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Push for pay increase: Shortage of aides hurts quality of life for disabled NJ residents



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Advocates for New Jerseyans with disabilities and lawmakers from both sides of the aisle continued their push this week for higher wages for the home health aides who make daily life possible for some of the state's most medically fragile residents.

During Wednesday's Department of Human Services budget hearing, Assemblywoman Carol Murphy, D-Burlington, said she has been "bombarded" by families pleading for help as staff shortages affect quality of life for thousands of state residents with developmental disabilities.

Murphy used the hearing to rally support for home aides — known in the industry as direct support professionals, or DSPs — who assist with daily needs, including bathing, clothing and feeding around the clock. It's a grueling task for which they are underpaid, advocates said.

The state has approved three rate increases for the aides since 2019, and another is planned for January 2023. All four totaled will account for an additional \$4.75 per hour for each worker, bringing the current median wage to \$17.86 an hour, according to the state.

"These investments are moving the needle. In the latest national survey of DSP wages, New Jersey is among the top five states for DSP pay and among the top three states with the lowest turnover rates," said DHS commissioner Sarah Adelman in an emailed statement.

"In the next survey, I'm confident we will do even better, and New Jersey will continue to lead the way in caring for individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities."

But advocates and families said more needs to be done.

Average wages for the aides fall below federal poverty levels, and most staffers work two or three jobs, according to the most recent report from 2017 to the U.S. president on “America’s Direct Support Workforce Crisis.”

The system has long been under strain with the low pay and long hours that caused a high turnover rate even before the pandemic. The current shortage of workers has exacerbated the problem.

Trips into communities are halted, as are therapy and other essential services. Even trips home to see family have slowed because of the staffing crisis.

Catherine Chin is the executive director of the Alliance for the Betterment of Citizens with Disabilities, a trade group for the companies that run homes and day programs. She surveys the companies monthly and said day programs are operating at 62% of pre-pandemic levels, primarily because of the shortage in staffing. She said about 21% of people in the community are stuck at home rather than taking part in the programs they rely on.

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Department of Human Services spokesperson Tom Hester said 344 of day program sites, or 94%, were open in April, allowing about 7,920 individuals to take part in programs that offer socialization and occupational therapy “in person or hybrid.” He said an additional 624 individuals participated in the programs remotely.

But that’s not the whole picture, Chin said.

“How many doors are open is just one measurement. But how often are they getting to step through those doors? How much time are they able to spend receiving services? They may only be coming one or two times a week because of staffing shortages, whereas in 2018 they were coming five times a week,” said Chin.

“Overall utilization is down about 22%,” Hester said.

Meanwhile, home providers — often the same companies that run day programs — have had to consolidate group homes and juggle employees between day programs and homes, wherever coverage is thinnest.

“They are really struggling, working two, three shifts in a row,” said Assemblywoman Aura Kenny Dunn, R-Morris, during Tuesday's Disability Caucus, a bipartisan forum.

The average starting salary for direct support professionals in New Jersey was about \$12 per hour, or \$24,960 a year, in 2019, according to a report by the state's disability ombudsman, Paul Aronsohn.

Agencies pay a minimum of \$15 to \$16.50 per hour, said Valerie Sellers, CEO of the New Jersey Association of Community Providers, a trade group that represents more than 150 agencies in the state.

Still, that doesn't compete with employers across the state, said Celeste Smith, associate executive director at the LADACIN Network, an agency that works in Ocean and Monmouth counties.

Homes and facilities agree that they have had to make do with fewer aides and a higher turnaround rate of employees, delaying progress in therapy and socialization.

Chin appreciates the incremental raises that have come from the state budget, but she said federal money could go a long way to helping this community, which was affected more than most during the pandemic.

“I am advocating an increase to help our staffing using American Rescue Plan funds. There are \$3 billion that we could use to help restart day programs and help residential [programs] get moving again,” Chin said. “It's a one-time fund, but we are living day to day here. We need to get started, and anything would help.”

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