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## Legislation aims to fairly compensate care givers

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If a new piece of legislation serving human service providers passes, it would professionalize the way the nonprofit organizations negotiate rates for state contracts, relieving a sector that for decades has been finding ways to survive.

The bill, Senate No. 65, would require the state pay reimbursement rates that would take into account the rising cost of living, inflation, energy costs and other expenses in operating a human services nonprofit. Currently, there is no formal way in which rates are set to meet those rising costs.

The bill, which was co-authored by state Sen. Gale D. Candaras, D-Wilbraham, was filed last fall. It comes at a time when human services nonprofits are squeezed by high operating expenses and increased demand, forcing them to cut down on staff, merge programs or cut programs altogether because, program executives say, the state does not adequately reimburse them.

At the heart of the bill is the ability for agencies to provide competitive salaries and raises to attract more qualified direct-care workers -- the core of human services operations -- and mitigate turnover.

"A bill like this is way overdue," said Michael J. Widmer, president of the Massachusetts Taxpayers Foundation. "As a commonwealth, we've entrusted to providers an enormous responsibility to handle human services populations, and we have a responsibility to pay the costs of those services, and for too long we've ignored this obligation, this reality." If passed now, the bill would require between \$35 million and \$45 million in additional funding from the state to bring the rates where they need to be to fairly compensate direct-care workers, said Candaras.

Under the new bill, rates would reflect the cost and value of services, taking into account the cost of living and inflation; and assign to one entity, the Division of Health Care Finance and Policy, the task of overseeing the rate-setting process and create an advisory group.

If passed, the measure would also eliminate the need for

the salary reserve -- a subsidy that's negotiated between the Massachusetts Council of Human Services Providers Inc. and the state every year, according to Michael Weekes, president and CEO of the council.

"The salary reserve has been a Band-Aid," said Katherine Wilson, president and CEO of Behavioral Health Network Inc. in Springfield. "And we've graciously accepted it because it's the only Band-Aid they've given us."

This year, the state will likely provide \$23 million, designated to be paid to workers who make under \$40,000. That does not include Carla Johnson-Porcher, a Bay Cove Human Services program director for a residential program in Revere; she makes about \$40,035, annually, and supports five sons, ages 11 to 20.

"I've been struggling day to day," said Johnson-Porcher. "Every year I depend on that raise." Currently, state agencies under the Executive Office of Health and Human Services, such as the Department of Mental Retardation, award contracts to human service providers without a formalized or bidding process. Contracts are awarded based on what the state can pay, not market conditions, Weekes said.

Contracts that are extended do not include adjustments for inflation.

Calls to the Executive Office of Health and Human Services were not returned. The bill is in committee and could go through the House and Senate this spring.

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