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THE PROVIDER

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Gov. Healey proposes \$61.5 billion FY '26 budget

Massachusetts has recently begun the process of constructing the FY '26 state budget. On January 22, Governor Maura Healey presented her FY '26 budget proposal, a \$61.5 billion spending plan, which includes \$1.95 billion in surtax spending.

The proposal contains \$207 million for the Chapter 257 Reserve, which represents an increase of \$34 million, a 19.65% increase from FY '24. The comparison to FY '24, rather than FY '25, is due to the alternating review cycle of Chapter 257 rates by the Executive Office of Health and Human Services (EOHHS).

EOHHS noted the \$207 million in new Chapter 257 rates will allow it to maintain the 53rd percentile Bureau of Labor Statistics benchmark used in human services rates over the last several years.

"While this budget may have been challenging given the demand for limited resources, we are confident that our administration is putting forward a plan that makes life more affordable for people, protects our most vulnerable citizens, supports our employers and our economy, and smartly balances those needs against the imperative of fiscal discipline and sustainability," Gov. Healey said in her budget message.

The Providers' Council shared its budget analysis with member on January 22, identifying proposed changes to several key line items from the FY '25 GAA bud-



On January 22, Governor Maura Healey presented her FY '26 budget proposal.

get. These included:

- **EEC line item 3000-3060** — DCF and DTA Related Child Care — rose from \$356.6 million to \$448.2 million, an increase of 25.69%.
- **MRC line item 4120-2000** — Vocational Rehabilitation for People with Disabilities — increased from \$26.2 million to \$28.8 million, an increase of 9.98%.
- **DTA line item 4401-1000** — Employment Services Program — rose from \$18.8 million to \$20.6, a increase of 8.84%.
- **DPH line item 4512-2000** — Bureau of Substance Abuse Services — decreased 8.41%, dropping from \$194.5 million to \$178 million.

FY '26 BUDGET, see page 7

"Know Your Rights" webinar with State ORI sheds light on immigration law

As the issue of immigration rights is at the forefront of many policy conversations with a new federal administration in Washington, the Providers' Council joined with other human services trades in January to host a webinar titled, "Know Your Rights: A Discussion of Immigration."

Susan Church, the chief operating officer at the state Office of Refugees and Immigrants (ORI) presented to more than 300 attendees about available resources and the rights providers have under the law. Providers' Council President/CEO Bill Yelenak opened the discussion and moderated questions during the hour-long webinar that was also hosted by the Association for Behavioral Healthcare, Association of Developmental Disabilities Providers and the Children's League of Massachusetts.

In addition to her role at ORI, Church is an attorney and immi-

KYR, see page 7

Council celebrates 50 years of impact: The Council's founding

The Providers' Council is turning 50 in 2025! The organization is thrilled be celebrating 50 years of impact with its members. In celebration of this milestone, *The Provider* will be running a series of articles throughout the year commemorating some of the Council's most important milestones in its first 50 years.

In 2025, the Council is the largest human services trade association and is widely recognized as the official voice of the private provider industry. Founded in 1975, the Council's chief goal was to advocate for the community-based human services sector.

In the 1970s, the deinstitutionalization movement pushed for vulnerable individuals to be included in society, with social workers and professional caregivers fighting for the rights of all individuals

to be able to live in a community of their choosing in the least restrictive settings possible. The movement launched several nonprofit organizations providing services to individuals in the communities where they lived. For example, instead of orphanages, alternatives such as adoption and foster homes were considered for children.

"[The Council] brought together organizations from around the state so that they could work together to find support for their programs from local and state agencies," said Gerry Wright, a founder of the Council. "The history is that I had created the D.A.R.E. program (Dynamic Action Residency Enterprises) ten years earlier, and it was my understanding that all programs needed to work together

FOUNDING, see page 7

Providers celebrate the life and legacy of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

Every January, provider organizations from around Massachusetts bring their staff and program participants together to celebrate the life and legacy of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. This year, many Providers' Council members brought their communities together for an annual celebration of this beloved civil rights leader.

Martin Luther King, Jr. Family Services hosted their annual event to celebrate King's legacy on January 20 at the City Hall in Springfield. Urban League of Springfield and the Providers' Council came together with MLK Jr. Family Services to support its annual celebration. The event began with a flag raising at noon at City Hall presented by the City of Springfield and the Greater Springfield NAACP. There were performances by MLK Charter School of Excellence, Martin Luther King, Jr. Family Services' Youth & Clemente Program, Communi-



MLK Family Services hosted its annual MLK Day event at the Mass Mutual Center.

ty Music School of Springfield's Sonido Musica, String City, African Drumming, Springfield CommUnity Chorale, Young

MLK DAY, see page 7



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Hildebrand Family Self-Help Center names Michael Hughes as Acting CEO
Hildebrand Family Self-Help Center, Inc. announced in January that Chief Financial Officer Michael Hughes will serve as Acting Chief Executive Officer following the retirement of Shiela Y. Moore from the CEO position.



Michael Hughes Hughes joined Hildebrand as Chief Financial Officer in January 2023, bringing over 25 years of consulting and financial advisory experience to the position. Under his leadership as CFO, Hildebrand grew its annual budget by 49% and expanded its shelter portfolio from 135 to 157 units, reaching many more families each year. Prior to joining Hildebrand, Hughes led his own consulting firm. In addition, he was a partner at a certified public accounting firm and served as the CFO of a local company.

Justice Resource Institute announces two new changes to their team

On January 13, **Justice Resource Institute (JRI)** announced the promotion of Roody Herold and hiring of Patty Vattes. Herold will take on responsibilities of overseeing HR, DEI, and IT along with his current role as Chief Administrative Officer and Vattes will now serve as JRI's new Senior Director of Human Resources.

Herold joined JRI as Chief Information Officer in January 2016. He brings over 30 years of experience to his new roles. Before joining JRI, Herold was Director of Strategic Planning and Innovation for the Commonwealth of Massachusetts' Executive Office of Labor and Workforce Development.

Vattes joined JRI in December 2024. She brings over 20 years of experience to her new role. Previously, Vattes was the Head of HR at DPS Group Global.

BFAIR announces promotions of Kaitlyn Moresi and Christine Meiklejohn

On January 14, **Berkshire Family & Individual Resources (BFAIR)** announced the promotions of Kaitlyn Moresi to Vice President of Clinical Services and Christine Meiklejohn to Senior Director of Residential Services.

Moresi joined BFAIR in 2022 as the Director of Clinical Services, where she made significant strides in advancing the organization's clinical programming. Kaitlyn began her career providing in-home ABA therapy with Positive Behavior Supports Corporation and later served as a BCBA for the Hoosac Valley Regional School District.

Meiklejohn joined BFAIR in 2016. In her new role, she will oversee both the ABI and DDS Residential Services departments, continuing her work to expand residential programming and support individuals transitioning from nursing homes to community living.

Advocates announces changes to their leadership team and board

Advocates recently welcomed Melissa Lewis, Joseph Robitaille and Dr. Madeline Aviles-Hernandez to its leadership team, and Marty Cohen to its board of directors.

Melissa Lewis will be taking on the role of Senior Vice President of Operations for Intellectual/Developmental Disability and Brain Injury Services. Lewis came to Advocates during its merger with HMEA, bringing nearly 30 years of experience as a steadfast advocate for individuals with developmental disabilities.

Joseph Robitaille will be taking on the role of Senior Vice President of Children's Services. Before joining Advocates, Robitaille previously held leadership roles at J. Arthur Trudeau Memorial Center and Beacon ABA Services, where he led a variety of children's programs, including early intervention, home and center-based treatment, and specialized school services.

Dr. Madeline Aviles-Hernandez has taken on the role of Senior Vice President

New England Village and Hanson Aktion Club collect over 400 toys for Toys for Tots Program



*The Hanson Aktion Club, which **New England Village Inc. (NEV)** serves as the host agency for, held its annual holiday party in December and announced it had collected more than 400 toys for the Toys for Tots Program surpassing last year's total. The club partnered with local businesses in collecting toys for the drive.*

of Behavioral Health Services. Aviles-Hernandez joins Advocates from her recent roles as Principal/CEO at Persona Solutions, LLC, and CEO of The Price Center, and brings more than fifteen years of progressive management and operations experience to her new position.

Marty Cohen will be welcomed to Advocates' Board of Directors. Cohen brings a wealth of experience in health and human services to Advocates Board of Directors, having recently retired after 25 years as the founding president and CEO of the MetroWest Health Foundation.

Council promotes Nina Lamarre to Education and Training Coordinator

On January 14, the **Providers' Council** promoted Nina Lamarre to Education

and Training Coordinator.

Lamarre previously served as an Education and Membership Associate, supporting the Council's Education and Training team and membership efforts. She also oversees the Council's Jobs With Heart online job board.



Nina Lamarre

In her new role, Lamarre will be responsible for planning the Council's trainings and webinars calendar, overseeing Convention & Expo workshops and coordinating collegiate academic partnerships and opportunities. She also manages The Leadership Initiative. To connect with Nina, email her at nlamarre@providers.org.



Exclusive Endorsed Vendor

EXCITING NEWS!

USI is pleased to announce that the Providers' Council Delta Dental program is renewing with a 3-year hold!

No increase to rates through 2027 and...

now covering mouthguards, enhanced fluoride and sealant coverage, enhanced implant coverage and more.

The Delta Dental program is one of the Council's most popular programs.

Interested Council members can receive a **free, no-obligation analysis** of their potential savings through the Delta Dental program.



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About the Agency

Vinfen, established in 1977 by psychiatrists and social workers from the Massachusetts Mental Health Center and Harvard Medical School, began as a nonprofit dedicated to assisting individuals with mental health conditions transition from hospital settings to community living.

The founders intentionally named the organization “Vinfen”—derived from their first group home at the intersection of Vining Street and Fenwood Road—to avoid stigmatizing terminology.

Initially focused on mental health, Vinfen expanded its services over the decades to support individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities and brain injuries.

The organization has been at the forefront of investing in community-based, person-centered support, emphasizing recovery, self-determination and the adoption of evidence-based practices.

Today, Vinfen operates over 370 programs and services across more than 500 locations in Massachusetts and Connecticut, serving approximately 10,000 individuals annually. With a workforce exceeding 3,300 employees, Vinfen is the 21st largest nonprofit in Massachusetts.

Vinfen’s commitment to housing is at the heart of its mission to support individuals with mental health conditions, intellectual and developmental disabilities and brain injuries.

Vinfen’s funding sources are diverse, including state and federal contracts, grants and private contributions, enabling the organization to continue its mission of transforming lives by building the capacity of individuals, families, organizations and communities to learn, thrive and achieve their goals.

Pathway to stability: Vinfen’s holistic approach to housing and support

As a leading health and human services nonprofit, Vinfen’s expansive network of 190 group residences focuses on creating safe, comfortable and supportive home environments that empower individuals to lead fulfilling lives in their communities.

For those living with mental health challenges, Vinfen’s Adult Community Clinical Services (ACCS) and Program for Assertive Community Treatment (PACT) offer comprehensive, community-based programs to help individuals stabilize their mental health, build daily living skills and integrate into the community. For those who are unhoused, Vinfen provides housing navigation services from application support to obtaining keys to a home.

Vinfen is able to provide low-barrier housing solutions for those with chronic homelessness and behavioral health conditions. This is exemplified by its operation of six Safe Haven residential programs, including those located in Boston, Somerville and Lowell. Safe Haven programs provide individuals with immediate access to housing while offering mental health support and connection to longer-term services.

Vinfen’s impact extends further through its management of housing subsidies and leases as part of its contracts with the Department of Mental Health. This partnership enables Vinfen to serve nearly 2,700 people across Eastern Massachusetts, from Haverhill to the Cape and the Islands. This support system means individuals remain securely housed while receiving ongoing assistance from Vinfen’s multidisciplinary teams. Through contracts with MassHealth managed care entities, Vinfen offers a holistic approach that includes both housing and healthcare.

Similarly, Vinfen’s work with individuals with intellectual and developmental



Vinfen’s mission starts with its holistic approach to housing and community.

disabilities and acquired brain injuries emphasizes housing as a key pillar of independence. Vinfen’s residential services range from 24-hour care in group homes where significant cognitive, behavioral, and physical support may be offered to environments where individuals live with less direct supervision but still receive essential assistance. The goal is to provide person-centered care that respects everyone’s unique needs and aspirations.

Beyond housing, Vinfen addresses employment services to help individuals build skills, secure jobs and maintain stable housing. Meanwhile, outpatient clinics offer essential mental health and recovery services that help individuals stay on track, supporting their ability to remain housed and engaged in the community.

Family and caregiver support services ensure that individuals who live with family members receive the guidance and resources they need to thrive. By educating and empowering families, Vinfen strengthens the broader network of support around each person, reinforcing their ability to maintain a safe and nurturing home environment.

Executive Leadership

Jean Yang, MBA, has been serving as the President and Chief Executive Officer of Vinfen since 2022. In her role, Yang is responsible for the organization’s overall strategic direction, ensuring alignment with Vinfen’s core mission through rigorous operations, strong workforce development, innovative practices and extensive collaboration with stakeholders across the health and human services sector.



Jean Yang

Before joining Vinfen, Yang accumulated over two decades of experience in the healthcare sector, spanning payer, provider, and government entities. She served as President of Public Plans at Point32Health (formerly Tufts Health Plan), overseeing health insurance services for over 500,000 Medicaid and low-income members.

Her public service includes leadership roles at the Massachusetts Health Connector Authority, where she served as Chief Financial Officer and later as Executive Director from 2010 to 2014. Subsequently, she became the Executive Director of Boston Children’s Hospital’s Integrated Care Organization.

Yang holds a Bachelor of Science in Biochemistry from Peking University and a Master of Business Administration from Harvard Business School.

Her vision for Vinfen focuses on fostering innovation, building partnerships with public and private entities and ensuring that the workforce has the necessary resources to succeed. She is committed to advancing Vinfen’s mission to support individuals with mental health conditions, disabilities, and life challenges, enabling them to lead full, productive, and valued lives within their communities.

SALUTING THE CARING FORCE

Rusinko is dedicated to helping children find their forever home

Downey Side Adoption is a nonprofit organization dedicated to placing children in foster care with loving families through adoption. Nearly 500,000 children across the United States are waiting for a family.

Recently, we had a family in the process of adopting a 14-year-old girl from a boarding home. While visiting her, her best friend asked if they could adopt her too. The family was concerned that when the friend turned 18, she would age out of the system and become a statistic. They decided to adopt both girls. She is now 18 years old and accepted into college. She is thrilled to have a family, a sister and a home to return to during the holidays.

Meet Dawn Rusinko, a dedicated social worker and the director of Downey Side Adoption in New Jersey and New York. Her journey began in 2005 when she and her husband adopted an eight-year-old boy through Downey Side. With two biological children, the couple navigated the transition of welcoming a third child into their family and developed many valuable skills along the way.

Engel, the founder of Downey Side, invited Rusinko to join the Downey Side team to help other families adopt. Since then, she has been a dynamic addition



Dawn Rusinko has been a dynamic addition to Downey Side Adoption.

to the organization and has played a significant role in facilitating family adoptions. Her personal experience as a parent of an adopted child has provided her with unique insights into what it’s like to be a kid in the system. This understanding enables her to connect and communicate effectively with children in need.

As an administrator, Rusinko has compassion for the challenges faced by these children and has become a powerful tool in her advocacy. She works tirelessly to navigate the bureaucratic system, fighting for children’s rights and helping them transition from an overburdened system into loving families.

Jack of all trades: Lavandier supports new parents at SMOC

Maribel Lavandier has worked in the WIC program at South Middlesex Opportunity Council (SMOC) for 24 years, and she could not imagine a more fulfilling career.

“I always say I’m going to retire in this job,” she said. “I don’t want to move and look for something else. This is what I like.”

WIC (Women, Infants, and Children) is a USDA program that provides free healthy foods and infant formula, breastfeeding support, nutrition education, referrals to healthcare and other services to pregnant and postpartum individuals as well as to other caregivers of children under 5. “I used to eat a lot of junk and stuff like that because we didn’t know much about nutrition,” Lavandier said. “I feel happy to teach parents how to eat healthy and to balance [meals] for their kids.”

A native of Puerto Rico, Lavandier moved to Massachusetts with her family in 1990. She has become WIC’s jack-of-all-trades. Her official title is Program/Nutrition Assistant, which means she juggles intake and administrative duties with nutrition and health counseling. She has also assumed the unofficial role of the team’s Breastfeeding Coordinator, training and managing the Breastfeeding Peer Counselor. Because of her experience in multiple areas, Lavandier — who is triling-



Maribel Lavandier could not imagine a more fulfilling career.

gual in English, Spanish and Portuguese — can be found working with families at all three of SMOC’s WIC offices, in Framingham, Marlborough and Waltham.

“Maribel is one of the kindest and most helpful people I have ever met,” said Sharon McCollum, SMOC’s WIC Program Director. “She brings her best to our program and team every day and seeks out ways to do anything she can to help our WIC participants and staff members. She is a caring and motivating cheerleader who supports and lifts our team up. She is truly dedicated to and loves our mission. Our WIC program would not be as fun nor successful without Maribel.”



William Yelenak
President / Publisher

Determination is the Key

Like many other Americans, I watched the inauguration of President Donald Trump in late January with apprehension and worry.

Trump made a lot of promises during his campaign for president. As I noted in this space last year, he promised that he would launch the “largest deportation program in American history.” He called former President Joe Biden’s efforts on diversity, equity and inclusion a “Marxist concept of ‘equity’” and pledged to dismantle DEI efforts in government and the private sector. He even announced a plan to end birthright citizenship — a right enshrined in the United States Constitution.

So, as Trump took the oath of office and once again became the president of the United States, a wave of fear spread within the human services sector and throughout Massachusetts. As the only right-to-shelter state in the country and one that has frequently promoted diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) throughout the years, Massachusetts became an immediate target for a Trump presidency. It wasn’t a question of if the campaign promises would begin to impact our state’s residents — but when.

That question was answered later on Inauguration Day — and continued to become clearer throughout the week. The new administration launched aggressive attacks on diversity, equity, inclusion and belonging (DEIB) programs in the government and private sector, and it attempted to dismantle resettlement and immigration programs that had brought many new arrivals to our country and state. One such executive order directed government agencies to compile a list of private organizations with DEI programs and prepare “civil compliance investigations of publicly traded corporations, large non-profit corporations or associations” and other institutions of higher education and organizations. Yet another suspended the U.S. refugee admissions program, preventing any more admissions for at least four months.

Trump followed up on his campaign promises almost immediately, making life more difficult for many throughout our sector, our state and our country. But while there’s understandably fear, apprehension and worry pervading throughout our state’s human services sector and this country, there’s something else too. Determination.

With determination, leaders in our sector pushed back against the xenophobia, intolerance and discrimination that came from Washington. And they were determined to let their staff and those to whom they provide services know that they’re not alone.

One leader in the Massachusetts human services sector sent all staff an email, pledging opportunities to discuss issues, hear questions from the workforce, and provide all employees an opportunity to discuss their feelings and concerns, writing that their “call to care is to ensure that everyone is met with dignity: our staff, the individuals we support, and the communities in which we operate.”

“Our DEIB work operates on the understanding that our identities are unique

and deserving of advocacy and action,” the leader wrote to all staff. “We will remain steadfast in this work and will continue to commit to Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Belonging, to ensure that all are met with respect regardless of race, color, religion, sex (including pregnancy, childbirth, or related conditions, gender identity, and sexual orientation), national origin, documented status, age, or disability.”

Another human services provider, the International Institute of New England (IINE), is one of the state’s leading refugee resettlement agencies. In 2024, IINE provided services to more than 21,000 refugees and immigrants, more than double the number it helped in the prior year. The organization had been planning to provide services to 44 more refugees who were coming to the country after January 27, and now they’ll be unable to come to Massachusetts due to the new executive order. IINE President/CEO Jeff Thielman noted 10 of those refugees coming to the country were from Afghanistan and had been working alongside American troops in the region.

“Rather than celebrating the newcomers that continue to build our culture and economy, Trump’s orders go well beyond addressing his stated crackdown on people unauthorized to be in the U.S. who have committed crimes, and instead seek to dismantle the processes and policies by which most of our citizens’ families became Americans,” IINE wrote in a statement on its website the day after the inauguration. “His actions do not align with the values of welcome and compassion that have defined our nation, distinguished us as a global humanitarian leader, and brought our country growth and prosperity.”

IINE continued that it will “stand proudly with the brave refugees, asylum seekers, and persecuted immigrants in the U.S., with their families, with all those who welcome and support them, and with those awaiting admission to the U.S. whose dreams of freedom and safety have been shattered.”

And these were just two of many statements that flooded the websites, social media pages and email accounts of community-based human services organizations throughout Massachusetts who expressed support for all staff, consumers, program participants and others — regardless of their race, immigration status, gender identity, country of citizenship, sexual orientation or any other factor.

It’s true that I began this week filled with fear, apprehension and worry at the prospect of the next Trump administration. But I ended the week in a much different place.

After speaking with many throughout our human services community, I’m filled with pride, hope and determination that we’ll continue to fight back and support those in our community and country who need it the most. I’m reminded of Margaret Mead’s famous quote as we continue to work to battle injustice, inequity and intolerance: “Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful committed individuals can change the world. In fact, it’s the only thing that ever has.”



This piece is titled “The Plastic Garden” and was originally created in April as part of TILL’s April Madness competition, which was then submitted and featured at the TILL Wave Gallery during TILL’s “Empowerment Through Art” exhibit. It is mixed media, 3 dimensional, made with plastic spoons and ironed plastic straws. It is a collaborative piece made with some of the Individuals at the program along with their staff.

Want to highlight the artwork of your program participants?
Contact Maureen at mlynch@providers.org for more information.



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Providing care where it's needed most

By Eliza Adams

For many of us, the idea of growing older comes with a list of “what ifs”: What if I can't get my needs met? What if I don't have a caregiver? What if I can't afford care?

For over 50 years, our mission at Somerville-Cambridge Elder Services (SCES) has been to offer answers and person-centered solutions to these unknowns. At the core of our work is the belief that most people — regardless of their ability, age or income — would prefer to remain in their own homes and communities with the people and places they love for as long as possible.

This is more than just a hunch; data shows that 88% of Americans want to live in their homes long-term, and 83% of older adults say they feel safer in their homes than anywhere else.

At SCES, our diverse array of home and community-based services meets clients where they are to ensure that they can continue living in their homes and communities with the greatest degree of independence possible. For those who can no longer shop for groceries or cook for themselves, our Home Delivered Meals drivers deliver fresh, culturally appropriate and medically tailored meals daily. For those who experience repeated hospital emergency room stays, our Hospital-to-Home staff perform in-home visits to make sure their needs are met to prevent readmission. And, for those who have trouble using their devices to access their medical information, our tech team provides one-on-one sessions to coach them through the steps.

These in-home services are not merely connected to health care; rather, they are health care. Food security, economic stability, digital equity and language access are just a few of the social factors upon which healthy communities prosper. Centering these key predictors of health outcomes allows us to tackle issues at their root before they take hold and further entrench people in cycles of sickness and poverty — running up health care costs in the process.

We're able to deliver home-based services in large part thanks to our hun-

dreds of dedicated team members who visit clients' homes each day. However, many SCES clients receive services not from paid staff but from those in their life who know them best: their friends and family. These family caregivers, along with direct care professionals, form the backbone of our caring economy and assist with critical daily tasks that enable their care recipients to lead meaningful lives.

Eligible caregivers and care recipients can take part in SCES's range of caregiving programs, including our Adult Family Care (AFC) program. AFC allows individuals with disabilities 16 and older, as well as older adults, to receive the best care at home by providing training, compensation and clinical support for family caregivers. The AFC team has extensive experience supporting families caring for loved ones with neurodevelopmental disabilities, traumatic brain injuries, mental health diagnoses and more. Our nurses and social workers make home visits to support caregivers in their work and make sure their needs — which often go overlooked — are met.

Together, SCES's home-based services and caregiver support programs ensure that clients can find safety and comfort in the sanctuary of their own homes. However, we will not be able to continue to fulfill this mission without adequate resources. Despite consistent preference for home-based care and proven cost savings over institutional settings, home care programs continue to face funding shortfalls. With the population of adults aged 85 and older projected to more than double from 6.6 million in 2019 to 14.4 million in 2040 — a 118% increase — now is the time for robust, sustained investment in these services that so many rely upon.

While institutional care is the appropriate choice for certain individuals, the vast majority can thrive while remaining in their own homes. It's up to us to make sure they have that opportunity.

Eliza Adams is the Communications and Public Affairs Manager with Somerville-Cambridge Elder Services.

More Than Words: More than job training

By Naomi Parker

“I initially joined to make some money. Over time, I've gained so much more than that.”

Like many young people, Jayden was first attracted to More Than Words by the job — an opportunity to work 15-25 hours per week in a business selling pre-loved books and clothing online and in stores. By the end, he ended up valuing the experience in an entirely different way.

“They helped me to not only be mentally prepared and have the things I need to get to work, but also to have a roof over my head and clothes on my back and a phone number for emergencies,” he added. “I've learned how to hold myself accountable when working on tasks by myself and I've built my leadership skills when teaching others.”

More Than Words is a job training and youth development program for young people, ages 16-24, who are in the foster care system, court-involved, experiencing homelessness, or are out of school. Founded in 2004 by CEO Jodi Rosenbaum, the lore is that her friend found a pile of books at the side of the road, and it launched an idea that those same books could be a vehicle for job training. The organization started selling online in 2004, opened its first storefront in Waltham in 2005, expanded to Boston in 2012 and now serves over 300 youth annually who run businesses bringing in nearly \$4 million in revenue.

The focus has similarly expanded beyond job training to include comprehensive social services and a very long-time frame of services, driven by the organization's belief that that is what it takes for youth to really transform their lives and gain what they need from work experience.

“Getting up at a certain time and getting in the routine of working a job, it's not easy especially if you don't have what you need. You can't do that if you don't have a phone. Or clothes. Or transportation. Or if you didn't have a place to sleep the night before,” explains Jayden.

Young people start at More Than Words with the Readiness Program, a 6-to-12 week period focused on comprehensive assessments, and support for urgent needs to help them get ready for intensive job training. A young person may apply for SNAP benefits, get grocery gift cards, work

with staff to get copies of vital documents or start the long process of housing stabilization (27% of youth start More Than Words homeless or facing imminent housing instability).

Youth then participate in the Core Social Enterprise Program, which includes 9-to-12 months of work in the training businesses and on goals in their personal lives. Youth develop hard job skills, including customer service and inventory management, as well as critical professional skills such as hitting goals, leadership, and teamwork, all while sourcing donated books and clothing, listing them online and shipping them out worldwide, and selling them in retail stores. Young people also advance stability and goals, with case management, support on challenges like court-involvement, housing, and parenting, career planning and financial wellness curriculum.

“More Than Words has our backs. Whether it's a life decision you need help with or going down to go to court with you early in the mornings when others are still sleep,” says Jayden.

After completing the program, graduates stay involved for a minimum of two years of proactive support in pursuing jobs and education in the Career Services Program. During this time, youth access Bridge Funding to cover living expenses while they pursue skilled training programs and post-secondary education. Some also return to More Than Words for supportive transitional employment to stabilize from a set-back or to help them complete educational goals.

That's the phase Jayden is in. “Right now, my focus is on finishing school and pursuing a career in HVAC. I'm also working at More Than Words on the Power is Yours youth advocacy team, helping work on legislation and policy changes that will help youth all across the state.”

And success is more than anecdotal. While the program is intensive and the path is long, it gets results. About 98% of graduates have or are on track to earn their secondary credential, and 53% pursued post-secondary education. In all, 94% of graduates are productively engaged in work and/or school.

Naomi Parker is the Chief Advancement Officer at More Than Words.

Autism Welcoming creates more accessible communities

By Diane Gould

As president and CEO of Advocates, one of Massachusetts' largest human services providers, each day I get to witness the incredible work done by professionals in our field.

Our work as human services providers is rooted in caring, but caring alone is not enough. To build communities where all of us can thrive, we must nurture cross-sector partnerships and be unafraid of bold, creative solutions. To illustrate the importance of this big-picture thinking, I want to share the story of Autism WelcomingSM.

Autism Welcoming launched in 2019 as an initiative of Autism Alliance, a family support center run by Advocates. Through their lived and professional experience, the Autism Alliance team knew that everyday outings could present challenges for individuals and families affected by autism. Dining out, a routine blood draw or getting a haircut — typical activities for many families — could be difficult or impossible for others. The Autism Alliance team knew that simple, thoughtful accommodations could make all the difference for individuals with autism, allowing life-changing access to community life.

Though the Autism Alliance staff didn't have a background in business training, they knew their unique perspective was needed. They set out to create a program

that would allow them to share their expertise, equipping businesses with the tools they needed to warmly welcome and serve people with autism. With initial funding from the Becker Family Trust at The Arc of Massachusetts, the Autism Welcoming program was born.

Since 2019, Autism Welcoming has grown significantly. More than 60 businesses have been certified — from hair salons and restaurants to museums and medical providers. With rates of autism higher than ever, the demand for training is unprecedented. We are heartened by the community's desire to do right by people with autism and their families. If the inquiries we receive from businesses are any indicator, organizations of all sizes and across all sectors are eager to open their doors to individuals with autism and their families.

In 2024, Autism Welcoming got a tremendous boost when MassHealth and the Massachusetts Department of Developmental Services (DDS) recognized its potential to transform dental care for people with autism. Their investment in the Autism Welcoming program allowed us to train and certify Massachusetts dental providers free of charge. Anyone who has been to the dentist knows that it's a highly sensory experience — sights, smells and sounds abound. Regular, preventative dental care is also essential for health and

growing the number of dental providers who can deliver sensory-friendly care is critical to the wellbeing of people with autism. Thus far, we have certified four dental practices, and we anticipate training dozens more in the years ahead.

Over the course of the past year, Autism Welcoming and Brookfield Properties have collaborated to bring Autism Welcoming to an even bigger audience. After Autism Welcoming certified several Natick Mall businesses, mall management approached the team with a visionary offer: Would Autism Welcoming consider opening a storefront in the mall?

The vision was for a multi-use location, designed to offer sensory respite to mall shoppers, programming for individuals and families, and a training space for businesses seeking to become Autism Welcoming certified. The 2,700-square-foot space would require a renovation, which would occur alongside the day-to-day work of Autism Alliance and Autism Welcoming. It was an exciting and generous offer and a huge undertaking.

Fortunately, our team has proven time and again that they're not afraid of a big project. They jumped in, alongside our amazing partners at Brookfield Properties, figuring it out as they went. As the mall space came together over the course of a few quick months, the team also tackled the creation of a new website for Autism

Welcoming. The AutismWelcoming.org site, which was funded by The NLM Family Foundation, provides individuals and families with access to a directory of Autism Welcoming certified businesses, as well as information about the new Natick Mall location.

When we hosted a grand opening for the new space this past September — surrounded by individuals with autism and their families, elected officials, businesspeople, and dozens of community partners — the excitement was palpable. Since then, all the space's intended functions have unfolded as planned, and we've experienced a wonderful surprise; we've also become a destination for mall employees with autism who need a sensory break during their shifts. This unanticipated benefit — supporting employment of individuals with disabilities — is just one more example of the importance of cross-sector collaboration.

As champions for belonging, our Autism Welcoming team and their community partners make life a little easier for people with autism and their families every single day. With caring as our cornerstone and creative collaboration as our path forward, we can all build communities where individuals with disabilities can thrive.

Diane Gould is the president and CEO of Advocates.

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A VIEW FROM THE HILL

A commentary from a legislator on human services



Softening the staffing crunch for human services

By Rep. Jeffrey N. Roy

With stagnant wages, frequent turnover and the growing pressure of student loan debt, human services providers continue to face a staffing crisis and enormous challenges in recruiting and retaining staff. This leaves them without sufficient resources to meet the needs of the state's most vulnerable populations.

Human services providers and the workers they employ offer critical support to hundreds of thousands of Massachusetts residents. These workers care for some of the most vulnerable members of our communities — the elderly, individuals with disabilities, veterans and those suffering from mental illness and substance use disorders — who rely on assistance with daily living.

Providers have repeatedly expressed difficulty finding and retaining staff. And many human service workers are forced to leave the work they love due to financial pressures, depriving the Commonwealth of vital contributors to its workforce.

In January, I was proud to join Rep. Sean Garballey (D-Arlington) in filing an Act relative to a loan repayment program for human service workers (HD.503). This legislation represents a pivotal step toward addressing the financial challenges faced by workers in this field. By providing student loan repayment assistance, it aims to attract and retain individuals in roles essential to supporting vulnerable populations.

The bill will mirror the current state loan repayment program and seeks to reduce the wage gap between state and community-based human services jobs. Under this program, full-time human services employees earning less than \$60,000 per year — a higher salary than many in entry- and mid-level positions — will qualify. By alleviating this financial burden, the program seeks to make human services careers more sustainable for workers who are often underpaid despite performing critical services.

One worker described feeling “imprisoned by student loan debt,” which forced her to put her life on hold. She also noted how student loan debt casts a shadow over the health field, warning that it creates barriers for employees and contributes to a staffing crisis.

To qualify for the loan repayment program, human service workers must work 12 consecutive months for a minimum of 35 hours per week. These eligibility requirements target those most in need of financial assistance, ensuring the program supports workers committed to the field but struggling to make ends meet.

By reducing educational debt, the program aims to enhance workforce retention, improve the quality of care, address service gaps in underserved communities, and reduce burnout among

providers.

The demand for human service workers is particularly acute in settings such as group homes, residential facilities, correctional or community health centers, and programs addressing issues like substance use disorder, homelessness, and family violence. However, wages in these roles remain stagnant, exacerbating staffing shortages. While 40 percent of workers in this field hold at least a bachelor's degree, nearly 20 percent earn incomes at or below 200 percent of the federal poverty level.

The community-based human services sector is experiencing a workforce crisis. A report titled *Who Will Care: The Workforce Crisis in Human Services* highlights the challenges of recruitment and retention, the impact on clients and organizations, and potential solutions. Loan repayment assistance is one critical step toward addressing these issues.

We need to provide this type of relief for human service workers to encourage them to stay in the field, attract new talent, and ensure we have a trained workforce to perform this essential work. The education-related costs required to become a healthcare professional are significant and must be addressed.

The urgency of passing this legislation is especially critical given its impact on communities of color. According to a report by the Providers' Council, the human services workforce in Massachusetts is overwhelmingly female, minority and economically disadvantaged. Women comprise 80 percent of the workforce, with some sectors, such as childcare, having as many as 93 percent female workers. Additionally, 12.3 percent of human service workers identify as Black, 13.5 percent as Latino and nearly 19 percent are foreign-born.

The jobs performed by these workers—caring for the elderly, children, the mentally ill, and other marginalized populations—are critical to society. Loan repayment assistance can provide meaningful relief, enabling recent graduates to remain in the field while easing their financial burdens.

As the late Vice President Hubert Humphrey once reminded us, “The strength of our communities is reflected in how we treat our most vulnerable.” Human service workers care for our loved ones with dignity and dedication every day. It is time we show them the same level of respect and send a clear message that Massachusetts supports those who selflessly work to ensure everyone can enjoy the quality of life they deserve.

Rep. Jeffrey Roy represents the 10th Norfolk District in the Massachusetts House of Representatives.

This opinions expressed in a View from the Hill and Viewpoints from Across the State are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views or opinions of the Providers' Council or its members.



Rep. Jeffrey Roy

FOUNDING: Council Celebrates 50 Years of Impact

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er to be effective.”

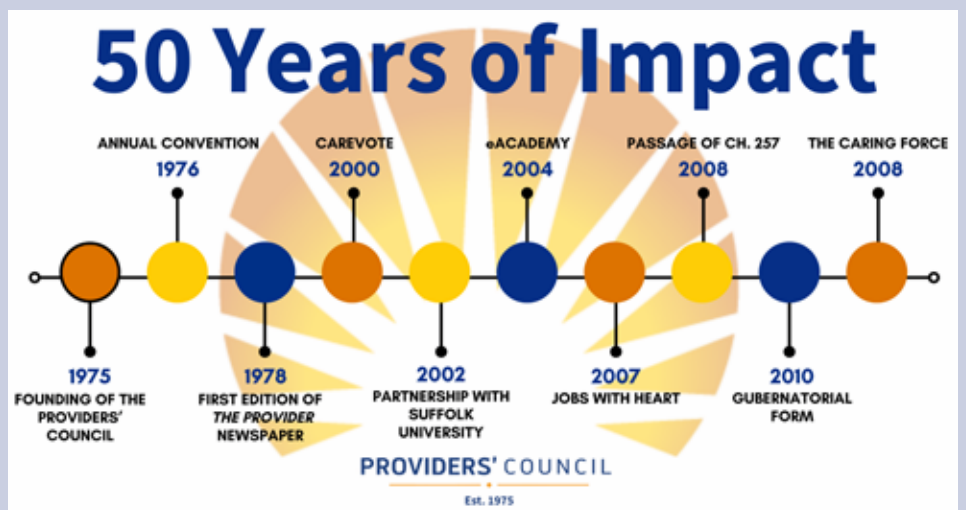
These newly formed community-based human services needed to work together to ensure fair funding and legislation that both promoted and protected the rights and dignity of the populations they served. In the mid-1970's, a core group of members founded the Providers' Council to represent their best interests and provide an exchange of communications, ideas and best practices.

“We organized the Human Service Providers as a nonprofit and developed a Board of Directors and a Director,” explained Wright. “I worked with an attorney to create the structure for the organization.”

The Providers' Council — or in a formal setting, the Massachusetts Council of Human Service Providers, Inc. — set up an office in Boston to begin to untangle the complicated issues surrounding caring for vulnerable populations and how to best serve its members.

“It became obvious that by gathering together we would have more power to influence state officials,” said Wright when asked about the importance of human service nonprofits coming together as a coalition.

The original mission of the Council — to provide a space for human services organizations to come together and share information and advocate for their program participants — is still at the core of its



The Council celebrates 50 Years of Impact by honoring the Council's founding.

mission. From its inception, the Council has grown to encompass over 220 members across the state of Massachusetts. As the Council enters the next chapter in its

history, it will continue to honor its original mission as it looks to build the strongest human services sector in the United States.

FY '26 BUDGET: Healey presented her budget proposal

Continued from Page 1

- **DPH line item 4513-1020** — Early Intervention Services — increased 22.07%, rising from \$30.9 million to \$37.7 million.
- **DCF line item 4800-0041** — Congregate Care Services — dropped from \$495.9 million to \$463.8 million, a decrease of 6.48%.
- **DCF line item 4800-0200** — DCF Family Resource Centers — decreased 16.50%, dropping from \$33.8 million to \$28.2 million.
- **DMH line item 5042-5000** — Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services — dropped from \$131.3 million to \$115 million, a decrease of 12.38%.
- **DMH line item 5095-0015** — Inpatient Facilities and Community-Based Mental Health — rose from \$345.7 million to \$376.1 million, an increase of 8.78%.
- **DDS line item 5920-2000** — Community Residential Services — increased from \$1.7 billion to \$2 billion, an 18.86% increase.
- **DDS line item 5920-3000** — Respite Family Supports — rose from \$119.4 million to \$123.9 million, an increase of 3.77%.

- **HLC line item 7004-9024** — Mass. Rental Voucher Program — rose from \$219 million to \$253.3 million, an increase of 15.54%.
- **HLC line item 7004-0101** — Emergency Assistance — Family Shelter and Services — dropped from \$326 million to \$325.3 million, a decrease of 0.25%. Gov. Healey filed a supplemental budget on January 26, requesting an additional \$425 million from a reserve account to maintain the EA Shelter system for the next six months.
- **OAI line item 9110-1630** — Home Care Services — rose from \$236.9 million to \$278.7 million, an increase of 17.63%.

Secretary Kate Walsh stated that EO-HHS will focus on advancing health equity in Massachusetts, supporting high need youth and adults, preparing for an aging population, developing a strong workforce, investing in economic empowerment and prevention and clarifying and strengthening the missions of the agencies.

The governor's full budget proposal is available to view online at mass.gov. To discuss any line items in the state budget or for more information on the budget process, please contact Caroline O'Neill at coneill@providers.org.

KYR: Informational webinar from State ORI on immigration law

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gration expert with more than 25 years advocating for immigration rights. She has provided Know Your Rights workshops for Emergency Assistance Family Shelter programs and other organizations.

Church discussed individuals who may be at risk for deportation, while noting there are laws that limit law enforcement's ability to search places or people. Massachusetts Declaration of Rights Art. 14 asserts that police cannot conduct searches without warrants signed by a judge and must have probable cause for entry. Additionally, Lunn vs. Commonwealth says that in the state of Massachusetts, a warrant provided by U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement is not valid because it is not based on probable cause or signed by a judge. These state protections, along with the Fourth Amendment, inhibit law enforcement's ability to conduct searches.

Additionally, Church stated that people, regardless of their citizenship status also have a right to privacy where they live, including juveniles, meaning that law enforcement officers cannot enter places where persons have an expectation of privacy without a warrant. Public areas, which are defined as areas where the public can enter and exit freely, can

be accessed by law enforcement offers.

Church also suggested several ways program participants and staff can prepare for law enforcement visits and cited Know Your Rights cards or handouts with similar information be given to residents and staff who may be at risk.

Church ended her presentation by providing several resources to attendees. She stated that many of the services open to citizens in Massachusetts are also open to immigrants, including child care financial assistance, housing assistance and reduced MBTA fares. For those in need of mental health services, Church recommended that program participants contact their organizations to find more tailored resources, but recommended NAMI Compass, a helpline that provides resources to help people navigate the mental health system, along with the 988 Suicide and Crisis Hotline for mental health emergencies.

Additionally, Church outlined several legal resources that are available, including MA Legal Resources Finder and Immigration Advocates Network Legal Directory, while also noting that the City of Boston will host free consultations upon request.

Those interested in speaking with Church about potential trainings or Know Your Rights sessions can contact training@miracoalition.org.

MLK DAY: Members celebrate the legacy of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

Continued from Page 1

at Heart Chorus, Springfield Public Schools students, and more.

“As we enter into a season of commemoration highlighting the life and legacy of Dr. King, let us remember that we are the new faces of civil rights, standing strong together in pursuit of a more just world,” said Shannon Rudder, president and CEO of Martin Luther King, Jr. Family Services.

At Open Sky Community Services, the organization celebrated King and his enduring legacy through their participation in Quinsigamond Community College's (QCC) 40th annual MLK Jr. Breakfast. The organization will continue to celebrate Dr. King's legacy throughout the Black History Month.

“Open Sky strives to live out Dr. King's vision of justice through intentional action, reflecting the principles outlined in his Letter from Birmingham Jail: ‘In any nonviolent campaign there are four basic steps: collection of the facts to determine whether injustices are alive, negotiation, self-purification, and direct action,’” said Levi Ekstrom, DEIB Manager at Open Sky.

The organization further stated that it wants to focus on several key aspects from Dr. King's letter including the importance of acknowledging the facts that reveal injustice, self-purification through introspection and growth, and the necessity of negotiation and direct action to address injustice.

Brockton Area Multi-Services, Inc (BAMSI) provided program participants and staff with a curated list of local events to provide them with ways to celebrate Dr. King. The list included events such as the Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Day of Service at the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum in Boston and the Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Day of Celebration at the Peabody Essex Museum in Salem.

The organization also shared the following message about the importance of celebrating MLK Day: “In a climate where diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts are seen as unwelcome political acts and in some cases are prohibited outright, the work of racial justice carries on quietly and persistently. On Martin Luther King, Jr. Day, the country unites behind the principle of civil rights in honor of someone who, with other civil rights activists, helped to shift the climate of that time.”

Several Council members marked Dr. King's legacy with impactful events and initiatives, showcasing their commitment to his vision of equality and community service. The Amherst Survival Center hosted a heartfelt “MLK Day Light & Love Food Drive,” bringing the community together to address food insecurity. The YMCA of Greater Boston carried on its tradition of honoring Dr. King with their annual MLK Day Breakfast, fostering unity and reflection.

Riverside Community Care will be sponsoring an event to honor the legacy of Dr. King and celebrate Black History Month on February 6. Jerome Kyles, a singer/producer and professor at Berklee College of Music, will perform with his band at the event as an exploration of the role of music in the Civil Rights Movement and its connection to healing, behavioral health and community work. To accommodate all in the community, Riverside will host a livestream of the event along with in-person seating available at the event.

The Council will be celebrating Dr. King's legacy and Black History Month throughout the month of February. If members have any events they would like to share with the Council please contact Maureen Lynch at mlynch@providers.org.



Quinsigamond Community College's (QCC) 40th annual MLK Jr. Breakfast.



ALEX

Academy for Learning and Exchange

CALENDAR OF EVENTS • FEBRUARY 2025

What: Success as a New Supervisor – Winter 2025
When: Tuesday, February 4 and 10
Time: 9:00 a.m. to 12:30 p.m.
Presenters: Jim Ognibene, M.Ed
Where: Session I: 100 Crossing Blvd., Suite 100, Framingham, MA; Session II: Online via Zoom
Cost: \$200 for Members; \$400 for Non-members

What: Certificate in Supervision Series – Winter 2025
When: January 29, February 5, 12, 19, 26 and March 5
Time: 9 a.m. to 12:30 p.m.
Presenter: Jim Ognibene, Visioneer Consulting, Comma Williams, Comma Williams Enterprises and Ginny Maglio, Optimum Development
Where: Online via Zoom
Cost: \$700 for Members; \$1,200 for Non-members

What: Community Webinar: The Impact of the 2024 Presidential Elections on Social Work and Social Justice
When: Monday, February 24
Time: 6:30 p.m. to 8:00 p.m.
Presenter: Dr. Gary Bailey, MSW Program Director, Simmons University
Where: Online via Zoom
Cost: Free; Event for Council Provider Members only

What: Free, Members-Only Webinar: Managing a Diverse Team
When: Tuesday, February 25
Time: 10:00 a.m. to 11:00 a.m.
Presenter: Stephen OseiBonsu, Director of Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Belonging (DEI&B), Open Sky Community Services
Where: Online via Zoom
Cost: Free; Event for Council Provider Members only

What: Community Webinar: Addressing Race-based Stress and Trauma – Innovations in Motivational Interviewing
When: Wednesday, February 26
Time: 1:00 to 2:30 p.m.
Presenter: Dr. Christina Lee – Associate Professor, School of Social Work, Dept. of Clinical Practice, Boston University
Where: Online via Zoom
Cost: \$25 for Members Only

What: Associate Member Workshop: Approaches to Working with Trans and Nonbinary Adults – Overview and Case Discussion
When: Friday, February 28
Time: 9:00 a.m. to 12:00 p.m.
Presenter: Rubin Hopwood, PhD, M. Div.
Where: Bridgewater State University
Cost: \$60 for Members Only

Pre-registration for these events is required unless otherwise noted

Please visit providers.org/events to learn more and register for the event you wish to attend

Questions? Call 508.598.9800 or email Nina Lamarre at nlamarre@providers.org



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