

A Genealogy of Home Health Care: Law, Social Policy, and the Valuing of
Women's Labor

Eileen Boris, University of California, Santa Barbara

Jennifer Klein, Yale University

California's In Home Supportive Services (IHSS) developed out of previous homemaker/choremaker programs that sometimes sought to employ those on welfare to care for others on public assistance, which allowed recipients to hire relatives subject to social worker determination of needs. Though providing services necessary to sustain daily living, but not technically medical, such supportive work easily has become conflated with domestic service and confused with routine family maintenance. Consumers, their families and other care professionals continue to misrecognize the non-relative home care worker as a "cleaning lady," while county welfare departments persist in treating the relative attendant as not a worker. Until the last decade, these associations, along with the home location, had placed home care outside of state law, contributing to its low status, lack of training, poor working conditions, and inadequate pay. The federal Fair Labor Standards Act still excludes the home care worker. This paper sets forth a "genealogy" of home health care, tracing both the conflation and misrecognition of the home care attendant as a domestic servant since the 1930s. The connections with welfare are particularly salient, indicative of how the state both constructed a low waged occupation and sought to fill it with poor women of color.

Even as California's inclusion of relatives in its "residual" program under IHSS offers a cautionary model for the re-valuing—as opposed to the commodification—of carework, its the home, intimate, and familial aspects have made it ripe for the budget-cutting axe. This historical perspective, we argue, helps to understand the devaluation of home care. Legal change is crucial, but so is the recognition of intimate and domestic labor as worthy of a living wage.