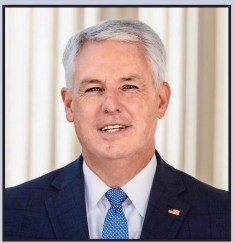


Sen. John F. Keenan:
Elected officials can be a
bridge to human services

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MVAS celebrates 50 years
of helping older adults
thrive

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Advocacy doesn't happen
overnight

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Council's 51st convention celebrates progress and purpose

One year after marking a half-century, the Council turns to its next 50 with the 51st Annual Convention & Expo: *Unshaken in Purpose* on Monday, October 26 — a full day of workshops, award ceremonies, scholarship presentations and a keynote from national champion boxer Cam F. Awesome.

The Council will offer 39 workshops across three blocks. Each block features 13 hour-long offerings including traditional workshops, commissioner panels and networking sessions. This year's workshops include popular favorites — like "Legal and Financial Updates and Best Practices" — and ones on emerging themes, including three separate sessions on artificial intelligence.

The Council is excited to have Cam F. Awesome — a national champion heavyweight boxer, former captain of Team USA, bestselling author of *Becoming Awesome: Defeating Average Through Gratitude and Resilience*, and featured athlete in the Netflix documentary *CounterPunch* — as its keynote speaker. Awesome has built an extraordinary career by turning setbacks into success.

The Caring Force (TCF) will also host its second annual T-shirt design contest. The winning design will be featured on the back of The Caring Force's iconic gold T-shirt.

The contest challenges members to create a design to honor the 15th anniversary of The Caring Force's first State House rally, which will be celebrated next April. The Caring Force Committee will help select the winning design along with two other finalists; all designs will be unveiled at the convention. The T-shirt with the winning design will be available for purchase on the TCF store following the convention. The deadline to submit a design for the contest is Friday, September 11.

The convention will take place at the Marriott Copley Place Hotel in Boston. General registration for the convention is now open, but space is limited. Registration will close on Friday, October 9, or earlier if the event reaches capacity.

For more information on the Council's 51st Annual Convention & Expo, please visit www.providersconvention.org.

Cam Awesome to keynote 51st Annual Convention & Expo on resilience and rewriting your story

Cam F. Awesome lives by one mantra: if you can fail without being discouraged, success becomes inevitable.

A national champion heavyweight boxer, former captain of Team USA, bestselling author of *Becoming Awesome: Defeating Average Through Gratitude and Resilience* and featured athlete in the Netflix documentary *CounterPunch*, Awesome has built his career on turning setbacks into success through the power of determination and self-compassion.

"We all tell ourselves stories about who we are, what we deserve, or what we're capable of. And the thing you repeat about yourself is who you become," Awesome said. "I want people to question the stories they've been telling about themselves and realize that they have the autonomy and the power to change their identity. It's not easy, but it can be fun."

Awesome will bring his unique brand of energy and inspiration to the Providers' Council's 51st Annual Convention & Expo: *Unshaken in Purpose*. On Monday, October 26, he will take the stage at the Marriott Copley Place Hotel in Boston to deliver the keynote address to nearly 1,200 friends and advocates of the community-based human services sector.

Awesome's story began in a Jamaican and Trinidadian household on Long Island, where bullying led him to construct a narrative in which he felt weak and on guard.

"I didn't know there was a word for anxiety until I became an adult. So, in my head, I was like, oh, if I box, if I could fight all these people, then I'd be a little more comfortable," Awesome explained. "No one is going to take on the giant, buff dude."

In high school, he joined a free local gym and crafted a new story: Cam, the boxer. After high school, he got the opportunity to pursue boxing full time in Kansas City with a veteran coach and at little to no personal expense. With the freedom and resources to focus on fighting, Awesome decided to pour himself into developing his talents in the ring.

After winning nationals in 2008, he became captain of Team USA. He continued his winning streak, earning the national title again in 2010 and the Golden Gloves in 2009 and 2011.

Awesome faced a major setback in 2012 when he was suspended from Team USA for

KEYNOTE, see page 7



The Council is excited to have national champion heavyweight boxer, Cam Awesome, keynote its 51st Annual Convention & Expo: *Unshaken in Purpose*.

The Caring Force heads into fall with final 2026 rallies



The third annual Western MA Rally will take place on September 18 at Westfield State University.

The Caring Force will close out its 2026 regional rally series with two events this September, including its first-ever regional gathering for Metro Boston.

On Friday, September 18, The Caring Force will host its third annual Western Massachusetts rally at Westfield State University. The event will bring together human services workers, providers and advocates for a high-energy morning of advocacy, community

and a performance by The Friendship Band. Participants will gather to raise awareness and advocate for increased funding for the human services sector across Western MA.

Partnering agencies for the event include 18 Degrees, Berkshire County Arc, Berkshire Family & Individual Resources (BFAIR), The Brien Center, Center for Human Development

CARING FORCE, see page 7

TPS changes create uncertainty for Haitian workers and providers

Foreign-born workers, particularly Haitian-born workers, have provided critical support to many human services organizations amid an ongoing workforce crisis. However, many have been forced to leave their positions following the termination of Haiti's Temporary Protected Status (TPS) at the end of July.

Following the Supreme Court's decision in *Mullin v. Doe*, TPS for Haitian nationals in the United States officially terminated on July 27, and the lower-court orders that had delayed the termination were lifted on August 5.

On August 6, the state's Executive Office of Labor and Workforce Development issued guidance to employers regarding

TPS CHANGES, see page 7

Cardinal Cushing Centers adds four to its board

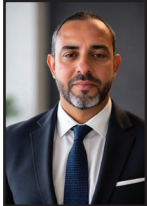
Cardinal Cushing Centers has added four new board members who collectively bring financial, operational and advancement expertise to the organization. The appointments include Kayla Florence, Dina Gray, Jeffrey Smith and Christine Urann.

Christine Urann of Arbella Insurance Group, Dina Gray of ABA Helps and HALE, Jeffrey Smith of Eastern Bank, and Kayla Florence of Rockland Recovery bring financial, operational and executive leadership experience, along with a shared commitment to Cushing and advocacy for people with developmental disabilities. Smith has supported Cushing since 1999, while Florence's family connection to Cushing dates back to 1947.

Catholic Charities Boston announces Luiz DaCosta as new VP for operations

Catholic Charities Boston has appointed Luiz DaCosta as its next vice president for operations. DaCosta, who previously served as the agency's senior director for operations, began his new role in July.

DaCosta will work with COO Jamie Ewing to strengthen operations supporting more than 450 employees at over 20 Eastern Massachusetts locations. He joined Catholic Charities in 2024 and has helped shape the organization's operational vision.



Luiz DaCosta

BFAIR names new chief operating officer

BFAIR has announced that Theresa Denette, MBA, has been named the organization's permanent chief operating officer (COO), following her tenure in the role on an interim basis since earlier this year.

Denette has spent nearly 25 years at BFAIR, rising through leadership roles in programs, quality assurance, clinical services and operations while driving organizational growth and innovation.



Theresa Denette

Northeast Arc names new chief development officer

Northeast Arc has named Jansi Chandler as chief development officer. In her role, Chandler will be responsible for all development efforts to support Northeast Arc's mission. She will also oversee marketing, public relations, and volunteer services.

Chandler previously served as chief development officer at Cardinal Cushing Centers for 14 years, leading fundraising and development while supporting strategic planning and growth for the \$40 million organization.



Jansi Chandler

Bay Cove names new VP of quality, risk and compliance

Bay Cove Human Services announced that Michael Wagner, PhD has joined the organization as vice president of quality, risk, compliance and chief compliance officer.

Wagner brings more than 25 years of healthcare leadership experience. At Bay Cove, he leads quality, compliance, privacy, risk management and performance improvement. He most recently served as a senior quality and accreditation leader at Commonwealth Care Alliance.



Michael Wagner

Road to Responsibility hires assistant vice president of career services

Road to Responsibility (RTR) announced Taciana Ribeiro Saab as assistant vice president of career services.

In this newly created role, Ribeiro Saab will build modern workforce pathways, strengthen compliance with evolving regulations and expand employment opportunities that promote independence, inclusion and long-term career success for the individuals RTR proudly serves.

Ribeiro Saab joins RTR with more than



Taciana Ribeiro Saab

Liberty Bank Foundation and Square One team up to support workforce development



(From left to right): Dawn DiStefano, Square One; Kris Allard, Square One; Dawn Creighton, Liberty Bank; Nyi'eshia Smith, Square One; and Kimmy Campbell, Square One, hold a \$20,000 check supporting **Square One's** Workforce Development initiatives. The Liberty Bank Foundation recently doubled its support for the programs, which provide youth ages 14 to 25 with opportunities to earn a high school equivalency diploma, gain valuable workplace experience and develop career skills through partnerships with local employers.

20 years of experience in workforce development, most recently at New England ADA. She has also held leadership roles at Boston Center for Independent Living and Triangle, Inc., helping hundreds of people with disabilities build careers.

Bridgewell appoints new clinic director

Bridgewell has announced the appointment of Enid Keefe as clinic director of Bridgewell's counseling services in Lowell.

In her new role, Keefe will oversee clinical and administrative staff while ensuring the delivery of high-quality services to the clinic's clients. A licensed mental health counselor, Keefe brings nearly two decades of experience as a mental health clinician, in-



Enid Keefe

cluding more than three years as director of a Central Massachusetts behavioral health center.

Jane Doe Inc. names Cenee Enriquez as policy director

Jane Doe Inc. (JDI) announced that Cenee Enriquez will become JDI's next policy director. Enriquez, who previously served as policy and systems advocacy manager, will succeed current Policy Director Nithya Badrinath, who is departing to attend law school this fall.

Enriquez joined JDI as a policy intern in 2023 and became policy and systems advocacy manager in 2024, helping develop and advance the organization's public policy agenda.



Cenee Enriquez



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For more information, contact:

Aaron Duguay | 781-608-2834 | Aaron.R.Duguay@efleets.com



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About the Agency

Originally a grassroots initiative serving just three cities, Mystic Valley Aging Services (MVAS) has evolved into one of the Commonwealth's largest Aging Services Access Points (ASAPs). The organization was established in 1975 when the newly formed Department of Elder Affairs began creating non-profit home care agencies.

Mystic Valley quickly grew to serve eight communities north of Boston and incorporated support for adults with disabilities. The agency, which was launched with just 10 employees, expanded and introduced new services, including meal programs, transportation, protective services and caregiver support.

To meet the region's changing needs, Mystic Valley enhanced support for people who speak English as a second language and pioneered innovative programming to foster independence and wellness. In 2015, the organization merged with Chelsea Revere Winthrop Elder Services, establishing its current service footprint of 11 communities.

As part of its 50th anniversary celebration in 2026, the agency announced a new name, Mystic Valley Aging Services, to reflect how its mission has grown over the years. The new name aligns with the agency's inclusive view of aging — a view that recognizes the right to live independently and with dignity at every stage of life.

Today, over 300 staff serve Mystic Valley Aging Services' 11 communities. It is designated at the state and federal level to serve as a regional resource for aging services. It relies primarily on state and federal funding, with key support from donations, grants and investments.

50 years of helping older adults live independently

Over the course of 50 years, Mystic Valley Aging Services developed a network of solutions that empower older adults, people with disabilities, and their family caregivers. These include:

- **Advice & information:** Guiding the process of accessing support. In addition to MVAS services, individuals may need referrals to other supports, such as assisted living resources.
- **Behavioral health:** Connecting individuals with services that support emotional and mental health when they are struggling with issues like depression, anxiety, grief and social isolation. This may include counseling, referrals and community-based support.
- **In-home care:** Connecting individuals to services that help them remain living safely and independently in their communities. This may include home safety modifications, personal care, housekeeping assistance, dementia/memory care and more.
- **Nutrition:** Home-delivered meals, including therapeutic and culturally tailored options, and access to community dining programs. Programs are designed to maintain health while reducing food insecurity and isolation.
- **Care coordination:** Care managers and nurses develop a personalized plan with the individual and family. The team monitors and adjusts the plan over time, securing and modifying services.
- **Transportation:** Coordinating transportation options customized for each community's resources and challenges. Aimed at reducing barriers that impact health, independence, and social engagement.
- **Protective services:** Safeguarding vulnerable residents who may be experiencing abuse, neglect, self-neglect, or financial exploitation. Specialized staff investigate reports, assess



From three cities to 11 communities, Mystic Valley Aging Services celebrates 50 years.

safety concerns and coordinate interventions.

- **Caregiver support:** Education, respite resources, support groups and one-on-one assistance to help caregivers manage their responsibilities and maintain their own well-being.
- **Housing and financial guidance:** Helping individuals understand available housing options, apply for benefits and connect with resources that can improve financial stability.
- **Community transitions:** These programs help people transition back to the community, with safety and stability, after a hospitalization or nursing facility stay.
- **Insurance counseling:** Helping people maximize available benefits by providing unbiased guidance on Medicare, as well as help with MassHealth applications and eligibility.
- **Healthy aging:** Wellness classes and education including falls prevention, tai chi and self-managing chronic health conditions.
- **Technology access:** Digital literacy classes and technical support aimed at improving access to telehealth, reducing social isolation and making connections to resources that were previously unavailable.

Executive Leadership

Lisa Gurgone joined Mystic Valley Aging Services as the chief executive officer in 2022. Gurgone has focused on expanding the innovative programs and partnerships that allow the organization to meet the evolving needs



Lisa Gurgone

of the people it serves. This includes deepening community impact through housing partnerships, healthcare collaborations, caregiver support, nutrition services and healthy aging initiatives, while continuing to advocate for policies and funding that strengthen home and community-based services. Gurgone and the MVAS leadership team are committed to making MVAS an employer of choice where staff feel valued and empowered.

Previously, Gurgone served as executive director of Mass Aging Access, the statewide trade association representing the Commonwealth's network of ASAPs and Area Agencies on Aging (AAAs). For more than 15 years, she served as the executive director of the Home Care Aide Council, a direct care workforce advocacy organization where she also led multiple grant-funded training initiatives.

Throughout her career, Gurgone has worked in partnership with the Administration and the legislature to implement policies for the delivery of long-term care services. She has fostered coalitions and partnerships with the stakeholder community to strengthen supports offered to older adults and people with disabilities throughout MA.

SALUTING THE CARING FORCE

Destanee Griffiths: Leading with compassion, dedication and a commitment to youth

For Destanee Griffiths, working with youth at **Walker Therapeutic & Educational Programs** is more than a career — it is a calling rooted in compassion, personal experience, and a genuine desire to make a difference.

Griffiths has been part of the Walker community for over three years. During that time, she has steadily grown as a professional and a leader, beginning her Walker career as a direct care counselor before achieving a promotion to milieu specialist and then to residential supervisor.

Griffiths' desire to work in this field was shaped by both her past work and personal experiences with youth who faced significant challenges. These experiences have helped her develop a deep sense of empathy and understanding for the youth she serves. She describes the youth as "a source of inspiration" and appreciates "the opportunity to support them through their challenges and growth." The impact she has on the youth is perhaps best captured in their own words. One youth shared, "When I'm feeling down she lifts me up." Another said, "She always knows how to help."

Youth also recognize the positive energy Griffiths brings to the program: "She makes everyone laugh," one youth shared, while another described her simply as "always positive." Even during difficult moments, youth know that Destanee will remain reassuring and supportive. "She always encourages us, even during hard times. She feels like my family," one youth explained. Another said, "she cares, listens, gives us a lot of support, and she is there when I need her."

Griffiths is equally committed to her own professional development. She is currently attending college and holds certifications in Therapeu-



Griffiths embodies the kind of leadership that is built through relationships: showing up for youth.

tic Crisis Intervention and CPR/First Aid.

Her supervisor describes Griffiths as "dedicated, caring, and consistently willing to go above and beyond." She is known for "helping without being asked," seeking opportunities for professional development, and approaching youth with "a natural warmth and sensitivity." Perhaps most importantly, she has what her supervisor describes as a "soft response" to youth — a quality that allows her to respond to challenging moments with compassion while maintaining the structure and support youth need.

Griffiths' journey at Walker — from direct care counselor to milieu specialist to residential supervisor — is a testament to what can happen when compassion is combined with dedication, curiosity, and a commitment to growth. She embodies the kind of leadership that is built through relationships: showing up for youth, supporting colleagues, continuing to learn and consistently going the extra mile.

Delaney Tobias: Showing up is how you build trust

Delaney Tobias joined **COMPASS** almost three years ago, then stepped into the role of EAST Project Specialist this past January, now working with youth impacted by or vulnerable to commercial sexual exploitation. No two days look the same. One morning might mean welcoming back a youth who has just returned from being out of care; the next, building trust through small talk with a teenager.

"The biggest thing is meeting them where they're at," Tobias says. Once trust is established, she identifies needs, assesses vulnerabilities, and provides stabilization support aligned with the youth's goals. Much of the work happens in conversation: Identifying the warning signs of grooming and planting seeds that empower youth to recognize and minimize risk factors and strengthen protective factors.

Tobias studied criminal justice with a minor in psychology at Merrimack College, where a field internship with the Department of Youth Services in Lawrence led her to COMPASS. She then completed numerous training sessions, including a 10-week training facilitated by My Life My Choice.

Tobias knew from childhood she wanted to work with kids, torn between teaching and social work before choosing the latter. "I'm very passionate about making a difference in the lives of young people," she says. "I enjoy building genuine relationships with youth, empowering them to make safer, more informed decisions that strengthen their autonomy and help them achieve their own goals." She's struck by the prevalence and number



Tobias builds trust with youth and helps them recognize risks, strengthen protective factors and make safer, informed decisions.

of youth affected by this epidemic; she knew she wanted to move beyond recognition and work toward action.

Clients describe Tobias as calm and non-judgmental, traits she calls essential to the job, explaining that the key is leaning on consistency and transparency. "Showing up is how you build rapport and trust," she says. Another client expressed how grateful they were that their daughter has a mentor like Tobias to support her. "Thank you for being my daughter's mentor over the past six months. Every week she waited for you by the window and couldn't run fast enough to spend time with you. I appreciate your gentle, inviting, patient, encouraging approach with her... You have shown her what a healthy, consistent, positive community relationship is, and we are deeply grateful," said the client.



William Yelenak
President / Publisher

Advocacy doesn't happen overnight

Kate Nelson walked to the podium at the South of Boston Caring Force Regional Rally in Rockland this spring and found herself in a familiar place.

"Some of you may remember me from last year's Caring Force Rally in Taunton," she told the crowd of nearly 200 human services workers, supporters and consumers. "I am back again this year to keep speaking and drawing attention to the financial crisis for human services workers that I am sure most of us are feeling right now!"

A lead direct support professional, case manager and human rights officer at The Arc of Plymouth and Upper Cape Cod, Kate returned to make the case for the Providers' Council's legislative agenda — pay that would put community-based human services workers on par with state employees doing similar work and a loan repayment program for their educational debt.

"We all know that continuity of care is critical to the success of the people that we support, and I would never want to work in any other field," she said. "This is where my heart is and always will be. But without fair wages, I am unsure if I can make it my lifelong career."

Kate came back again this year to share the same story. This is what advocacy actually looks like. It is rarely one decisive moment. It is the same worker telling the same story in a different room a year later — and a year after that. And perhaps a year after that too.

We'll need that persistence. This year, formal sessions in the Legislature ended on July 31, and neither of our legislative priorities made it across the finish line. A *livable wage for human services workers* (Senate 130, House 223) would have closed the pay disparity with state employees by 2029. Student loan repayment (Senate 119, House 283) would have created a new fund to help workers pay down their educational debt. Both died in Ways and Means, and we're exploring refiling them — and other legislation — when the new session begins in January 2027.

I understand why that reads like a loss. But look at what we accomplished together this year.

In April, we released *Stretched to Capacity: The Workforce Crisis in Human Services* with the University of Massachusetts Donahue Institute — the most detailed picture yet of the pay gap between our workforce and state employees doing similar jobs. In May, more than 600 Caring Force members filled the Great Hall for our 14th Annual Caring Force Rally.

In June, we brought the findings back to the State House for legislators and their aides, and carried that same message to regional rallies across the state. And in July, that data showed up in *The Boston Globe*, on GBH and in other news outlets as reporters connected federal immigration decisions to the workers this sector is losing.

The report sharpened our argument. Our sector holds about 150,000 jobs across the Commonwealth, and provid-

ers reported vacancy rates of 15 to 16 percent in client-facing roles — against a statewide job-opening rate of just 3.3 percent. And the benchmarks the state uses to fund direct care jobs in our sector run 13 to 18 percent below what the Commonwealth pays its own employees for the same work.

Our work makes an impact even when a bill doesn't move. The Chapter 257 Reserve will be funded at \$260 million in FY '27 — enough to maintain rates at the 53rd percentile. We are incredibly grateful to our legislative sponsors and human services champions — Sen. Cindy Friedman, Sen. Sal DiDomenico, Rep. Mindy Domb, Rep. Jeffrey Roy and Rep. Sean Garballey — for carrying our legislation session after session.

At the Merrimack Valley rally in June, Desmond Heffner reminded us why the stakes are greater than one bill or line item. A residential caseworker at The Key Program, he told the crowd about the caseworkers, counselors and advocates who shaped him from an early age. They're the reason he does this work now — even though he was told over and over to pursue a different career.

"A young person whose life was positively impacted by human services wanted to dedicate his career to helping others," he said. "The biggest obstacle wasn't passion, ability or commitment — it was the fear that the profession wouldn't provide a livable wage."

So for Kate, for Desmond and for the 150,000 people who work in the community-based human services sector — we begin again. And we want to begin with you.

Our staff and Public Policy Committee have already started building our legislative agenda for the 2027-2028 session, and we're asking the hard questions about our own bills. Should a livable wage for our workforce be measured against state salaries or another benchmark? How can we best help employees working in this field with sizable student loan debt? And what else belongs on our list?

Bills will be filed in January 2027, and the legislative agenda we carry to Beacon Hill ought to be one our members help write. Send your ideas for strengthening this sector and its essential workforce to Caroline O'Neill at coneill@providers.org.

Kate closed her remarks with a question for legislators in the room. "We work in the human services field to make sure everyone has a meaningful day. But here is my question to our legislators: Is there a way to make sure we can afford to feed our families, maintain our homes, and live comfortably?"

Kate will probably be back next year. I'd rather she didn't have to be. The gap — between the rallies she's attended and the one she shouldn't have to — is the work in front of us between now and January. Help us write the agenda, and let's give Kate's question the answer it deserves — for her and for the hundreds of thousands of Massachusetts residents who rely on this workforce every day.



Artwork from **Cardinal Cushing Centers**, a nonprofit supporting 500 students and adults with intellectual disabilities, was recently featured at North River Arts Society in Marshfield. The exhibition showcased more than 150 pieces created by artists across Cushing's adult and student programs, including *Life Opportunities Unlimited*, the Woodshop, Industrial Arts, Ceramic Studio and school art programs in Hanover and Braintree. A true collective, the exhibit featured a wide range of styles and mediums, from paintings and drawings to paper collages and woodworking. Highlights included a show-stopping wall of 167 painted knobs created by artists of various ages, as well as colorful paper-bag self-portraits.

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



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Before the bell rings: What every child needs to thrive

By Lesli Suggs

Many consider education to be the great equalizer, and I believe it can be. When you string together year after year of positive learning experiences in strong and safe schools, the totality of that investment — combined with a student's innate curiosity — can become a powerful pathway to future success. In the classroom, which is governed by the same standards across the state, every child has the potential to thrive. But to truly tap into that potential, for education to truly be equalizing, every child needs the support and opportunity to fully access it.

Across Massachusetts, as children arrive at their school buildings this September, they are coming with vastly different resources behind them. A child's zip code, access to support and economic well-being shape the opportunities available to them before they even step into the building. When that first bell rings, inequities don't simply fall away. They aren't shed like a backpack hung on a hook in a coatroom, then picked up at dismissal. Children cannot fully engage in learning when they are carrying untreated anxiety, trauma, behavioral health challenges, hunger, unstable housing or family stress with them into the classroom.

A recent survey conducted by the Federal Reserve Bank of Boston, titled the 2025 Massachusetts Economic Conditions and House-

hold Opportunity Survey (Mass ECHOS) shows staggering disparities across Massachusetts. While the median family wealth in the Commonwealth is \$374,000, for families living in cities, it is \$110,000. Just over 35 percent of families surveyed reported they could not cover an unexpected \$400 expense with cash or equivalent resources, should it arise.

This report offers a revealing look at Massachusetts' economic landscape, examining how geography, race and home ownership intersect with wealth and shows just how tightly education and economics are intertwined. The numbers are stark: families with a graduate-educated adult had median wealth approaching \$1 million, compared with just \$11,000 for families without an education beyond high school or a GED.

This study underscores a challenge we need to confront: If education is one of our most powerful pathways to economic mobility, then unequal access to educational opportunity can perpetuate the very wealth disparities we look to education to overcome.

Schools cannot do this alone. We need to continue to invest in the full ecosystem that children need to learn: behavioral health, housing stability, family supports, after-school programming, early childhood services, food security, transportation, and more. And we need to look to the communi-

SCHOOL, see page 7

Fifth annual purple bows — why it matters to remember

By Katie O'Leary and Michelle McKenzie

On August 20, North Suffolk Community Services' recovery support team — joined by 10 other nonprofit and municipal partners — started placing more than 1,200 purple bows throughout East Boston, Chelsea, Revere, Charlestown, Winthrop, Malden, Medford, Lynn, Roxbury, South Boston and along Mass. and Cass.

On August 31 — International Overdose Awareness Day — the same folks who were

placing those bows as part of the 5th Annual Adopt-A-Pole campaign will join many more volunteers from across the state to place more than 20,000 purple flags on Boston Common.

Each bow and each flag represents a Massachusetts resident who died of an overdose: A son, daughter, parent, sibling, partner, friend. Or — as Bureau of Substance Addiction Services (BSAS) Director Deirdre Calvert put it at the Adopt-A-Pole Kickoff event at NSCS' recov-

OVERDOSE AWARENESS, see page 7



One of North Suffolk Community Services' recovery teams puts up purple bows to honor International Overdose Awareness Day in Chelsea.

Backpack Heroes helps every child start school ready to succeed

By Matt Stone

Every child deserves to begin the school year feeling prepared, confident and excited to learn. But for families already struggling to make ends meet, the cost of back-to-school essentials can create a difficult choice — what can we afford, what will have to wait?

That's why the Youth Villages New England Backpack Heroes campaign is so meaningful. Each year, the campaign brings together employees, community partners and generous supporters to provide children and families with new back-

packs and school supplies. What may seem like a simple backpack to one person can represent significant relief for a family facing financial strain.

A mother of eight was preparing her children for the new school year. She was faced with having to decide between putting her limited resources toward purchasing the required school uniforms for her children or buying the essential school supplies they needed to succeed in the classroom.

Through Backpack Heroes, Youth Villages provided backpacks and school supplies for all eight of her children. That sup-

Finding strength, one goal at a time



Francesca celebrates a milestone at Tempus Unlimited's Wellness Center, where her determination, support system and commitment to staying active have helped her build strength, confidence and independence.

By Sophia Macrina

At Tempus Unlimited's Wellness Center, every achievement is worth celebrating.

Francesca's journey is one of incredible resilience. Born in Italy with two rare syndromes, she was flown to the United States to receive specialized care. She is also Deaf, and as of today, is the only person in the world who is Deaf with these rare syndromes. Despite the challenges she has faced, she walks into every room smiling, proud of her accomplishments thus far. Francesca's story is a powerful reminder that determination and having a great support system can overcome any goal you set your mind to.

Francesca joined the Wellness Center in December 2022 due to her love of exercise and her desire to stay active. Since then, she has embraced every opportunity to challenge herself, setting personal goals and celebrating each milestone along the way. One of her proudest accomplishments came during her cardio on the recumbent elliptical, where she rode an incredible 3.34 miles in just 15 minutes, breaking the speed record in the Wellness Center! It's a testament to the hard work and dedication she brings with her every time she walks through Tempus Unlimited's front door.

For Francesca, the Wellness Center is about more than just fitness, it's a place where she feels supported, encouraged, and empowered to reach her goals. As part of Tempus Unlimited's social, recreational and therapeutic services, the Wellness Center provides a safe, fully accessible environment where consumers receive individualized support from trained staff. Francesca especially enjoys working one on one with her personal trainer, Steven, whose encouragement and guidance make every workout both enjoyable and rewarding. The welcoming atmosphere and variety of adaptive exercise equipment have helped make the Wellness Center a place where she continues to build strength, confidence, and independence. Outside of the gym, Francesca enjoys spending time with family and friends, going bowling, taking walks, and staying active whenever she can. She credits her perseverance as her greatest strength. No matter the challenge, she faces it with determination and a positive attitude, always giving her best and refusing to give up.

Beyond the Wellness Center, Tempus Un-

limited offers a variety of programs designed to help individuals build confidence, develop life skills and achieve greater independence. One of these is our Employment Services Program, which empowers individuals to discover meaningful career opportunities while developing the skills necessary to succeed in the workforce.

Francesca participated in the Employment Services Program, where she received personalized support while exploring careers. Services include vocational assessments to identify her strengths and interests, employment-based skills training, resume and cover letter building, interview preparation, and job search assistance. In this program, participants also have access to both on and off the job support to help them maintain long term success in the workplace. In addition, Employment Services offer job clubs meetings and workshops that provide opportunities for students and adults to explore different career avenues and continue strengthening their professional skills while connecting with peers who share similar employment goals. Throughout her experience in the program, Francesca gained valuable experience that has helped better prepare her for future employment opportunities to come.

Looking ahead, Tempus will be introducing T.E.A.M. (Tempus, Empower, Access, Money), an innovative program created to fund a variety of therapeutic services to those with disabilities. The T.E.A.M. Program is built on a foundation of equity, inclusion and person-centered justice, is dedicated to breaking down financial barriers and expanding access to life-enriching, specialized therapies for individuals of all ages with documented diagnoses or disabilities. Guided by a person-centered, family systems approach, we empower individuals to unlock their full potential, foster independence and enhancing overall quality of life. Because T.E.A.M. exclusively funds specific, non-traditional therapeutic pathways, eligible participants will have access to therapies and services such as Art Therapy, Dance and Movement Therapy, Music Therapy, Adaptive Swim, and Equine Therapy. T.E.A.M. aims to help individuals gain access to experiences they otherwise may not have been able to. We are thrilled to open this program and partner with organizations like-minded to our mission.

Sophia Macrina is the public relations specialist for Tempus Unlimited.

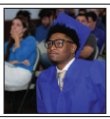
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THE PROVIDER

Volume 46 — No. 10 The Newspaper of the Providers' Council November 2025

50 Years Together: Celebrating Today, Shaping Tomorrow a huge success

The Providers' Council's 50th Annual Convention & Expo, 50 Years Together: Celebrating Today, Shaping Tomorrow, brought together a sold-out crowd of nearly 1,200 attendees connected to Massachusetts' community-based human services sector. Held on October 6 at the Marriott Copley Place Hotel in Boston, the event marked the Council's golden anniversary with a day of celebration, reflection and forward-looking conversations about the future of the sector.

"Today is not just about our past — it's about shaping our future as well," said Providers' Council President/CEO Bill Yelenak when kicking off the event in the morning. "The challenges we face today are among the greatest the Council and human services organizations have seen since our founding in 1975. But with challenges come opportunities, and whatever challenges the sector may face, the Council will be right there with our members every step of the way."

The event provided space for professionals from across the sector to connect with other organizations and community members. This year, the convention hosted a robust exhibitor showcase, highlighting time and cost-saving solutions for attendees.

"To me the greatest importance is in connecting with fellow organizations that allow you to not only talk about what we do but to learn about what others do in the industry," said Richard Shulman, assistant director of recruiting at Vinden. "I enjoy going from table to table because it gives me the opportunity not to recruit but to know what's going on in the sector."

I think coming from a different industry completely, there are not enough opportunities for us to join with other providers and other leaders in the space. We really operate alone in so many ways, and we work only within our bubbles," said Alexis Steel, president and CEO of St. Mary's Center for Women and Children. "Being at a conference like

this is refreshing to get a little bit out of the office and have that opportunity."

In response to evaluations submitted in prior years, the Council added a third workshop block, allowing attendees an opportunity for additional learning across 39 workshops — a record number for the event. This updated schedule gave attendees more opportunities to engage with a wide range of topics relevant to the human services sector. Each block featured 13, hour-long experiences, including traditional workshops, panels, networking rounds and wellness sessions.

To honor the dedication of individuals and organizations across the Commonwealth, the Council honored 12 awardees, including 10 Awards of Excellence and 2 Peer Provider awards, celebrating the human services organizations and individuals for their tremendous contributions to the sector over the past year. This year, the Council combined the Awards of Excellence and Peer Provider Award ceremonies to create one segment dedicated to celebrating those individuals and organizations' contributions to the human services sector in Massachusetts. Combined, this ceremony allowed the audience to take a moment to honor the awardees and to enjoy the personalized videos and caricatures handcrafted by local companies and artists.

Nine future leaders of the community-based human services sector were also honored at the event, receiving education-



CONVENTION, see page 7

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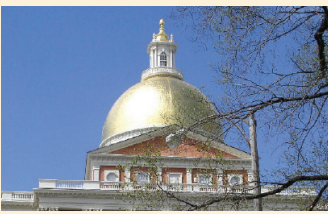
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A VIEW FROM THE HILL

*A commentary from a legislator
on human services*



Elected officials: A bridge to human services

By Senator John F. Keenan

Government and human services providers share a fundamental responsibility: protecting people who may be vulnerable due to a host of reasons, including age, living situations, or health. When a human services provider closes, the impact is more than the loss of a business; it disrupts care, creates uncertainty for families and leaves vulnerable residents wondering where they can get help.

Residents should know they can turn to their elected officials for support and as a bridge to services.

In my district, South Shore Elder Services (SSES) had played a critical role in meeting the needs of seniors throughout the region for many years. My team and I had a close working relationship with SSES, frequently turning to them to help constituents in need. Suddenly, SSES closed and a nearby organization, Old Colony Elder Services, stepped up to offer services to SSES clients. My office has worked with both SSES and Old Colony Elder Services to ensure clients receive assistance during this transition.

Clients rely on these providers for many services, including basics such as food and in-home support. As the transition continues, my office attends bi-weekly informational meetings regarding the switch, and with new information we reach out to constituents we have helped in the past to make sure they receive services and care.

In a transition of this magnitude, the impacts go beyond those receiving services — they extend to the people providing the services. Hundreds of SSES employees were applying to work at Old Colony or searching for positions elsewhere. My office heard from employees who expressed concerns about their jobs and uncertainty about the future. We have been providing information and connecting employees with resources to help them make informed decisions about their next steps.

These employees also shared information with my office that we have shared with state agencies to ensure staff and clients remain protected during the transition.

The experience of dealing with a major service provider closing will no doubt inform my future legislative decisions as I consider how best to support providers, their staffs and the residents who rely on them. Access to human services is critical, as is having stable, well-supported providers with dedicated employees capable of meeting the needs of their communities.

But government also has a responsibility to look upstream. While elected officials and their staff work daily to connect people with resources, the responsibility also extends to prevention. When we can address problems before they become crises, we can reduce the strain on human services providers, ensuring that all those who need care actually receive it.

In Massachusetts and across the country there is a rapidly expanding commercial online gambling market and a rapidly growing number of people with gambling disorders. Also, the public health infrastructure needed to address gambling disorders is not nearly keeping pace with the growing need for services.

Banning legal sports betting is not the solution; however, practices of sports betting operators that make their products more addictive need additional regulation. For that reason, I proposed *The Bettor Health Act*.

One of the worst industry practices is the offering and promotion of in-game bets, which are second-by-second wagers that allow people to bet on every aspect of a game in real-time. The speed and frequency of these wagers can create additional risks for people vulnerable to gambling addiction. Also, we continue to learn more about how athletes, organized crime figures and others manipulate the in-play performances of players. My bill would protect bettors and sports by prohibiting these addictive bets.

Another insidious practice of the industry is the use of VIP hosts who encourage high-spending bettors to keep gambling. They often target problem gamblers, even those attempting to quit or who are in active recovery. These hosts are paid based on how much they can get bettors to spend. My bill would bar VIP hosts.

Beyond the prevention aspects of *The Bettor Health Act*, it would also increase resources for the provision of gambling disorder treatment services. *The Bettor Health Act* would increase the excise on online sports betting operators in the Commonwealth from 20 percent to 51 percent, matching New York, New Hampshire and Rhode Island. It would also direct the Massachusetts Gaming Commission to study the link between gambling addiction and suicide, which gambling companies often overlook or deny completely.

DraftKings has highlighted its \$2 million contribution to state councils and affiliates of the National Council on Problem Gambling. However, this contribution should be considered relative to the scale of the industry, which reported more than \$6 billion in revenue in 2025. Massachusetts should ensure that resources devoted to prevention and treatment are aligned with the size of the market and the public health challenges, while holding those responsible for creating these challenges accountable for addressing them.

If nothing is done to curb the addictiveness of mobile sports betting, the strain on gambling addiction specialists will be substantial.

We should not wait until treatment providers are overwhelmed, families are in crisis and more people are struggling with gambling disorders before we act. If Massachusetts is going to permit, use revenue from and allow sports betting operators to make enormous profits in a rapidly expanding mobile betting industry, then we must also invest in prevention, treatment and recovery.

We take lessons from experiences, and whether it is the closing of SSES or witnessing the growth in sports betting, we have learned that preventing harms, providing services and connecting people to services is critically important. The work continues.

Senator John F. Keenan represents the Norfolk and Plymouth District in the Massachusetts Senate.

The 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.

TPS CHANGES: Haitian TPS end disrupts human services workforce

Continued from page 1

changes to Temporary Protected Status and their impact on the workforce. The guidance notes that while some employees may be able to continue working under an alternative immigration status, those without alternative employment authorization may need to be placed on unpaid administrative leave, providing them with an opportunity to pursue an alternative status.

Similarly, the Offices of the Governor and Attorney General have issued guidance emphasizing the need for employers to comply with applicable employment and immigration laws while ensuring that employees are not discriminated against based on national origin or citizenship status.

The Providers' Council and several of its members spoke with news publications — including *The Boston Globe*, GBH News and NBC10 Boston — about the impact the loss of TPS for Haitian employees will have on the community-based human services sector.

“Our sector does not function without immigrants,” Providers' Council Presi-

dent and CEO Bill Yelenak told *The Globe*. “These are folks, they passed background checks, they showed up for overnight shifts ... and nothing about their work or effort changed, just their paperwork.”

Several Council members — including Bay Cove Human Services, Road to Responsibility and Vinfen — also spoke with the press, sharing how the loss of TPS for Haitian employees has affected their organizations and the communities they serve.

“In the human services field, much of what we do is based upon relationships between the direct service workers and the people that we serve,” Kevin Martone, president and CEO of Bay Cove Human Services, told GBH News. “To have those therapeutic relationships severed pretty abruptly has a strong negative impact on the people that we serve.”

The Council will continue to monitor the impact of the TPS changes on the human services sector. For additional information, or if an organization has been significantly impacted, please contact Bill Yelenak at byelenak@providers.org.

OVERDOSE AWARENESS: Purple bows honor lives lost to overdose



Purple bows honor MA residents lost to overdose during the Adopt-A-Pole campaign.

Continued from page 5

ery support center Recovery on the Harbor — “Everybody is somebody’s somebody.”

For the NSCS team, our partners, the volunteers and family members, placing the bows is deeply personal. Each bow has a tag with the name of a loved one lost to overdose. The bows stay up through September — Recovery Month. For many of our colleagues, the sea of purple bows and flags symbolize the statistic they could have been, and represents the person(s) whose memory fuels their work.

In Massachusetts, Department of Public Health (DPH) data around fatal overdose may suggest that the tide is finally turning:

- 978 confirmed and estimated opioid-related overdose deaths among Massachusetts residents last year — marking the first time since 2013 (992 deaths) that Massachusetts recorded fewer than 1,000 annual opioid-related overdose deaths.
- That represents a nearly 60 percent decline in fatal opioid overdoses in the state since the record high of 2,364 deaths in 2022;
- Opioid-related overdose deaths in 2025 are estimated to be 27 percent lower than in 2024, nearly double the national average;
- According to the Boston Public Health Commission, the 120 reported opioid overdose deaths in Boston for 2025 represent a 29 percent reduction from 2024.

The surprisingly significant drop reflects the impact of investing in harm-reduction strategies, including distributing fentanyl test strips and over 150,000 naloxone kits, as well as increased awareness and outreach, which may be slowly eroding the weighty stigma of addiction.

At NSCS, one of the many addiction and recovery services we offer is a one-of-a-kind 24/7 Recovery Support Hotline staffed completely by Recovery Coaches. From Sept. 1, 2021 through June 30, 2026 the hotline received 6,185 calls/text messages, of which 3,847 (62 percent) were unique. Many callers reach out to seek immediate help for substance use-related crises, and in that time frame, Recovery Coaches facilitated 804 detox placements, provided support to families and connected callers to other resources. One-third of the hotline calls in the last two years (June 2024-2026) have been outbound calls made by our Coaches to check in on callers, coordinate transfers, and follow up post-detox.

While the data is notable, we must remember that every number represents a human being. This is not the time to take our foot off the gas as far as funding services goes. The numbers do not reflect those friends, family and loved ones we lose to the other medical and physical effects of addiction. And while Black and Latinx communities have also shown reductions in unintentional drug overdose, these populations continue to be disproportionately affected. In Boston, for example, where Black and Latinx residents account for nearly 37 percent of city’s total population, they also accounted for nearly half (48 percent) of all overdose deaths in 2025.

So even as the deaths from accidental overdose continue to decline, the number of bows placed throughout greater Boston and the flags planted on the Common continue to increase. And each August, we will continue to place them as a reminder of the work yet to be done.

Katie O’Leary is the director of recovery services and Michelle McKenzie is the chief advancement officer for NSCS.

KEYNOTE: Cam Awesome to share his story of resilience and reinvention

Continued from page 1

a paperwork violation, costing him a chance to compete in the Olympics. This period of time challenged everything Awesome thought about himself and who he was, which led him down a path of discovery.

Awesome has many stories in his life, and he noted he’s excited to share his personal experiences about overcoming adversity with friends of the human services sector in October.

“I like to ask the audience: ‘What’s this story you’ve been telling? How can you break that cycle?’”

The Council is honored to welcome Awesome as the keynote speaker for its 51st Annual Convention & Expo. His story of resilience, transformation and embracing change offers a powerful perspective on what it means to remain *Unshaken in Purpose*. To learn more about Awesome and the 51st Annual Convention, please visit www.providersconvention.org.

SCHOOL: Investing in student opportunity

Continued from page 5

ty-based workforce that provides those supports. That means strengthening the partnerships that already exist between schools and behavioral health providers and building new ones across the public, private and non-profit sectors. It means businesses, philanthropy and government working together to invest in the opportunities that help children thrive — not only behavioral health and family supports, but access to sports, music, the arts, mentoring and the experiences that build confidence, connection and belonging.

It also means recognizing the extraordinary strength of our provider community. Every day, organizations across Massachusetts work alongside children and families and they understand firsthand what gets in the way of a child’s ability to learn—and what can help remove those barriers. That expertise belongs at the center of how we think about educational opportunity, because supporting a child outside the classroom is often what makes success inside the classroom possible.

Let’s redefine what an “educational resource” is. A school counselor is an investment in education, as is a therapeutic mentor, a case manager or clinician. A child’s work with a clinician can be just as critical to their educational success as a good curriculum. I say we do both. As Governor Healey and the Legislature turn their attention to evaluating the Student Opportunity

Act and its funding formulas, we have an opportunity to ask whether we are making the investments necessary to have the impact intended — and whether we are thinking broadly enough about what student opportunity truly requires.

Massachusetts has the resources, knowledge and provider infrastructure. The question is whether we are willing to make the investments necessary to ensure that every child has what they need to learn and thrive. The Student Opportunity Act recognized that students facing greater barriers—including low-income students, English learners and students with special needs—require greater resources. As we revisit how those resources are allocated, we should also look beyond the classroom to the behavioral health, family supports, housing stability and community connections that make educational success possible.

This new academic year is a new opportunity.

For those of us working in human services, education and behavioral health, September represents more than another academic year. It is one of our greatest opportunities to ensure that every child has the support they need, not just to attend school, but to thrive in life.

So, let’s get to it. Before the bell rings.

Lesli Suggs, LICSW, is the president and CEO at The Home for Little Wanderers.

CARING FORCE: The Caring Force wraps up its 2026 rally season this fall



To join The Caring Force in either Western MA or Metro Boston, please visit www.thecaringforce.org.

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opment, Gándara Center, Justice Resource Institute, Key Program, Mental Health Association Inc., River Valley Counseling Center, Riverside Industries Inc., ServiceNet, UCP of Western MA and Viability.

The Caring Force will host its first-ever Metro Boston rally on Friday, September 25 at the WORK Inc. headquarters in Dorchester. The gathering will highlight the voices and experiences of frontline staff, underscore ongoing workforce challenges and amplify calls for livable wages, sustainable funding and policies that strengthen the human services sector and the communities it serves. The event will also demonstrate the collective strength and impact of the human services workforce across the region.

Partnering organizations for the rally include Action for Boston Community Development (ABCD), Bay Cove Human Services, Casa Esperanza, Children’s Services of Roxbury, Communities for People, COMPASS,

Family Independence, Justice Resource Institute, Morgan Memorial Goodwill, North Suffolk Community Services, Roxbury Youthworks, Sojourner House, The Home for Little Wanderers, TILL Inc., Victory Programs and WORK Inc.

Although The Caring Force will conclude its 2026 rally season in September, the grassroots advocacy coalition will participate in one additional event before the end of the year: the Massachusetts Direct Support Professionals Conference, taking place November 9 and November 10.

The conference brings together hundreds of professionals to honor, celebrate and educate the workforce serving individuals with disabilities. The two-day event features plenary sessions, breakout topics like burnout prevention and a town hall with the Department of Developmental Services (DDS).

To register for these rallies or receive more information, please visit www.thecaringforce.org. For further questions, please contact Isabella A. Lee at ilee@providers.org.



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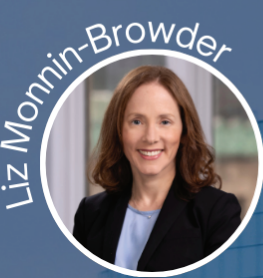
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