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Lawmakers pushing for funding for human services workers

NATICK - Rep. David Linsky told an audience of human service workers at the Natick Elks Lodge Friday morning he is gathering backing in the House to put a new salary reserve account in next year's budget that will help boost their pay. Other lawmakers at the MetroWest Advocacy Coalition's 12th annual legislative breakfast said the Legislature is also working to implement a broader measure passed several years ago that aims to reform the state's reimbursement rate system for human and social service providers.

But Sen. Karen Spilka told the roughly 100 people in attendance legislators need their help to finish the efforts, which are intended to better compensate workers who lawmakers and industry leaders said have been underpaid for years.

"We're close, we're almost there. But we're not there yet," the Ashland Democrat said.

According to Michael Weekes, president and CEO of the Massachusetts Council of Human Services Providers, who gave a presentation about the measure, known as Chapter 257, there has been no adjustment to the rates for service providers in 25 years, which has caused the industry's workers to bear the brunt of its recent struggles to stay afloat financially.

"Let's be honest - it's been on the backs of our workers, who have made personal sacrifices to ensure we have a human services sector that's working," he said.

Chapter 257, adopted in 2008, would modernize the rate system, make it more uniform across the state, and ensure that workers are being paid fairly, Weekes said. But the recent recession forced the government to delay implementation, so that six years later, and two years after the measure was supposed to have been fully implemented, only slightly more than a third of all worker contracts as of Jan. 1 had been paid according to the new rates, he said.

"There's going to be a number of people who don't see anything," he said. "We don't think that's fair - you work just as hard as your colleagues."

Weekes and other advocates for the industry are asking the Legislature to create a salary reserve of \$16.6 million to help increase the pay of employees who have not been affected by Chapter 257 yet.

Linsky, a Democrat from Natick, said he's forming a legislative coalition to help secure support for putting that item in the House budget, and asked audience members to help by sending emails to their representatives imploring them to vote in favor of it.

The House Ways and Means Committee is scheduled to present its draft budget next Wednesday, he said.

Also at Friday's event, coalition officials presented two awards named after the late Bill Taylor, the former CEO of Framingham human services organization Advocates Inc. and a "tremendous and tireless advocate for the work" of people within the industry, said Jerry Desilets, a director at the South Middlesex Opportunity Council in Framingham, who emceed the breakfast.

Barbara Steele, a senior outreach clinician in Advocates Inc.'s mental health division, received the Outstanding Human Service Professional award. Margaret Davitt, a longtime employee of SMOC who headed the agency's Turning Point shelter, received the Lifetime Achievement Award.

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At the MetroWest Advocacy Coalition's 12th annual legislative breakfast Friday at the Natick Elks, Barbara Steele received the Bill Taylor Award for outstanding human services professional, here showing a proclamation from state legislators. Daily News Staff Photo/Art Illman

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