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EDITOR'S PICK

## Human services workers, clients call for living wage at legislative event

By Caroline Enos | Staff Writer

March 25, 2024



State Rep. Manny Cruz, D-Salem, speaks at the Northeast Regional Caring Force Rally's legislative breakfast in Peabody on Friday.



Todd Reis, chair of Vinfen's Metro Boston Self Advocacy Group, calls for higher wages for human services workers at the Northeast Regional Caring Force Rally's legislative breakfast in Peabody on Friday.



From left: state Sen. Bruce Tarr, state Rep. Tom Walsh, state Sen, Joan Lovely, state Rep. Daniel Cahill, state Rep. Manny Cruz and state Rep. Jerry Parisella at the Northeast Regional Caring Force Rally in Peabody on Friday. At the rally, human services workers and their clients called for higher wages for those in the field.

PEABODY — A Lawrence woman carried a clear message from the workers who care for the state’s most vulnerable at the Northeast Regional Caring Force Rally on Friday.

“One of the saddest, most common situations I’ve seen was when someone had built a strong connection with clients and would leave their work for better pay,” said Rosalee Sanchez, a direct care assistant supervisor at NFI Massachusetts.

Sanchez spoke before a crowd of lawmakers, caregivers, clients and human service advocates at a legislative breakfast hosted at the Holiday Inn & Suites in Peabody ahead of a rally at the State House later Friday afternoon.

Many in the room work with the impoverished, at-risk youth or those with disabilities, or have faced challenges themselves.

With 26% of these types of positions vacant in the state, legislative action is crucial, according to host The Caring Force.

“This is hard work, but it is also so satisfying to be able to change lives,” said Sanchez.

“We all need to advocate for livable wages so that those we care for can have a staff full of those who love what they do and will stay with them for the long haul.”

Danvers mother Geraldine Neistorowich has seen the value of these services firsthand. Her son, who struggled in the early years of his autism diagnosis, is now able to live at home and have a happy life as an adult thanks to adult care programs like the Northeast Arc, where she also works, she told the rally.

Todd Reis is also another adult with disabilities who is thriving thanks, in part, to human services nonprofits. He’s a Special Olympian, chair of the Metro Boston Self Advocacy Group and has lived in a group home in Watertown since 2015 that’s run by the nonprofit Vinfen.

“It’s wonderful to have some staff who have been with Vinfen for a long time,” he told the crowd. “They know how to do their job well, and they get to know all the people they work with well.

“Their jobs can be challenging, so I like to go to the State House every chance I can to advocate for an increase in staff salaries,” he said.

State Reps. Tom Walsh, D-Peabody, Dan Cahill, D-Lynn, Manny Cruz, D-Salem, and Jerry Parisella, D-Beverly, attended Friday’s breakfast, as did state Sens. Bruce Tarr, R-Gloucester, and Joan Lovely, D-Salem.

Lovely has two grown nephews with disabilities, and sees the need for the services they receive, she said.

She supported the Alternative 22 program, which helps move disabled youth from special education programs to adult services, and spoke on behalf of the lawmakers in attendance.

“We are addressing the workforce shortage, we are working on your budget priorities, working with the governor,” Lovely said. “The House will do their budget in April and the Senate will follow in May, and we’re going to get these done.”

One bill proposed on Beacon Hill would eliminate the pay disparity between state workers and those employed by community-based human services nonprofits. Filed as S.84 and H.191, the bill notes state workers often make more money for similar work done in the private sector, where workers don't always earn a livable wage.

Another proposed bill, filed as H.214 and S.77, would create an education loan repayment program for human service workers who work at least 35 hours a week.

"It's not just a job, it's about giving your heart, yourself to what you do and making sure that we have a caring, committed workforce for a lot of folks that are vulnerable," Tarr said.

With state revenues not as high as lawmakers projected this year, protecting current funding for these services will be its own battle this budget season, Walsh said.

"But by having events like this, it helps us when we make determinations that we have you in mind as the deliberations continue," Walsh said.

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