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Trickledown Downsizing

By [JULIE SCELFO](#)
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IN September, Cathy DeVore, a real estate agent in Larchmont, N.Y., whose business has been at a standstill lately, began taking gradual steps to lay off her longtime nanny and housekeeper. Aware that the woman supports a son, a mother, and a niece in Dominica, and worried for their well-being, Mrs. DeVore wanted to make sure her employee found another source of income before losing her \$500-a-week salary.

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Jan Feindt

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Gabriele Stabile for The New York Times

SERIAL CUTS Because of the economic downturn, many people are cutting back on household help, like nannies, housecleaners and personal chefs. Vicki Devor, a laid-off art teacher, let her housekeeper go.

“I told her I was worried about her job security with me, and found her an additional day of work with my sister, and told her that she should start saving because I was worried about having to cut her back more,”

Mrs. DeVore said. “In October I started a no-overtime policy; in November I told her that as of Jan. 1, I am cutting her back to 20 hours a week, and that as of June 30, I probably won’t need her at all.”

Mrs. DeVore said that both she and her employee (who declined to be interviewed and asked not to be named) had marveled at the speed with which the financial crisis had hit home. “We talk about the trickledown effect of Wall Street, how my selling less houses is going to affect her mother living in her hut in Dominica, which is crazy,” she said. “But her mother is going to get less sugar because she has less money to send home.”

In the New York area, where there is a high number of dual-career professionals and where workdays are notoriously long, the number of people filling in for them at home is also immense. Domestic Workers United, a nonprofit advocacy group, estimates there are more than 200,000 nannies, housekeepers, personal chefs and other domestic workers employed in the New York metropolitan area.

And as professionals recalibrate their spending because of job losses, salary or bonus cuts or just anxiety about the future, said Ai-jen Poo, an organizer at Domestic Workers United, “domestic workers’ wages are often the first thing

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that gets compromised.”

“Essentially, 10,000 jobs lost at [Lehman Brothers](#) means 10,000 domestic workers’ jobs that are in jeopardy,” she added, referring to the number of people in North America who were employed by the bank.

Given that the connection between domestic workers and their employers is often more intimate than other working relationships, when it is threatened by economic downturn, feelings on both sides run high. For employers, who form attachments to the people they entrust with their children and their homes, terminating or even scaling back the relationship can feel like betraying a family member. For workers — particularly those who are being paid off the books and have little or no legal protection or financial buffer — there is much more at stake.

One employer, a lawyer who grew up “very middle class” in a household with few luxuries, said that she and her husband, also a lawyer, had taken on a lot of domestic help — a housecleaner, two part-time nannies, even a dog walker — because “our time became more valuable than anything” when she went back to work after having children. But now that money has become more of an issue again, the woman, who spoke on condition of anonymity because she pays her workers under the table, said cutting back on their hours was not so easy.

“We pay an extra five hours a week so we can have a date night,” she said. “It’s a complete luxury so it could easily be cut” — except that one of the nannies, paid \$18 an hour, depends on that extra work.

She is also considering dismissing the housecleaner, to whom she pays \$150 a week. “She doesn’t do that great a job, but she has four kids and I know she relies on the money.”

The cleaner once told her that she couldn’t wait even a few days for a check to clear, suggesting to the lawyer that she lives hand-to-mouth. “If being late is going to affect her, imagine firing her,” the lawyer said.

Many employers interviewed for this article said they had searched for other ways to save money before laying off housekeepers or nannies or cutting back on their wages. After losing her job teaching art classes in September, Vicki Devor (no relation to Cathy DeVore), a 48-year-old mother in Carroll Gardens, Brooklyn, gave up on eating lunch out and a \$59-a-month gym membership, she said, before even considering laying off her housekeeper, who cleaned Ms. Devor’s apartment twice a month for \$100 a visit.

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