



Scrimping on direct care

By Karen Spilka and Gale Candaras

Saturday, November 24, 2007 | <http://www.bostonherald.com> | [Op-Ed](#)

State lawmakers have a long history of standing up for major industries in Massachusetts in order to make it easier for these sectors of the economy to survive, grow and thrive.

In the last 10 years alone, Beacon Hill has passed specific tax breaks for certain financial services and research and development companies. More recently, new tax breaks and incentives have been passed in order to tempt Hollywood to film here.

Yet there is one massive sector of the Massachusetts economy that has not received the same attention. This industry provides more than \$100 million in tax revenue to the state and its cities and towns, and boasts a payroll exceeding \$2 billion.

It is the human services industry.

Rarely are human services workers - the people who take care of the millions of seniors and disabled citizens day and night - mentioned as an economic force. But a new report released by the Executive Office of Health and Human Services shows that is exactly the case. More than 185,000 workers are employed in the field, making up 3 percent of the state's entire work force. That mirrors the size of the telecommunications industry in Massachusetts.

Additionally, this is among the fastest growing sectors of the economy. According to the report, the work force grew by 18 percent from 1998 to 2003, while the state's overall work force grew only 1.7 percent during the same period.

The last time the state adjusted the rates that are paid to providers for their services was 1987. Think about how much the cost of living has increased in the last 20 years. Despite a small increase in the human service salary reserve in last year's budget, the larger funding problem has gone unresolved.

This has led to the severe crisis in care that is being felt throughout the system today. Compared to other workers, pay is low, resulting in high turnover among direct care workers and subsequent compromised care. In addition, 80 percent of these workers are women and heads of households, while many are single mothers. When these workers need to take second jobs, the quality of care suffers. Conversely, paying these workers a decent wage will result in them being well-trained, qualified, motivated and present.

All of us may be relying on human service workers in some capacity in the not-so-distant future. For our own peace of mind, we should be taking better care of those who take care of our loved ones - and possibly even ourselves.

"Given the vital role that this industry and its work force play, both as an economic contributor to the commonwealth and as a partner in delivering care to vulnerable citizens," the report reads, "it is in the commonwealth's interest to ensure that the industry's work force is paid a fair living wage."

This is why we support passage of legislation that would, for the first time since 1987, change the rates that are paid to providers. The bill also would establish an advisory council that would help ensure rates remain at a fair level.

Gov. [Deval Patrick](#) has already indicated his support for reasonable rate reform.

In the Legislature, we need to ask ourselves, "How much this is going to cost?" However, we also need to consider the cost to the state by not passing this legislation.

We cannot outsource these jobs. Nor can we use technology to replace the skill and care these workers bring to their profession.

This legislation should become law not because it is their turn. It should become law because the state needs these workers as much as the workers need the state.

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