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# Chapter 257: State Reimbursement Must Address the Human Services Staffing Crisis.

Opinion by Colleen Holmes.

In Massachusetts, we can be proud of our extensive network of state-funded services demonstrating our caring and commitment to social equity for individuals with disabilities or other disadvantages. Today we need to protect that commitment against a state reimbursement rate, which if it is not changed, will leave those individuals and their families without access to safe, quality care.

At my agency, Viability, Inc., we see miracle-like impact for our individuals with disabilities or disadvantages literally every day because a human services worker, who typically makes less than \$17.00 an hour, consistently gave their skill, patience, caring, encouragement, know-how and dedication to ensure another individual's success. Today, those life-changing outcomes are in jeopardy. Some of our programs only have half the number of staff needed, a staffing crisis crippling every corner of human services. The state reimbursement rate does not allow human service workers to be paid a living wage. Their pay is nowhere near the \$44.73 the MIT Wage Calculator states a single parent with one child needs to be self-sufficient.

For human service workers, being on the frontlines of the pandemic has added insult to the injury of always being expected to move mountains with little more than hope and hard work. They watch with sinking hearts as the cost of everything, and now pay for others, went up. The *Associated Press* noted the average pay for retail workers, excluding managers, jumped 7.1% to \$19.24 an hour. There is certainly dignity in all work. There is also certainly a difference between what it takes to empower others and build a more equitable world, versus selling t-shirts at the mall.

Human service workers are done, and they are leaving for jobs with higher pay. Here is what that means: 7,000 people with disabilities have not been able to *return* to their day programs for the past 2 years. This places great stress on their family members, many of whom had to give up their own jobs to care of their adult children. Providers haven't been able to open new programs to meet the needs of individuals turning 22 or residential initiatives for those with acquired brain injuries. Waitlists to see community-based therapists are months long. People with substance use disorders are delayed in getting treatment. With vacant positions sitting unfilled up to a year, the staff who remain regularly work upwards of 80 hours a week. Do we want to experience what worse looks like?

Money doesn't fix everything, but it certainly fixes money problems. The state budget has the surplus to be able to do it. If our state senators vote to increase what is called the Chapter 257 rate reserve to \$581 million dollars,

enabling providers to pay direct care workers \$20/hour, they won't need to leave critically needed services offering safe, quality care for a job at a retail store - and social equity grows.

*Ms. Holmes is President and CEO of Viability, Inc. a community-based human services provider for five decades, currently serving over 2851 individuals with disabilities or disadvantages in Massachusetts with a staff of 296.*