



HEATHER FERBERT
CITY ATTORNEY
CITY OF SAN DIEGO

PRESS RELEASE

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Ibrahim Ahmed
(619) 666-4161
iaahmed@sandiego.gov

 [heatherferbert.ca](https://www.heatherferbert.ca) | sandiego.gov/cityattorney

CITY ATTORNEY FERBERT, CIVIL PROSECUTORS COALITION, AND CALIFORNIA FEDERATION OF LABOR UNIONS APPLAUD RENEWED INVESTMENT IN WORKERS' RIGHTS ENFORCEMENT PROGRAM IN STATE BUDGET

SAN DIEGO — San Diego City Attorney Heather Ferbert applauded the continuation of a critical program to protect the rights of California workers in the state's recently announced budget agreement, which includes a new ongoing appropriation of \$9 million annually to extend the Workers' Rights Enforcement Grant Program administered by the Labor Commissioner's Office (LCO) in the Department of Industrial Relations. Ferbert, who serves as Vice-Chair of the Civil Prosecutors Coalition, helped lead the effort in partnership with the California Federation of Labor Unions and city attorneys, district attorneys, and county counsels across the state.

The program provides grant funding that enables local public prosecutors to combat wage theft and end exploitative labor practices statewide. The program was at risk of expiring without this renewed state funding.

Wage theft refers to any instance where an employer does not pay workers all they have earned, whether by paying less than the minimum or overtime wage, misclassifying employees as independent contractors, demanding kickbacks, denying paid sick leave, or failing to provide meal and rest breaks. Estimated at roughly \$15 billion each year nationally, it outpaces robbery, embezzlement, and fraud combined. It falls hardest on low-wage workers who are already vulnerable and closest to financial ruin, and it reaches every corner of the state and nearly every industry.

"Wage theft is theft, plain and simple, and it's the single largest form of theft in the country," said San Diego City Attorney Heather Ferbert, Vice-Chair of the Civil Prosecutors Coalition. "When an employer holds back a worker's pay, they're stealing from someone who showed up and did the job, and too often that's a person living paycheck to paycheck who can least afford the loss. It's also unfair to the honest businesses that follow the law and still find themselves undercut by those who don't. This funding gives local prosecutors the tools to hold these employers accountable, put stolen wages back in workers' pockets, and stop wage theft before it spreads. We're standing up for California's workers and making sure the paychecks they've earned are there when they need them."

"Robust enforcement is critical to addressing wage theft, and the State's continued funding sends a clear message that employers can't continue to steal wages from low-wage workers without facing their day in court. County counsels and city attorneys throughout the state are partnering with the Labor Commissioner's Office to protect workers' rights, and we're thrilled that the State is playing its part to help resource this vital work." said Santa Clara County Counsel Tony LoPresti, Chair of the Civil Prosecutors Coalition.

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“For far too long, corporations have gotten away with cheating workers of their hard-earned wages, overtime, and lunch breaks. Over the past few years, numerous city attorneys and county counsels have stepped up to fill the void in labor law enforcement and in 2024, we were excited to work with the Legislature to develop the first Workers' Rights Enforcement Grant Program to fund these operations. We applaud the Legislature's decision to continue funding for this essential enforcement effort and we look forward to supporting these local prosecutors in showing that wage theft is a crime that will no longer be tolerated in California.” said California Federation of Labor Unions President Lorena Gonzalez Fletcher.

California has long led the nation with strong worker protection laws, but legislation alone is insufficient. Enforcement is essential. Over the past two years, the program has helped local jurisdictions stand up wage theft enforcement efforts far beyond what the state could previously reach, conducting investigations, filing lawsuits, and obtaining settlements and convictions that collectively seek to recover tens of millions of dollars for workers, collect millions more in penalties, and impose injunctions to prevent wage theft going forward.

The Civil Prosecutors Coalition and the California Federation of Labor Unions thank the Legislature and Governor Newsom for their support of this critical investment in worker protection. Senator Aisha Wahab and Assemblymember Liz Ortega championed the budget request in the Legislature, and the program benefitted greatly from the leadership of budget chairs Senator Laura Richardson and Assemblymember Sharon Quirk-Silva.

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