

Human service workers in Massachusetts protest possible cut of pay raise



By [Dan Ring, The Republican](#)

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Michael Weekes *The Republican* / Dan Ring

BOSTON - A group of [human service workers](#) on Monday pressed [Gov. Deval L. Patrick](#) to release small salary increases for low-paid employees in the field.

The delay in raises for the human service workers came as hundreds of legislative staffers at the Statehouse were rewarded with raises.

Though the state House of Representatives and the state Senate have not met in formal sessions for four months, the House speaker and Senate president provided raises to hundreds of staffers. Those pay hikes were doled out even as the state faces declining revenues that could force budget cuts.

House Speaker Robert DeLeo and Senate President Therese Murray agreed to the 3 percent raises last week.

The Democratic leaders have the authority to give raises. House employees haven't seen an increase since 2008.

While DeLeo gave the 3 percent raise to 460 House employees, Murray gave the raises just to her staff, the Associated Press reported.

A spokesman for Murray said individual senators control their own office and staff and can make their own decisions about raises.

Holding signs that said "dare to care about human services," about 15 human service workers greeted Patrick outside his Statehouse office as he answered questions from reporters. The workers plan daily protests of his decision.

Michael D. Weekes of Longmeadow, president and CEO of the Massachusetts Council of Human Service Providers, said the Patrick administration is indefinitely delaying release of \$20 million in this year's state budget to provide about 2 percent salary increases for 29,000 workers of private, nonprofit agencies that contract with the state for care of the mentally ill, the developmentally disabled and other human services.

When he signed the \$32.5 billion state budget in July, Patrick vetoed \$10 million of the money. State legislators voted to override the veto.

Weekes said the raises were to be released on Dec. 21 but have been held up by the administration amid a shortfall in state tax collections.

Patrick told reporters that "everything is on the table" for possible emergency budget cuts because state tax collections were about \$250 million below the state's estimates for the first quarter of the fiscal year that started July 1. Patrick said he would wait until he received a report on November tax revenues before determining whether to make mid-year budget cuts.

Patrick said he has not frozen the salary reserve for the human service workers. He said the administration has taken steps in anticipation of potential budget cuts, but no final decisions have been made.

"I understand the sensitivity about those issues and the sensitivity of some of the folks who are here and we appreciate that you are here," Patrick said, recognizing the human service workers outside his office.

One of the workers, Ann Sinawski, 54, of Quincy, said she is barely scraping by on her pay of \$11.06 an hour. She said she needs the raise approved by legislators, which would amount to \$13 a week or 33 cents an hour, according to an estimate by the providers' council.

"I'm upset," she said. "This really hurts at a bad time."

While available to reporters on Monday, Patrick also said there is no move afoot on Beacon Hill to eliminate the need for a special election next year if [U.S. Sen. John F. Kerry](#) resigns [to join the cabinet](#) of President Barack Obama. "I don't think there is any appetite to do that," Patrick told reporters.

Patrick's comments on possibly filling Kerry's seat means a 2009 state law is likely to stay the same. Speculation in Washington is that Kerry might resign to become secretary of state or secretary of defense.

Kerry's press secretary, [Alec Gerlach](#), said last week that Kerry "intends to run for re-election in 2014 and stay in the Senate."

Under the state election law, Patrick would have to appoint a temporary replacement until a special election, which would be held between 145 and 160 days after a vacancy were to occur. A special election could favor U.S. Sen. [Scott P. Brown](#), a Republican who lost the Nov. 6 election to Democrat [Elizabeth Warren](#).

Patrick did reiterate that he would have preferred a prior law that allowed a governor to appoint a replacement for a vacant U.S. Senate seat until the next statewide election, which would be 2014, instead of until a special election that would be in four or five months.