



Rally pushes disabled funding

Workers press lawmakers for higher wages

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BY EMILY O'DONNELL FOR THE SUN CHRONICLE

BOSTON - More than 500 human service workers held a rally at the Statehouse Tuesday to push increased funding for programs to help the disabled and a 2 percent salary increase for their caretakers.

The workers and supporters, all wearing gold Caring Force shirts, heard a pledge from Senate President Therese Murray to support Gov. Deval Patrick's budget plan to add \$140 million more in state aid.

"Many of you have gone years without a salary increase, and this was a well-deserved investment. The human service sector is one of the most important in the commonwealth, and I will continue to fight for you," Murray said at the rally.

Murray said she supported a one-time salary bonus of \$10 million for human service providers in the 2012 supplemental budget, the first raise since fiscal year 2008. Last fiscal year, Murray helped to secure another \$20 million for staff raises.

In addition to Patrick's plan to provide more money to programs such as assisted-living homes and employment services, members of a coalition of home care workers are asking for another \$16.6 million for a 2 percent salary hike for most workers.

Michael Moloney, the president of Horace Mann Educational Associates (HMEA) and emcee of the rally, said the bonuses are essential because many caretakers are struggling financially.

"Most human service workers in Massachusetts make about \$12 an hour, and around \$23,000 annually after taxes, which is among the lowest wages in the commonwealth," Moloney said in a phone interview after the rally.

Workers, in a news release, said some 660,000 Massachusetts residents receive some type of care through the program.

Because the national poverty line stands at \$23,550 for a family of four, a majority of the 185,000 human service workers in Massachusetts must work a second or third job to be able to afford their expenses, Moloney said.

Around 100 of those residents who receive care live in the Attleboro area, according to Moloney, a North Attleboro resident.

State Rep. Betty Poirier, R-North Attleboro, who wasn't able to attend the rally, said in an interview that she has supported earlier salary increase and hopes a salary increase will be sustained in the upcoming 2014 state budget.

"Caretakers work incredibly hard and, though we're dealing with some other budget issues, it's their turn to get more money," she said.

State Rep. David Linsky, D-Natick, said patients would also benefit from a salary increase.

"Workers be able to do a better job if they don't show up dog tired in the morning to be able to do their direct care job. That means that the people who need their help will be better served," Linsky said at the rally.

"Caretakers are testament to how important this work is. You should be paid appropriately for the work that you do," he added.

State Rep. Ruth Balsler, D-Newton, agreed saying, "You do arguably the most important job there is, and that's taking care of the most vulnerable people of Massachusetts. You're a force to be reckoned with."

State Rep. Karen Spilka, D-Ashland, whose sister has Down syndrome and Alzheimer's disease, said she would not like to see her sister being turned away from a program due to lack of staffing.

"I understand the issues involved with families taking care of loved ones with intellectual or developmental disabilities. I know how hard it is when there are programs that might be understaffed because the pay is just so low that people can literally earn more at Wendy's," Spilka said.

Karen Cusick, who receives 24-hour care at a home in Worcester for 13 years, fought back tears as she spoke at the rally about the importance of caretakers in her life.

"I have good staff around me to help me keep my home clean, do my laundry and make sure I'm eating nutritious food. I can only have the good life I live now because of good staff. I'm often sad and worried when so many leave," Cusick said.

Cusick's mother, Jean, who helped her daughter read her speech, said the most challenging part about finding good caretakers for Karen is the high turnover rate, with service jobs often ending after six months.

Jean Cusick said most workers leave the industry because they're "just too burnt out."

"The staff at Karen's home look exhausted. They often have little energy. Being totally responsible for the care of individuals who are unable to care for themselves is daunting," she said.

"Increasing salaries will help staff to know that we recognize the good work that they do and that we respect them as health care providers."