



Low Pay May Limit Ability to Hire Mass. Human Services Workers

March 26, 2015 — Almost one in five workers in the Massachusetts human services sector earns so little that they could qualify to receive the services and supports they provide, which, if the situation continues, could limit agencies' ability to staff up as demand for services grows, according to a newly issued report.

Nearly 20% Massachusetts human services workers earns at or below 200% of poverty, a common threshold used to calculate service eligibility, according to *Beyond Social Value: The Economic Impact of the Human Services Sector*, commissioned by the **Providers' Council**, a statewide association of private, community-based care giving organizations, to assess the sector's economic impact on Massachusetts.

Despite the fact that 42% of human services workers have a bachelor's or advanced degree, 12% earn at or below 150% of poverty, according to the report.

"The poverty status of human services workers is not surprising given the relatively low wages that many earn, particularly the frontline, direct service staff," the report notes.

In 2013 the average income required for economic independence for a single adult with no children in Massachusetts is \$13.65 per hour, according to an "economic independence index" developed by **Crittenton Women's Union**, a Boston-based nonprofit that helps low-income women and their families become economically self-sufficient.

However, the report observes, many individuals working in the human services industry are not single adults without children.

Human services jobs in Massachusetts—now numbering 145,000, or 5% of the state's jobs—increased 48% between 2003 and 2011, a period during which the overall number of jobs in the state declined, and is expected to see "substantial additional growth" over the next decade, driven largely by demographic changes that are increasing demand for services, according to the report.

Providers' Council President and CEO Michael Weekes said the social services sector "enhances our communities by significantly creating jobs and supporting local businesses."

Sounding a possible alarm bell, the report noted that spending for human services, most of which receive at least some state funds, dropped as a share of the state budget from 11.8% in fiscal year 2003 to 9.8% last year. During the same period, state spending on health care (MassHealth and health reform, mental health, public health, and state employee health insurance) grew from 35.1% to 43.1%.

Among providers receiving state and local funds, 92% reported that current funding levels do not pay for the full cost of the services being provided to clients, according to the report.

"Given that many direct service occupations earn median wages below that needed for a single adult with no children to achieve economic independence, it is difficult to imagine how the industry will continue to recruit workers in the coming decade if economic conditions continue to improve and current and future workers find themselves with more and better alternative employment options," the report noted.