Lilly and Evelyn

On Jan. 29, 2009, in the East Room of the White House, President Obama signed his first bill into law, the Lilly Ledbetter Fair Pay Act. It overturned a notorious 5-to-4 Supreme Court decision from 2007 that had denied Ms. Ledbetter restitution for years in which her employer, the Goodyear Tire and Rubber Company, had paid her less than her male colleagues.

The new law could not restore Ms. Ledbetter’s lost wages because her case could not be retried. But it brought justice, if belatedly, by ensuring that legal protections and civil rights denied to Ms. Ledbetter would not be denied to others. It is past time for Mr. Obama to see that similar justice is done for Evelyn Coke.

In 2007, Ms. Coke also had her day in Supreme Court — and also lost. A retired home care aide, she had sued her employer for decades of unpaid overtime. No one disputed that she had worked extra long hours for no extra pay. But in a 9-to-0 decision, the justices upheld a 1975 federal labor regulation that defines home care aides as “companions.” That designation exempts home care agencies from having to pay the federal minimum wage or time-and-a-half for overtime.

The justices were clear that the law gives the Labor Department the power to change the regulation. Congress also could change the rule. Yet the rule stands more than two years after the Coke decision and a year after lawmakers and Mr. Obama took a bow for the Ledbetter fair-pay law.

Like Ms. Coke, who was born in Jamaica, home care workers are often immigrants. Most are women, minorities and earn a low income. They are not mere companions. They typically help to feed, dress and move their elderly and disabled clients, plus keep house. Home care also is one of the nation’s fastest-growing occupations. Currently numbering around two million, they are among the lowest-paid and most-exploited in the work force.

After signing the Lilly Ledbetter law last year, Mr. Obama gave Ms. Ledbetter the last of many pens used in the ceremony. Ms. Coke died last July before she saw justice, let alone a White House ceremony. In her memory, Mr. Obama should instruct his Labor Department to undo the companionship exemption. If he does not act, Congress should introduce and pass, without delay, the Evelyn Coke Fair Pay for Caregivers Act.