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EDITORIAL | OPINION

# **Viewpoint: Disability services network in 'system failure' due to workforce drought**

**CEO urges legislative support to address inadequate workforce in human services**

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ROAD TO RESPONSIBILITY

Christopher White is CEO of Road to Responsibility, which offers residential, work/employment, day habilitation and other day supports to individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities throughout Southern Massachusetts.

After decades of “getting by” (sometimes just barely) due to a large population of young people seeking to enter the job market complemented by a vast pool of legal immigrants, the day has arrived where the human service system has effectively reached the point of failure because we can’t hire enough workers.

This may sound hyperbolic, but how would you describe a situation where there are thousands of people with various disabilities needing services, there is money to pay for those services, yet those people cannot access them? That’s precisely what’s happening across the state.

The state Department of Developmental Services (DDS) has over 7,000 people waiting to return to the services they were receiving pre-pandemic. This doesn’t include the many young adults who are now aging out of school-based services and looking forward to moving on to adult services. Unfortunately, most of them learn there are no services to be had due to the workforce shortage. There is no foreseeable solution in sight for this problem unless something significant changes.

Why is this happening now? The pandemic has accelerated the pace of baby boomers retiring. Subsequent generations, being much smaller, aren't sufficient to replace those retirees in normal times, and these aren't normal times. It also forced millions of women out of the workforce to [care for young children or other family members](#). In the past, this problem was masked by a relatively abundant flow of legal immigrants. Unfortunately, legal immigration was largely curtailed under the Trump administration, and the Biden administration hasn't meaningfully addressed it. This dynamic has led to a massive shift in the labor market.

Businesses like Target (\$24 per hour), Bank of America (\$20 per hour), Amazon (\$18.50 per hour) and Hobby Lobby (\$18.50 per hour) are all offering a higher starting wage to perform jobs of less societal importance and impact than the essential work performed every day, pandemic or not, by our human services workforce. If Target is short-staffed, we are inconvenienced. When human services are short-staffed, the lives of our members and their families are jeopardized.

The primary issue is money. Companies like Road To Responsibility can't compete in this market without significant increases to the rates the state uses to purchase services. Using one-time funds (primarily a PPP loan) we have increased our starting pay to \$17 per hour and have added recruitment and retention bonuses of \$2,500. However, our state contracts will only support an entry-level wage of \$15 to \$16.79 per hour. While our efforts have helped to stabilize us, they haven't significantly decreased our vacancies (we still have more than 27% of our positions vacant). This is happening across the field — children, mental health, developmental disabilities and elder services.

Finally, it is important to understand that the private, nonprofit human-services system is the tool by which the commonwealth meets its moral and legal obligations to meet the needs of our most vulnerable citizens. Please tell your state representatives and senators to support increasing the Chapter 257 reserve budget line by \$351.6 million. This would bring entry-level wages for our direct support professionals to \$20.30 per hour and would peg future pay rates to the 75th percentile of the Bureau of Labor Statistics statistics benchmarks.

*[Christopher White](#) is CEO of Road to Responsibility, which offers residential, work/employment, day habilitation and other day supports to individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities throughout Southern Massachusetts.*