



The METROWEST DAILY NEWS

Chesto: Social service workers may get well-earned relief

With a pending move across the Neponset River to Dorchester from their longtime home in Quincy, you can't blame the folks who run Work Inc. if they're a little stressed these days.

But a big cause of headaches at the provider of rehabilitation and work services for disabled people isn't relocation planning. Instead, it's the ongoing efforts to keep up with constant turnover among its roughly 375 full- and part-time employees.

Like other social service providers, Work Inc. relies heavily on a steady stream of state funds every year. But Jimmy Cawley, a development officer at Work Inc., says the rates paid by the state over the past two decades have not increased, making it tough for Work Inc. to provide decent wages for its staff.

"The turnover kills us," Cawley says. "We're always retraining people (and) a lot of our clients need a continuation of care with the same provider."

Fortunately for Work Inc. and numerous other social service agencies, help could be on the way. A once-languishing effort to pass a bill that would regularly adjust rates paid to social service providers is about to move forward on Beacon Hill.

Currently, rates on state social service contracts are fixed for as long as 11 years. But that would change under a bill that would require the state Division of Health Care Finance and Policy to adjust rates every two years on the contracts to reflect inflation.

Sen. Karen Spilka of Ashland, the Senate chairwoman of the Legislature's committee on children, families and disabled persons, says she expects the bill to be reported favorably out of her committee within the next several weeks. Spilka says she enthusiastically supports the bill, which was initially filed by Sen. Gale Candaras of Wilbraham.

"There is some consensus that we really need to do this for many reasons," Spilka says. "It's been overdue."

Spilka points to the impact that the human service industry has on the state's overall economy. Even though most of the providers are nonprofit organizations, they still pay payroll taxes and collectively employ as many as 185,000 people across the state. The industry generated \$4.6 billion in revenue in Massachusetts in 2003, according to a report conducted by DMA Health Strategies for the state.

The Legislature has gone out of its way to provide tax breaks for a number of industries ranging from mutual funds to manufacturers to movie makers. Aside from replenishing a \$23 million fund that can boost salaries of the lowest-paid direct-care workers, advocates say lawmakers have done little to help the social service industry in recent years.

With many employees in stressful jobs making under \$30,000 a year and some earning as little as \$20,000 a year, service providers across the state are dealing with the same personnel problems that Work Inc. faces.

A more stable work force would be a major benefit for clients served by Bay State Community Services, a Quincy-based nonprofit social service agency that employs about 250 people on the South Shore. Kenneth Tarabelli, who runs the agency, says about 80 percent of his \$12 million budget relies on state contracts with pay rates that don't change for as long as seven to 10 years.

Tarabelli says he tries to find money to pay for incremental raises, but he's still always on the hunt for new employees to replace the ones who are leaving. "You're always running to stay in place," Tarabelli says.

Vic DiGravio, CEO of the Mental Health and Substance Abuse Corporations of Massachusetts, says he is more optimistic about the bill's chances this year because the industry's three main advocacy groups have united to lobby for the bill for the first time. The three groups - which also include the Massachusetts Council of Human Service Providers and the Association of Developmental Disabilities Providers - have launched a campaign to get the bill passed.

The effort still faces a major stumbling block: money. With a potential budget gap of as much as \$1 billion looming for the next fiscal year, state lawmakers may have a hard time approving line item increases in any part of the state budget.

The precise cost of adjusting the rates for service providers is unclear. DiGravio estimates that the state would need to spend an extra \$200 million over a two- or three-year period if the bill is passed.

Spilka recognizes the fiscal challenge, but she says she still considers this bill "one of my top priorities for the budget."

One solution might involve phasing in the requirements of the bill, potentially so the full impact might not be felt until the state's budget situation has stabilized. At the very least, a phased-in approach would ensure that the state doesn't suddenly get socked with a big bill all at once.

The social service industry has grown significantly in recent decades as disabled individuals and those with mental illnesses were steadily shifted out of state-run institutions and into community settings. There are few people who would argue that the approach, in general, was not the right one to take. However, many of the agencies that now provide these services find themselves in perilous financial straits.

Even if the bill makes it to Gov. Deval Patrick's desk by the time formal sessions end for the year on July 31, social service workers won't get rich anytime soon, not by a long shot. But at least many of them would start to see their wages approach what they actually deserve to be paid.

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