjusted to the base pay for each job category. Subsequent increases would be offered based on a set of additional factors that were as yet unconfirmed, but speculated to be similar to those identified in DeAnn's 2021 email. Meanwhile, program management communicated that pay increases would also be tied to our upcoming performance appraisals, consistent with our CEO's most recent email in November 2022 concerning pay increases for the agency being tied to "annual appraisals." (However, in mid-2023, HR clarified that 2023 appraisals actually wouldn't count. The next employee raises, dependent on 2024 performance evaluations, would take effect in FY2024 — **another full year out.**)

Just weeks after these announcements were made and without any further direct communication from leadership, select case management employees were awarded raises above the newly-implemented case manager base-rate. Other case managers approached HR and their direct supervisors to request

information about obtaining such a raise, and came away with no clear answers. Tenure with the agency was the only factor identified by HR by which pay increases were awarded, and yet other long-term employees were not equally awarded pay increases exceeding the initial raise to base-rate. These increases appeared to be random and secretive, without equal application or transparent explanation.

As of the start of 2024, the pay scales used by the agency and an explanation of the factors considered in pay increases have yet to be transparently communicated to all employees. In fact, supervisors have also confirmed that they were explicitly told not to share pay scale information with their supervisees. When the agency pay scale spreadsheet was shown to an SRS employee by HR, they were expressly told to keep the information “confidential” and refrain from sharing with their colleagues. The pay scale spreadsheet shown to this employee only reflected that each “step” up the pay scale corresponded to the employee’s time with the agency. No other factors similar to those listed by DeAnn in 2021 were discussed in that meeting or reflected in the document.

	Step 1	Step 2	Step 3	Step 4	Step 5	Increase	% Increase	
	1-2 years	3-4 years	5-6 years	7-8 years	9+ years			
20 Specialists								
Non-Bilingual - no degree	\$ 20.00	\$ 21.25	\$ 22.50	\$ 23.75	\$ 25.00	\$ 1.25	25%	SRS Start is \$21.50
Non-Bilingual w/ degree	\$ 21.00	\$ 22.31	\$ 23.63	\$ 24.94	\$ 26.25	\$ 1.31	25%	SRS Start is \$22.50
Bilingual - no degree	\$ 22.50	\$ 23.91	\$ 25.31	\$ 26.72	\$ 28.13	\$ 1.41	25%	
Bilingual w/ degree	\$ 23.50	\$ 24.97	\$ 26.44	\$ 27.91	\$ 29.38	\$ 1.47	25%	

Unreleased pay scale document reflecting Youth Specialist pay.

FOY leadership has demonstrated a lack of accountability for their opaque decision-making about compensation. In the September 2023 Systemic Advocacy Committee meeting, a list of agency policies were nominated for the committee to review, including ‘compensation transparency.’ The policies on this list were suggested by committee membership to fulfill the mission of amplifying employee voice in the development of agency policy. Meeting facilitators HR Director Tori Cue and COO Patricia Charles-Heathers briefly acknowledged the suggestion, but dismissed it with the words, “Not a policy,” and continued moving down the list. This union effort believes that agency leadership is accountable for their decision-making processes, whether or not they have written them down.

In keeping with the spirit and purported mission of our agency’s justice-centered work, we seek commitment from our leadership to center values of transparency, accountability, and integrity in all operations. Thus, we call upon the Executive Leadership Team to release documentation of their present earnings, and the dates and dollar amount of pay increases over the past 5 years. We request this information be released internally to all employees within 2 weeks.

How could a union improve compensation practices at Friends of Youth? With a union, compensation practices are outlined clearly in a legally-binding contract negotiated between our union and our employer. As exemplified in other OPEIU8 contracts,

- Employees can expect pay increases at **predictable intervals that are outlined in advance** in the contract. (For an example, see [Dorothy share how it works at YouthCare on page 2 of our last communication.](#))
- Factors considered in pay increases and differentials (eg. Higher education, multilingual ability, overnight hours, etc.) are determined by a set of **transparent criteria that apply equally to all employees.**
- **Compensation standards will apply consistently to new hires and current employees,** ensuring that compensation practices promote retention and appropriately value the dedicated employees that make our work possible.
- The union contract gives us **concrete mechanisms to hold our agency accountable** to the agreements negotiated with unionized employees.

For more information on the FOY union effort, contact a coworker signer of the [open letter sent on 12/18/2023](#) or OPEIU organizer Corinne at corinne@opeiu8.org or 425-318-2650. You can also see [this FAQ](#) and/or visit [this page](#) to find all communications related to this effort.

We want your input! Share your experience. Does this sound familiar, or have you had a different experience? What issues matter to you? Share your story [here](#), contact a signer of our [open letter](#) or our union organizer Corinne to tell us what you hope a union can do for you.

Ready to unionize Friends of Youth? Sign a card [here](#) if you haven’t already.