

The Berkshire Eagle

Veto of pay hike for direct care professionals draws ire

By Amanda Korman, Berkshire Eagle Staff

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PITTSFIELD -- Human services advocates are pushing to reverse a governor's veto that halves a pay boost to those who work with vulnerable populations.

Gov. Deval Patrick slashed \$10 million of a \$20 million salary reserve item for direct care professionals who work with people with mental illness and developmental disability and have not had a raise in five years.

The veto was among \$32.1 million in cuts the governor made Sunday to the Legislature's proposed fiscal 2013 budget.

The human services salary reserve item, approved by the Legislature, had established the amount as a pay raise; the governor's adjustment changes the item to a one-time bonus. State Rep. David Linsky, D-Natick, is leading an effort to override Patrick's veto in the House of Representatives.

The cut affects 31,500 direct care workers in Massachusetts, all of whom earn under \$40,000 a year, according to Bill Yelenak, spokesman for the Massachusetts Council of Human Service Providers.

In the Berkshires, those affected include employees of the Berkshire County Arc, ServiceNet, Berkshire Family and Individual Resources (BFAIR) and the Brien Center.

In a strongly worded letter to the governor, Berkshire County Arc Executive Director Kenneth Singer criticized Patrick's decision, calling the move "un thinkable" and asserting that Patrick has "committed a grave injustice."

"That you would take this raise away from them is beyond belief for all of us that see how hard they work on a daily basis," Singer wrote. "... The compassion that you are known for, Governor Patrick, is well established and I am bewildered by this decision."

In an interview with The Eagle, Singer said that he has been a consistent admirer of the governor but was unsettled by the veto, which affects about 400 Berkshire County Arc employees.

"He's been a phenomenal supporter, and I was shocked that he'd make this decision," Singer said. "We were counting on it. He's taking money out of their pockets."

Singer said that in fiscal 2012, these direct care workers were also given a \$10 million one-time boost, but that they had not seen a salary increase from the state in five years.

In the announcement of the veto, Patrick proposed to use the \$10 million cut to fund higher human services costs.

"They're separate issues," Singer said in response. "You can't do that on the backs of staff."