



Springfield area human service providers to join Statehouse rally asking for more funding

caringforce.JPG

Wearing yellow shirts, a coalition of direct care service providers called The Caring Force pack a budget hearing at the State House on March 7, 2014. *(Shira Schoenberg for The Republican/MassLive.com)*

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BOSTON — A bus full of human service providers from Western Massachusetts will be traveling to the Statehouse on Tuesday for a rally to ask the Legislature for more money for salaries and services.

"We as a state have determined we don't want people in institutions, that years ago decided to transition to community-based services, but the struggle has been for years to fund those services in a way that provides the care that's needed," said Kathleen Dowd, executive director of Human Service Forum, an umbrella group for human service providers in Western Massachusetts.

Dowd said a bus of 50 people leaving from Springfield will join around 600 human service providers at the Statehouse rally.

The rally is being organized by the Caring Force, a lobbying group for social service workers organized by the Providers' Council, a statewide umbrella group of human services organizations. The human services organizations contract with the state to provide assistance to people with intellectual and developmental disabilities, homeless people and those in the child welfare system.

The Providers' Council is asking for more money for the implementation of "Chapter 257," a law passed in 2008 that brought the reimbursement rates for human services organizations in line with market rates. The law has been gradually implemented, and only some rates have been increased.

Gov. Deval Patrick, a Democrat, put an additional \$200 million into funding for Chapter 257 in his proposed budget, and the council wants the Legislature to keep that money there. The council is also asking the Legislature for an additional \$16.6 million for a salary fund, which supplements the salaries of human service workers who earn less than \$40,000 a year and whose salaries have not yet been raised to market rates.

Michael Weekes, president and CEO of the Providers' Council, who lives in Longmeadow, said it is important for Western Massachusetts to have a viable human services sector. Many human service workers earn \$10 or \$11 an hour.

"Generally, it's a low paid sector," Weekes said. "We need to do something about that so wages are a

more livable wage.”

Weekes pointed out that the human services industry is also a major employer in Western Massachusetts, a region that has a high poverty rate.

The Massachusetts House is expected to release its version of the state budget on Wednesday. The human service workers rally is one of numerous rallies and lobbying days that organizations are having, to get members to plead their case for more money as the legislature goes through its budgeting process.

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