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Human services jobs on fast rise

Aging population, downturn fuel jump

By Megan Woolhouse

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Jobs in human services, from home health care to drug counseling, have grown significantly faster than other employment sectors in Massachusetts over the last several years, the result of an aging population and fallout from the last recession, according to a report to be released Wednesday by the University of Massachusetts.

The report found that employment in the sector jumped nearly 50 percent between 2003 and 2011, compared to a slight decline for all Massachusetts jobs during that period.

Nationally, human services jobs grew by about 25 percent between 2003 and 2011, half the pace of the Massachusetts sector.

About 145,000 people in Massachusetts work in human services, with more than 80 percent of the positions held by women, according to the report.

The report, however, noted that many of the jobs are low-paying and part time.

Nearly half the jobs — 40 percent — were less than 35 hours a week, said Michael D. Goodman, a public policy professor at UMass Dartmouth and coauthor of the report.

“When you’re looking at the overall rate of job growth in human services, it’s very substantial,” Goodman said, “But some of that is part time.”

The report was commissioned by the Providers’ Council, a statewide association representing 200 health and human service agencies in Massachusetts, to build support for additional state and federal funding for human services, in part to raise wages.

About one in every five human service workers with a family of three earns \$40,000 a year or less, the report said. That compares to the state’s median family income of about \$84,000, according to the Census.

Many human services workers make ends meet by working multiple jobs, said Michael Weekes, chief executive of the Providers’ Council.

“That concerns us,” Weekes said. “This gives us a sense that perhaps the jobs that are out there are not paying the kind of wages that people need to live.”

Wages for human services varied depending on where a person worked.

For example, median pay for a category of positions that include social workers at a hospital was \$24 an hour, versus \$13 for the same positions at a group home.

Goodman said the low wages could become a problem for the sector and the people who rely on it, particularly as aging baby boomers increase demand for home health care and other services.

High unemployment following the recession may have led more people to take low-paying or part-time jobs, but as the labor market improves, many may leave human services for higher-paying positions, Goodman said.

That could create labor shortages for human services agencies and nonprofits. The unemployment rate in Massachusetts was 6.5 percent in February and 6.7 percent for the nation.

“As the economy recovers, we may see these providers have an increasingly difficult time attracting and retaining workers,” Goodman said.

About 40 percent have a bachelor’s degree or higher, and are employed as social workers or in other administrative jobs.

Others have a high school education or less, working as health care aides, personal care attendants, or companions for the elderly or disabled.

Some of the most dramatic job growth in the human services sector came in the individual and family services subcategory of workers, which range from foster care placement workers to companion services for the elderly.

Jobs in that area grew 109 percent since 2003 in Massachusetts, compared to about 48 percent nationally.

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