

Sen. Jamie Eldridge:
Supporting human services
starts with its workers

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Council sells out
tickets for its 50th
Annual Convention
and Expo

An engaging keynote speaker, nearly 40 workshop selections over three blocks, \$50,000 worth of educational scholarships and more than 70 exhibitors are all highlights of the Providers' Council's 50th Annual Convention & Expo, *50 Years Together: Celebrating Today, Shaping Tomorrow*, which is taking place at the Marriott Copley Place Hotel in Boston on Monday, October 6.

More than 1,100 attendees are expected at the event, which sold out during the early-bird registration period in August.

"We're looking forward to celebrating the 50th anniversary of our hallmark event with our members, friends and other supporters of the community-based human services sector," said Providers' Council President/CEO Bill Yelenak. "This is a great opportunity to join together to celebrate the history of the Providers' Council and honor the incredible efforts of workers who fill 160,000 jobs in human services."

Cait Donovan, host of "Fried: The Burnout Podcast" and author of *The Bounce-backability Factor*, will give this year's keynote address. With a background in biobehavioral science and Chinese medicine, Donovan bridges Eastern and Western perspectives to offer practical, proven strategies for emotional well-being, resilience and burnout recovery.

CONVENTION, see page 7

Final Caring Force Rally of
2025 brings powerful stories
and advocacy to Western MA



Members from Gándara Mental Health Center gather together at the last Caring Force regional rally of 2025, marking the end of an incredible year for the group.

On Friday, September 19, nearly 250 highly driven and enthusiastic members of The Caring Force came together at Westfield State University in Westfield, MA for the last regional Caring Force Rally this year. The event was an inspiring blend of celebration and advocacy — recognizing the relentless dedication of human services professionals across Western Massachusetts while calling for the support and resources they need to thrive.

From moving speeches to personal stories,

Council celebrates
50 Years of Impact:
passage of Chapter
257 in 2008

The Providers' Council is turning 50 in 2025! In celebration of this milestone, the Council will be running a series throughout the year commemorating some of the Council's most important milestones in its first 50 years.

This month, we're excited to highlight one of the most important policy milestones for the human services sector in Massachusetts: the passage of Chapter 257 of the Acts of 2008.

The landmark legislation — passed unanimously by the legislature and signed into law by then-Gov. Deval Patrick in 2008 — reformed how the Commonwealth funds human services programs for hundreds of thousands of state residents. Between 1987-2007, the Commonwealth did not adjust reimbursement rates to reflect actual costs, leaving providers underfunded for essential expenses like salaries, rent, utilities and health insurance. In 2007, the Executive Office of Health and Human Services released a report highlighting a looming financial crisis for the state's human service providers, describing a service delivery system deteriorating under inadequate reimbursement rates. In response, the legislature unanimously passed Chapter 257 and Gov. Patrick signed it into law

CHAPTER 257, see page 7

Council, members advocate for a livable wage before Joint Committee

On September 22, the Council along with several of its members testified before the Joint Committee on Children, Families and Persons with Disabilities on its bill, *An act relative to a livable wage for human services workers* (S.130| H.223).

Providers' Council President/CEO Bill Yelenak led the hearing giving an overview of the pay disparity between community-based human services workers and those that work at state-operated human services programs. Craig Gordon, president and CEO of Communities for People; Tammy Mello, president and CEO of Key Program, Inc.; and Peter Evers, president and CEO of BAMS, also testified before the committee on the importance of this bill.

"I am thankful to be before you today to discuss a pay disparity that has created a

two-tiered system of care and exacerbated a workforce crisis in the community-based human services sector," Yelenak told committee chairs Sen. Robyn Kennedy and Rep. Jay Livingstone, as well as other legislators on the committee.

Yelenak thanked the Legislature for inserting language in its FY '25 budget that compelled the Executive Office of Health and Human Services to do a report detailing the pay disparity between state and community-based human services workers.

The data presented in the report showed that state employees often make more: between 13 to 15 percent for direct care positions; up to 47 percent for master's level social workers; up to 16 percent more for



HEARING, see page 7

Providers' Council President & CEO Bill Yelenak testifies at the hearing.

Advocates CEO Diane Gould to retire; COO Regina Marshall is named her successor

The Board of Directors of Advocates announced that longstanding president and CEO Diane Gould will retire on June 30, 2026, and that it has named COO Regina Marshall as the new president and CEO effective July 1, 2026.

Gould has been with Advocates for 40 years, the last 12 as President and CEO. She grew the agency substantially during her tenure in the top job, including shepherding mergers with two other human services agencies. Even with the organizational change brought on by these very substantial mergers, Advocates maintained and even strengthened its culture as a caring agency focused on helping people overcome challenges and lead healthy and satisfying lives in the community.

Marshall joined Advocates in 2015 as senior vice president for administrative operations after working in a senior role at the state's Executive Office of Health and Human Services and as director of the Massachusetts Mental Health Center. In her role as COO of Advocates, to which she was named in 2021, Marshall has responsibility for overseeing the operations of the agency's many clinical, therapeutic, and residential programs, which stretch across Massachusetts and Rhode Island, and are staffed by more than 2,400 employees serving over 40,000 individuals annually.

Christine Chagnon named president & CEO of New England Village

New England Village, Inc (NEV) announced in early September the appointment of Christine Chagnon as its new president and chief executive officer, effective immediately. In her role, Chagnon will guide NEV's strategic vision, strengthen community partnerships and

further expand NEV's impact in empowering adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities.

With nearly 30 years of experience in the human services sector, Chagnon most recently served as NEV's chief operating officer, where she strengthened operational systems, improved program outcomes and deepened mission impact.

RFK Community Alliance welcomes Robyn Ernst as chief operating officer

RFK Community Alliance announced the appointment of Robyn Ernst, LMHC, as the organization's new chief operating officer (COO) in September. A licensed mental health counselor and certified trauma professional, Ernst has over 25 years of experience in human services, with more than 15 years in executive leadership roles across both nonprofit and public sectors.

She joins RFK Community Alliance following her role as vice president of adult mental health & substance use services at the Center for Human Development (CHD) in Springfield.

Marian O'Neil named chief financial officer of Bay Cove Human Services

Bay Cove Human Services announced the appointment of Marian O'Neil as the organization's next chief financial officer in early September.

O'Neil is a seasoned finance executive with over 24 years of experience across the nonprofit sector, higher education, the Department of Defense and legal industries. With more than eight years as chief financial officer for mission-driven organizations, O'Neil brings a



Christine Chagnon



Robyn Ernst



Marian O'Neil

Thrive Support & Advocacy, Main Street Bank Partner on school supply drive for individuals with disabilities



Photo from Thrive Support & Advocacy

Thrive Support & Advocacy and Main Street Bank staff members proudly hold up school supplies donated to their drive to support students with intellectual and developmental disabilities. Pictured at Main Street Bank's Marlborough branch are (from left) Thrive Bilingual Family Support Coordinator Hector Ortiz; Main Street Bank Assistant Vice President & Relationship Manager Patrick Lydiard; Main Street Bank Vice President & Regional Manager Tracy Carter; Thrive Director of Family Support Claire Jean-Michel; and Thrive Bilingual Family Support Coordinator Kiarilys Villa.

proven track record of strategic leadership, financial stewardship and a deep commitment to driving organizational impact.

Road to Responsibility opens new residential program in Taunton

Road to Responsibility (RTR), announced the opening of its new residential program, located on Range Avenue in Taunton, MA on September 14.

The newly constructed single-story residence was developed by long-time Road to Responsibility partner Patriot Investment Corp. of South Easton and is currently

leased to RTR by the firm. The residence will house several current RTR members with intellectual and developmental disabilities and autism who have aged out of the educational system, while also creating opportunities for others on the waiting list for similar services through the Department of Developmental Services (DDS).

Like other RTR residential programs, the Taunton home offers a supportive environment with a wide range of services, 24-hour staffing, and independent living options including smart technology.

Be a Change-Maker

Join us to make a meaningful difference in the lives of people facing developmental, mental health, or other life challenges.

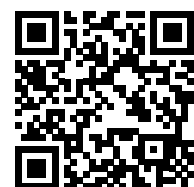
- ✓ Flexible Hours
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Advocates

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[Advocates.org/Careers](https://advocates.org/careers)



About the Agency

The Institute for Health and Recovery (IHR) supports people navigating complex and intersecting challenges: substance use, trauma, mental health and medical needs, isolation, poverty and housing instability and child welfare and justice system involvement. IHR works in homes, schools and community locations, offering:

- Treatment and recovery supports for people of all ages impacted by substance use, mental health needs and trauma;
- A continuum services for pregnant and parenting people seeking recovery from substance use disorders, including assessment, referrals, counseling and hands-on support accessing care;
- Support and navigation for people impacted by Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorders and their caregivers;
- Clinical services and case management for unhoused persons and families and housing supports for people with HIV/AIDS;
- Specialized supports for parents in recovery and their children, including parenting groups, services to strengthen parent-child relationships and peer support;
- Intensive services for families involved with the Department of Children and Families;
- School, home and community-based services for children;
- Youth substance use prevention, intervention and treatment;

All of IHR's work is guided by an understanding that with hope, support and meaningful connection to others, recovery and healing are possible for every person.

Programs that foster connection, healing and resilience

Institute for Health and Recovery (IHR) programs and services are grounded in compassion and focused on helping individuals and families strengthen their relationships, access resources and build the lives they deserve.

Since 1990, IHR has developed and scaled groundbreaking, family-centered approaches to support pregnant and parenting people with substance use disorders and their children, including the Nurturing Program for Parents in Substance Use Treatment and Recovery, Moms Do Care, the Family Recovery Project, Building Resilience through Intervention: Growing Healthier Together (BRIGHT) and Peer Engagement and Enhanced Recovery Supports (PEERS). IHR also offers prevention, intervention, and treatment services for youth and young adults impacted by substance use, statewide outpatient mental health and substance use treatment services for people of all ages, specialized supports for people with Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorders and their caregivers, people experiencing homelessness or housing instability, people with HIV/AIDS and families involved with the Department of Children and Families (DCF). Last year IHR:

- Provided interim counseling, referrals and resources for over 3,000 pregnant or parenting people impacted by substance use;
- Supported more than 1,200 adults in early recovery through our Access to Recovery programs in Boston, Springfield and Lowell;
- Facilitated rapid entry to family residential treatment or supportive living for more than 150 parents and their children;
- Engaged over 260 families involved with DCF with intensive home-based services;
- Supported 79 individuals and families experiencing housing instability or homelessness;



IHR's programs are rooted in compassion and guided by hope, lived experience, practice wisdom, and clinical expertise.

- Transformed a day treatment program for pregnant and parenting people into Promise, a continuum of care and support for pregnant and parenting people in recovery;
- Delivered training and consultation to more than 3,000 organizations and individual practitioners on topics including trauma-informed care integration, early childhood trauma, parenting in recovery, the impact of alcohol use in pregnancy and tobacco/nicotine use on recovery and tobacco treatment integration into substance use and mental health services;
- Convened and led the MA FASD Task Force, a group of professional providers and state agency personnel moving forward the work of comprehensive fetal alcohol spectrum disorders services in Massachusetts;
- Served as the Training and Technical Assistance lead for Moms Do Care, a statewide multidisciplinary program designed to support pregnant and parenting people impacted by substance use.

IHR shares its expertise with other organizations through training and consultation, supporting them to develop capacity, improve care and cultivate resilient, collaborative teams.

Executive Leadership

Valerie Gold joined the Institute for Health and Recovery (IHR) as executive director on January 1, 2025. Gold works collaboratively with IHR's leadership team which has accomplished many strategic goals, including launching a parenting-focused peer recovery support initiative, transforming IHR's Promise from day treatment to an innovative, flexible continuum of support and strengthening organizational infrastructure.



Valerie Gold

Gold brings more than 25 years of experience, having served in leadership roles with the Massachusetts Department of Children and Families and New York City's Administration for Children's Services, as well as with provider organizations including Eliot Community Human Services and Morgan Memorial Goodwill Industries. As C4 Innovations' director of organizational development and systems change, Gold led the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration's (SAMHSA) Bringing Recovery Supports to Scale Technical Assistance Center Strategy (BRSS TACS), advancing recovery-oriented services and systems nationwide and delivering technical assistance to states, providers and peer-run organizations. Gold has facilitated cross-system collaborations and led teams in developing innovative curricula and programming to support parenting in recovery, youth engagement and development and integration of lived expertise across all aspects of human services work.

SALUTING THE CARING FORCE

Diana Villatoro builds bridges for prospective parents

Diana Villatoro began her role as an adoption social worker with **Bridges Homeward** in April 2024 and quickly established herself as a dedicated and caring clinician with an incredible work ethic. With a master of social work from Boston College, as well as experience as a social worker in a large public school district, Villatoro was well prepared to enter the child welfare field. She shares, "I decided to work in child welfare to support children during the vulnerable periods of their life and help them feel seen, safe and valued."

As an adoption social worker, Villatoro provides case management services for children in foster care who face the greatest barriers to achieving adoption. She assesses children and prospective adoptive parents, provides clinical support to children and their caregivers, and advocates for her clients within the juvenile court system. Villatoro's clients range from toddlers with complex medical and developmental needs, to school-aged children and sibling groups with emotional and behavioral challenges, to teenagers who are facing the possibility of "aging out" of foster care without reliable family connections. All have endured considerable trauma and loss, and they are in need of the sensitive care that Villatoro provides. As a fluent Spanish-speaker, Villatoro also supports Spanish-speaking families as they navigate the child welfare system.

Director of Adoption Susan Rooney describes Villatoro as "a clinician whose compassion for children is evident in all



Diana Villatoro works as an adoption social worker at Bridges Homeward.

that she does. No matter the challenge before her, Diana remains focused on families' strengths and hopeful about their possibilities."

Perhaps most importantly, Villatoro's clients feel seen and supported by her efforts. One pre-adoptive parent writes, "Diana has been a wonderful case worker. She is organized, kind, competent and easy to communicate with. She is a problem solver and when we reach out to her about something she always gets to the bottom of it. We've never had to worry about something being left undone. So far on this journey it has been wonderful to work with Bridges Homeward, thanks to Diana, and we are thankful to have them to rely on."

Diana Capellupo helps participants thrive

Diana Capellupo works hard to ensure that every participant in **Morgan Memorial Goodwill Industries'** day-habilitation program for individuals with developmental disabilities has the chance to learn, grow and become more independent.

As lead developmental specialist at Morgan Memorial Goodwill Industries, she plays a key role in the day-habilitation program, which helps individuals strengthen their skills, build confidence and connect with the community. Capellupo's work centers on making sure participants' experiences are tailored to their unique needs and growth opportunities.

A licensed occupational therapist, Capellupo spends much of her time coordinating care with her colleagues and Goodwill's clinical consultants to align programming with each participant's individual goals. She ensures service plans highlight areas of development and works closely with staff to create support strategies that promote progress and independence. "It's important that everything we do reflects the needs and strengths of the participants we serve, and that we are helping them become more independent," she said.

Capellupo began her career at Goodwill in 2021 as a developmental specialist and advanced last year to her current leadership role. She holds a bachelor's degree in psychology from the University of Massachusetts Dartmouth and a master's degree in occupational therapy from Bay Path University.

In addition to assessments and care coordination, Capellupo designs and leads activities and outings. One recent highlight was a simulated flower shop project where participants role-played — they bought flowers,



Diana Capellupo works at Morgan Memorial Goodwill Industries day-habilitation program.

created floral arrangements and chose someone special to receive them.

"They were practicing so many skills without even realizing it," she said. "Money management, cashier math, fine motor skills, sequencing, and social skills — it was awesome to see them having so much fun while learning."

Neil Wyatt, the manager of the day-habilitation program, says Capellupo's contributions are invaluable: "By keeping everything organized and coordinated, she helps open doors for participants and supports our team in delivering meaningful experiences," he said.

For Capellupo, the work is deeply rewarding: "I love seeing participants accomplish new things and prove to themselves they are rock stars. I already know they are, and I'm so proud of them."

EDITORIAL



William Yelenak
President / Publisher

From State House steps to local stages: The Caring Force Regional Rallies take root across Massachusetts

As we use the pages of *The Provider* this year to travel back to some of our greatest hits and share stories about the creation of our Academy for Learning & Exchange or the signing of Chapter 257 of the Acts of 2008, there's a more recent initiative that I thought of the other day that has had a massive impact for our members and our sector.

And that's our Caring Force Regional Rallies.

When we started The Caring Force (TCF) and held our first rally at the State House in 2012, it was a massive undertaking. We used the Grand Staircase area instead of the Great Hall, and we were way over capacity with nearly 1,000 people in a space that was not meant to hold anywhere near that number. Since then, we've had to be more mindful of space. Even after moving the rally into the Great Hall, attendance had to be limited to 400-500 people, though gold t-shirts can be seen peaking in through every doorway and window.

Time to peel back the curtain a little bit: At the end of each year, The Caring Force has a TCF Coalition Meeting where we bring together our committee members, captains, ambassadors, staff and others who have been engaged in the grassroots advocacy initiative over the past year. During our 2023 debrief, we discussed what new types of events The Caring Force should try in 2024, and we kept coming back to one as our favorite idea: regional rallies for The Caring Force.

But just like many new ideas, we had concerns. Would people come to smaller rallies in local communities versus the State House in Boston? Could we attract legislators to these smaller events for TCF? Where would we hold the rallies if it wasn't under the golden dome of the State House? And, most importantly, would members want to have their employees and consumers attend an event that wasn't at the State House but in their town or nearby?

Two years later, all those questions have been answered. People would come. Legislators would attend. Members brought their employers and consumers. Hotels, colleges and town halls opened their doors to TCF. And our members' employees and consumers? They attended in huge numbers.

Over the past two years, we've run 10 TCF Regional Rallies now across Massachusetts — in Peabody, Taunton, Framingham, Worcester, Westfield and Haverhill. By our estimates, the TCF rallies have attracted more than 2,000 attendees. Senate President Karen Spilka joined the MetroWest Human Services Advocacy Coalition meeting in Framingham and Senate Ways & Means Chairman Michael Rodrigues joined the Center of Hope breakfast in Worcester — two events supported by The Caring Force! And they were two of dozens of legislators who have attended these events and engaged with The Caring Force over the past two years. That doesn't even count those like Rep. Seth Moulton and Sen. Ed Markey who shared videos to be played at the Merrimack Valley Rally and South of Boston Rally, respectively.

When we started planning The Caring Force Regional Rallies, we frankly weren't sure what to expect. But Council members stepped up with ideas and speakers to help make these

events an incredible success. While we initially took the format we've used at the State House — hearing from a few human services workers, maybe a family member, and then a few legislators — each event was unique and different and special in their own ways.

Multiple rallies have included music, including one in the form of an inclusive band and others with a DJ — and wouldn't you know it? A spontaneous dance party broke out after the event with people sharing the dance floor! Another rally featured a state senator breaking out into song and serenading attendees. We've had some where there's an open microphone for attendees to share their thoughts. Some have included award ceremonies. Others have featured tables for presenting organizations to display information and give out swag. At our most recent rally in Westfield, we even raffled off a "baby QT" to those who signed up for The Caring Force!

Just like those working in the field and those receiving services, all The Caring Force Regional Rallies have been different and unique. And that's what makes them amazing.

Our most recent regional rally was at Westfield State University where we held the W. Mass. TCF Rally for a second straight year. Last year, a fire alarm went off in the middle of state Sen. John Velis remarks — and he joked he hoped it wouldn't happen again this year (it didn't!). But when it did in 2024, Sen. Velis and attendees calmly moved the rally to a grassy area outside, and encircled by those in gold TCF t-shirts, he continued discussing the importance of their work.

As the fire alarm stayed silent, we were thrilled to see the biggest impact made by our two speakers from the sector. Rob Wild, a member of Viability's Star Light Clubhouse, spoke about the impact human services made on his life and he now works independently for the Wildflower Alliance — a program of the Western Massachusetts Training Consortium. He was followed by Yamila Sycz, a clinician from the Gándara Center and an immigrant from Argentina, who spoke at length about her personal and professional journey.

She talked about needing to advocate for the children she worked with — and then also hoped that there would be an advocate for human services workers.

"Every day in the community, I try to make an impact on these children's lives, looking at them with eyes full of love and compassion," Sycz said to the nearly 250 in attendance. "But now I'm asking... 'Has anybody seen me... us?' 'Has anybody seen us — professional immigrants — who are willing to serve this community with passion and professionalism?'"

Her words have really stayed with me as The Caring Force Regional Rallies continue to bring together workers, consumers, legislators and other supporters to advocate for more funding for human services and a livable wage for our sector's dedicated workforce. Please consider appointing a Caring Force Captain at your organization to be more engaged with the initiative — and we hope you'll join us at our Coalition meeting in November to help us think about more great ideas to move our human services sector forward.



A Chinese opera mask making workshop was recently held with the nonprofit Chinese Culture Connection (CCC) at two Malden sites that are home to older adults and adults with disabilities. CCC has an ongoing cultural partnership with **Mystic Valley Elder Services (MVES)** and held the mask workshop at MVES' Supportive Housing partner site on Pearl Street. The instructors worked with MVES Resident Services Coordinator Anthony LaFauci to assist residents in painting their own unique masks. CCC also held the workshop at the Heritage Apartments on Pleasant Street. CCC instructor Yihua Jiang, assisted by Ada He, explained the history and significance of the masks. Different colors represent personality traits, so the character's identity is shown through the painting of the mask. Many of the mask designs are inspired by characters from Chinese fairy tales and legends, such as Journey to the West and The Romance of the Three Kingdoms.

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



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Turning unrest into action: The power of us

By Shannon Rudder

We are living in a time of deep unrest.

From our own neighborhoods to our national headlines, the tension is palpable — social division, economic instability and relentless attacks on justice and equity. Across the country and around the world, uncertainty hangs heavy in the air.

And yet, in the face of this storm, I am not discouraged, for I have seen something else just as real, just as powerful: **US.**

At Martin Luther King Jr. Family Services, we witness daily how ordinary people are creating extraordinary impact. Young leaders discovering their voice. Families finding stability. Neighbors rallying to support one another. Each act of courage, compassion and community sends ripples far beyond its starting point. You too can point to ways you are witnessing the resilience of those your organization is proud to serve.

Unrest, when met with courage, becomes a call to action. A call to step deeper into our shared responsibility. A call to BE Love. To BE Change. To BE Determined.

JOIN THE MOVEMENT: THE 2025 SOCIAL JUSTICE IMPACT AWARDS

On Saturday, October 18, 2025, we invite you to stand with us at the 2025 Social Justice Impact Awards, held at Twin Hills Country Club in Longmeadow, MA — as a collective response to the times we’re living in to begin healing in community and get refueled for the work ahead.

Inspired by Dr. King’s enduring words: **“We are determined to work and fight until justice runs down like water and righteousness like a mighty stream.”**

We will honor local champions of justice for their bold work across industries to advance equity across health care, education, housing, business, the arts and more. Each of our 2025 honorees is a reminder that the beloved community isn’t a dream deferred — it is being built, brick by brick, by people just like **US.** Join in celebrating and become inspired by this cohort of remarkable changemakers.

- Rev. Dr. Barbara Headley — Faith-Based Leadership, Zion Community Baptist Church
- Justin Haynes — Impact through Enterprise, JUS10H
- Kali Green — Arts and Cultural Advocacy, Springfield Cultural Partnership
- Sheldon Smith — Architect of Equity and Expression, Make-It Springfield
- Rev. Dr. Terrlyn Curry Avery — Race Relations Leadership, Healing Racism Institute
- Dr. Tyonne Hinson — Health Equity Advocacy, Baystate Health

- Andrew Morehouse & The Food Bank of Western Mass Team — Civic Engagement Champions
- Dawn DiStefano — Equity in Education, Square One
- Icie B. Jones — Trailblazer Lifetime Achievement, Real Estate/Housing
- Maddy Landrau — Equity in Economic Development, MassMutual

SPONSORSHIP: A CHANCE TO LEAD WITH PURPOSE

We invite businesses and organizations to join us as sponsors and social justice champions. Exclusive sponsorship packages offer meaningful branding opportunities while aligning your organization with a mission that matters. Your support will empower conscious leadership, inspire equitable impact and help transform futures across our region.

Why now? Why us? Why you?

In a world that often feels fractured, events like the Social Justice Impact Awards remind us of our shared humanity. They call us to lean into the discomfort of change, to listen deeply and to act boldly. Dr. King’s vision of the beloved community was not utopian — it was actionable. It is rooted in love, justice and the radical belief that we are all interconnected.

In this time of great unrest, I have truly wrestled with my own moral responsibility. You may have too. It’s easy to feel overwhelmed. But when we remember that one act of justice, one gesture of love, one moment of connection can ignite change in our immediate space — we remember our power. As president & CEO of Martin Luther King Jr. Family Services, I am proud to stand alongside our honorees, our team, our partners and our community in this sacred work — they are who encourage me to show up on and in purpose.

Dr. King’s dream was never meant to rest in history books. It was meant to live through our actions, our voices, our leadership. **We are the keepers of Dr. King’s dream.** We are the ones who carry it forward — not in theory, but in truth. Not someday — now. So let this be your moment to stand taller. To speak louder. To move deeper. To become not just a witness to justice — but a co-creator of it. Let us be united in our “determination to fight and work for justice” together.

So, sponsor. Attend. Show up.

Justice is not inevitable — it is intentional; and it begins with **US.** Right here. Right now.

Join us on October 18th to ensure together **the beloved community across our Commonwealth.** Learn more about sponsorship and register for the 2025 Social Justice Awards on www.mlkjrfamily-services.org.

Shannon M. Rudder, MBA is the president & CEO, Martin Luther King Jr. Family Services.

Every life matters: Reflections on suicide prevention across systems of care

By Melinda Matthews

As Suicide Prevention Awareness Month invites renewed attention to a persistent public health crisis, we continue to reflect on how suicide prevention is being integrated — meaningfully and sustainably — into systems of behavioral health care.

At Eliot Community Human Services, we’ve been working since 2019 to adopt and adapt the **Zero Suicide** framework across a broad continuum of services. As many know, Zero Suicide is not a standalone program, but a system-wide commitment to safer, more responsive care. At its core, it challenges us to treat suicide prevention not as the responsibility of individual staff and clinicians, but as an organizational priority and shared practice.

FROM CONCEPT TO CULTURE

Implementing Zero Suicide at scale has involved building infrastructure but also shifting mindset. Over the past several years, we’ve focused on:

- Universal suicide risk screening;
- Collaborative safety planning as a routine element of care;
- Use of suicide-specific interventions, including CAMS and CPT;
- Ongoing training, supervision, and measurement-informed care; and
- Strengthening cross-program communication and accountability

Between 2023 and 2024, our teams delivered over 40,000 suicide-related interventions. While the number is significant, what matters more is what it reflects: an internal culture where suicide prevention is part of everyday care — not siloed or crisis-specific.

A HUMAN LENS

We continue to learn from the experiences of those we serve. One example: a young adult client entered our care following a suicide attempt and a history of trauma. Through coordinated services centered on her voice and choices, and with use of

structured interventions like CAMS, she began to stabilize. Her trajectory reminded our teams of the importance of timely access, cross-functional collaboration, and care that adapts as needs change.

For us, these stories aren’t about showcasing outcomes — they’re about reinforcing the need for systems that are responsive, flexible, and deeply grounded in human dignity.

SHARING PRACTICE, SHAPING INNOVATION

In parallel, Eliot is participating in the **Bipolar Action Network**, a national initiative focused on redesigning care for individuals with bipolar disorder. As a community-based provider, we’re contributing a perspective rooted in real-world service delivery. Our work within the network includes integrating suicide risk screening into prescribing practices — a small but potentially scalable shift that reflects the alignment between Zero Suicide and broader care redesign.

LOOKING AHEAD

Like many organizations in our field, we continue to wrestle with how to deepen and sustain this work. Our current priorities include:

- Expanding access to suicide-specific modalities for youth and young adults;
- Strengthening supervision frameworks across programs;
- Supporting staff well-being as an essential element of safe care; and
- Continuing to adapt national frameworks like Zero Suicide to fit complex, community-based settings

As colleagues across the field know, suicide prevention requires long-term commitment and organizational humility. We share these reflections not as a model, but as part of a shared journey.

Melinda Matthews is the president and CEO at Eliot Community Human Services.



A client and staff member from Eliot’s New River Academy program for youth and young adults stand together. Since 2019, Eliot Community Human Services has adopted the Zero Suicide framework across a broad continuum of services.

Wings for Autism® makes airline travel more accessible to those with disabilities

By Anne-Marie Bajwa

Flying to a vacation destination or visiting distant relatives is a common — and exciting — activity for many families. But when a family member is living with autism, the challenges involved with taking such a trip can seem insurmountable.

Launched in 2011 by the Charles River Center in Needham, Wings for Autism® is designed to ease the stress of flying for children and families with autism. Now in its 15th year, Wings events are held twice a year at Boston Logan International Airport. And since 2023, Worcester Regional Airport has hosted a yearly Wings event, allowing families in central and western Massachusetts access to this often life-changing experience.

With Wings for Autism®, our goal is to simulate the experience of navigating an airport so that airline travel is more accessible to those with disabilities. Families begin their “journey” at the ticket counter, where they

check in, provide identification and receive boarding passes. The security area is next, and families load bags and jackets into bins prior to passing through the full-body scanners. At the designated gate, airline personnel “check” boarding passes before families walk down the jetway. Once on the plane, children and parents can explore the aircraft, sit in seats, listen to announcements over the loudspeaker and visit the cockpit.

To make Wings for Autism® a reality, Charles River Center works closely with its partners, the Massachusetts Port Authority (Massport), the Transportation Safety Administration (TSA) and airlines. Since 2011, hundreds of Massport, TSA and airline personnel have volunteered their time to participate in this important initiative.

The Wings program fills a critical need for families who have a child or adult with autism, as well as developmental or intellectual disabilities. It demystifies the flying experience and allows them to experience an

airport in a safe, supported way. In addition, Wings offers airport staffers insight into the sometimes invisible challenges many families face, thereby fostering greater empathy and understanding.

Participation in Wings programs continues to grow and ever-increasing numbers of families are empowered to experience the joys of airline travel. Since we launched Wings in 2011, 12,000 children and family members have joined us for Wings Boston, with attendance at our April 2024 event breaking records. Now in its third year, Wings Worcester in September attracted more than 250 children and families, double the number who came to the first event in 2023.

The impact of Wings — and its power to make travel more accessible — has spread throughout the United States. Nationwide, Wings for Autism® is modeled at 75 airports. Charles River Center coordinates Wings events in New England, and The Arc of the

United States coordinates Wings events nationally.

In the years I’ve been attending Wings events, I’m gratified to see the progress families make toward realizing their dream of traveling together. Sometimes, the achievement is as great as moving through the airline process without a hiccup. Other times, a family may make it down the jetway, but a child is too fearful to board the plane. And for other families, it takes participating in repeated Wings events for everyone to make it over the plane’s threshold and claim a seat.

With Wings for Autism®, we’re creating travel accessibility pathways for individuals with disabilities both here in New England and across the United States. A journey begins with a single step. I’m grateful that we’re able to help families take that first step, whatever form it takes.

Anne-Marie Bajwa is the president and CEO of the Charles River Center.

Advertising space in *The Provider* for 2025 is available.

THE PROVIDER

Care providers deserve housing affordability
VIEW FROM THE HILL
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Bridges Homeward builds permanency
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Climbing the hill of belonging
EDITORIAL
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THE PROVIDER

Vol. 44 - No. 6 The Newspaper of the Providers' Council June 2023

Hundreds demand livable wages, loan repayment at TCF Rally



SWM budget includes \$173M for Ch. 257

The human services sector will almost certainly receive millions of additional state dollars next year following the early May release of the Senate Ways & Means Committee's FY 24 budget proposal, a \$55.8 billion spending plan.

Just like the budget proposals from Gov. Maura Healey's and the House Ways & Means Committee, the Senate proposed investing \$173 million in the in the Chapter 257 Reserve line item (1509-6903), representing an increase of \$94 million, or nearly 119%, from FY 22. The Council compared the Chapter 257 line item in the FY 22 budget, rather than the FY 22 budget, because the number of Chapter 257 rates reviewed by 626HIS altered in second order line

have all funded the Chapter 257 Reserve at \$173 million. This investment will support increasing the critically low wages for community-based human services workers," said Providers' Council President and CEO Michael Wekes. "As our sector's hiring crisis continues to worsen, pay increases to attract more workers are more important than ever."

The SWM budget proposal included higher funding amounts than the HWM budget proposal for two Department of Children & Families line items: there was a 36.25% increase to DCF Family Reunite Centers and an 8.41% increase in DCF and DTA Related Child Care. However, the SWM proposal decreased funding in second order line

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50TH ANNUAL CONVENTION & EXPO

OCTOBER 6 • MARRIOTT COPLEY PLACE HOTEL

8:00 - 8:45 A.M.	REGISTRATION OPENS & EXPO BEGINS
9:00 - 9:15 A.M.	WELCOME FROM THE COUNCIL
9:15 - 10:00 A.M.	KEYNOTE ADDRESS (Cait Donovan)
10:00 - 10:15 A.M.	VISIT WITH EXHIBITORS
10:15 - 11:15 A.M.	BLOCK A
11:15 - 11:30 A.M.	VISIT WITH EXHIBITORS
11:30 A.M. - 12:30 P.M.	BLOCK B
12:30 - 2:15 P.M.	LUNCHEON & AWARDS CEREMONY
2:15 - 2:30 P.M.	VISIT WITH EXHIBITORS
2:30 - 3:30 P.M.	BLOCK C
3:45 - 5:00 P.M.	CHAIR'S RECEPTION

YOUR DAY AT A GLANCE

A VIEW FROM THE STATE HOUSE

A commentary from a legislator on human services



Massachusetts can't support its residents while leaving its caregivers behind

By Senator Jamie Eldridge

If we truly believe that access to high-quality care is a right, we must also ensure that we guarantee fair pay and dignified working conditions for the people providing that support.

Protecting our most vulnerable requires ensuring fair pay, safe staffing levels and reasonable working conditions for human services professionals. Building a system that truly serves all Massachusetts residents begins with acknowledging its flaws, not only to attract and retain talented workers, but to raise the quality of care itself.

Currently, the health and human services workers employed at community-based human services agencies face a significant pay gap compared to their counterparts employed by the state. More than 160,000 workers across the Commonwealth stand to benefit from closing this disparity. Since my first term in office, supporting our most vulnerable Massachusetts residents has been one of my top legislative priorities. That mission must include valuing the workforce on which our system depends.

An Act relative to a livable wage for human services workers (S.130 | H.223) is taking healthcare access a step further, ensuring that those involved in supporting individuals in community-based settings are valued and compensated better, which benefits everyone involved. This bill establishes a clear mechanism to raise compensation for human services workers by directly addressing the existing salary gaps. At its core, it requires the state to reduce, and ultimately eliminate, the average pay difference between human services employees at community-based organizations and employees performing similar jobs at state-operated human services programs.

We accomplish this by increasing the reimbursement rates paid by state agencies, including the Executive Office of Health and Human Services, the Executive Office of Elder Affairs, and the Department of Housing and Community Development, to community-based human-services providers. Crucially, every dollar of those increased reimbursements must be used to boost wages for all employees, critically, direct care staff who work directly with persons served.

The legislation sets a strict, multi-year schedule for closing the wage gap, with the full disparity to be eliminated by July 1, 2029, and maintained thereafter. Beyond raising pay, the bill includes robust administrative and reporting requirements to ensure transparency and accountability. State agencies will be required to issue annual public reports detailing the size of the current disparity, the annual increases in reimbursement rates needed to meet the schedule, the appropriations required to fund those increases and how rates are being implemented by agency, job description and start date.

Massachusetts' human services system is only as strong as the people who run it. By passing this legislation, we can ensure that those who care for our most vulnerable residents are fairly compensated for their essential work. It's time to match our praise with action and deliver the fair pay that community-based human services workers have long deserved. We owe it to the people who care for us to make this happen.

Senator Jamie Eldridge represents the Middlesex and Worcester district.

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.



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CHAPTER 257: Council gains a major policy win for human services workers

Continued from page 1

in a ceremony on August 4, 2008.

Chapter 257 established a transparent, uniform and evidence-based process for the establishment of rates “which are reasonable and adequate to meet the costs which are incurred by efficiently and economically operated social service program providers.” EOHHS holds sole responsibility for setting reimbursement rates, and it is guided by testimony received during public hearings on each proposed rate.

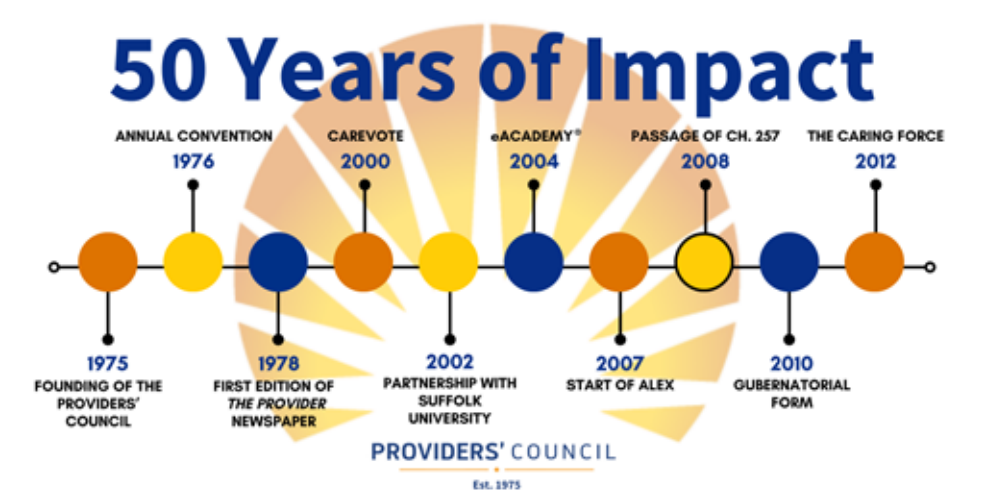
“We have marginalized their lives by paying 21-year-old rates that today do not allow for anything even close to a living wage,” said Bill Taylor, then president & CEO of Advocates, in the summer 2008 edition of *The Provider*.

Chapter 257 mandates a rate review every two years to ensure rates are updated to re-

fect current economic conditions. The state must implement a cost-adjustment factor (CAF) to account for cost-of-living increases. The law also ensures that contracts cover all reasonable costs needed to deliver effective and efficient services.

“We not only hope that our workers finally will receive a living wage, but also that our community-based programs will endure less staff turnover so they can offer a more stable environment for those we serve,” said John Larivee, former president/CEO of Community Resources for Justice and then-board chair of the Providers’ Council, in the Summer 2008 edition of *The Provider*.

Today, the Providers’ Council continues to advocate for increased Chapter 257 funding to ensure fair rates, competitive wages and sustainable human services. For more information on the Council’s advocacy, please contact Caroline O’Neill at coneill@providers.org.



Chapter 257 established a transparent, uniform and evidence-based process for the establishment of rates “which are reasonable and adequate to meet the costs which are incurred by efficiently and economically operated social service program providers.”

HEARING: Council testifies in favor of its livable wage bill

Continued from page 1

bachelor’s level nursing positions; and between 37 and 58 percent for occupational therapists, physical therapists, psychologists and speech-language pathologists.

“Over the past year, so FY ‘25, we hired 146 new employees. We’re an agency that employees about 400 employees. We had about the same number leave,” said Mello. “And we always ask why, why are people leaving. And the top two reasons are personal, and the personal, when we dig a little deeper, it’s just really hard and stressful work; the second reason is they are finding jobs in state agencies and for-profit agencies where they are getting paid more, they are entitled to retirement benefits, etc.”

Gordon, Mello and Evers argued the pay disparity makes it more difficult to recruit and retain employees, and it causes disruptions in providing those receiving services consistent supports as organizations deal with frequent staff turnover.

“We’re touching the lives of about youth and families in the Commonwealth every

single day and we do that with a staff of about 115 when those positions are filled. Unfortunately, we run about 25 to 35 positions vacant, that’s about a 30% vacancy factor,” said Gordon, “When we hire someone, when we retain someone, we are making a promise that that person is going to be there for that youth, for that parent, for that family. And whenever those positions are vacant, we break that promise.”

An act relative to a livable wage for human services workers would eliminate the pay disparity that exists between the salaries of human services workers employed by community-based human service providers and state employees holding similar job titles who perform similar work.

Sponsored by Sen. Cindy Friedman and Rep. Mindy Domb, the legislation outlines a timeline to achieve pay equity, aiming to improve recruitment and retention in a sector that has more than 160,000 jobs. The bill would seek to eliminate the pay disparity between state workers and those at community-based human services nonprofits no later than July 1, 2029.



(From left to right) Tammy Mello, Craig Gordon, and Bill Yelenak stand together after the hearing.

“This inequity undermines the stability of our workforce and threatens the continuity of care for the most vulnerable residents of Massachusetts,” said Evers. “Many leave the field entirely, not because they lack passion or commitment, but because they cannot afford to stay.”

The Senate has 60 days to report on the bill. The House has until the first Wednesday of December to report on the bill.

For more information on the hearing, or questions regarding the bill, please contact Caroline O’Neill at coneill@providers.org.

CONVENTION: Council sells out landmark event

Continued from page 1

Along with delivering a keynote address to a capacity crowd in the Grand Ballroom, Donovan will also host two breakout sessions on burnout during workshop blocks. The smaller sessions will allow attendees to have a more in-depth exploration of the topic with her.

EOHHS Secretary Dr. Kiame Mahaniah will offer attendees a special greeting in the morning. The Council is also bringing back its “Chat with Secretaries and Commissioners” panel series, that will have representatives from across EOHHS and state government.

The Council will also present a record 39 workshops across three workshop blocks — adding an additional session from prior years. This new schedule provides attendees more opportunities to explore different topics connected to the human services sector. Each block will have 13, hour-long experiences.

For the latest information on this year’s Convention and Expo, visit providers.org.

CARING FORCE: Western MA rally caps off statewide series

Continued from page 1

Inc. (BFAIR), Gándara Center, Justice Resource Institute (JRI), Key Program, Inc., Mental Health Association, Inc. (MHA) and Viability. Their collective effort made this gathering a meaningful and unifying moment for the region’s human services community.

Stephanie Steed, president and CEO of 18 Degrees and chair of The Caring Force, was the event’s MC, who delivered a message focused on the unifying theme of the regional rallies: human services workers deserve fair pay and funding.

“Today marks the final stop in our statewide rally series,” said Steed. “At each rally this year, we’ve come together with a clear and united message: human services workers deserve fair pay, fair funding, and the recognition and respect for the essential work they do every single day. And thanks to your advocacy — your calls, your emails, and your presence at events like this — we’ve already made a real difference.”

The rally’s focal point were the powerful speakers who brought the heart of human services to life through their personal stories. Each one underscored the vital role the sector plays in supporting individuals and families across Western MA. To highlighted the urgent need for legislative action, discussing how *An act relative to a student loan repayment program for human services workers* (S.119/H.283) and *An act relative to a livable wage for human services workers* (S.130/H.223) would transform not just their lives, but the well-being of entire communities.

The Caring Force heard from Robert Wild, both a human services worker and a person-served, from Viability and Yamila Sycz, a human services worker from Gándara Center.

Wild, who has been a longtime direct care professional, detailed his struggles with mental health while navigating the sector. In 1999, Wild’s mental health took a downturn, and has since been managing both his work helping others and managing his own mental and emotional needs. His lived experiences

have allowed him to connect with the people he serves on a deeper level.

“Throughout my lived experience I could not avoid relating to the people served on a personal level,” said Wild. “All of my lived experience has benefited me in some way. This includes the time I have been the person being supported.

Due to his mental health struggles, Wild has worked on and off for most of his career, and as such, has struggled financially. He shared his experience with The Caring Force and advocated for the passing of both the Council’s livable wage and student loan repayment bills:

“In this field of work we have many difficulties,” said Wild. “There is legislation to ease the burden of student loans. There is also legislation to give human service employees a living wage. I have struggled to pay bills like everyone. I support the legislative efforts, and I hope both can become law.”

Sycz shared her own journey as a human services worker. As an immigrant from Argentina, Sycz has struggled to attain the licenses she needs to advance her career because of the different requirements for certification in Argentina versus the United States. Sycz shared that this has been challenging not only for her professionally, but also financially. As someone working under a professional visa, Sycz and her family rely on her income, as companions are not allowed to work under a professional visa.

“As much as I would like to study for my master’s degree again to advance in my career, today I have two children and a husband who depend on my salary,” said Sycz. “Our professional visa does not allow companions to work, so my family only depends on my salary, which, thank God, covers our basic needs but it is not enough to plan or expand on other goals, whether it be buying a house, replacing our car, or studying another career. We don’t have possibilities to request student loans, so we must pay for everything out of pocket.”

Without the ability to move forward in her career, Sycz struggles to support her family and attain her professional goals.



Stephanie Steed, chair of The Caring Force and president and CEO of 18 Degrees, accepts a proclamation from the Westfield Mayor McCabe in honor of direct care support professionals week.

“That’s why I’m feeling trapped in this moment, without a clear horizon for my career. I know that I have the ability, the knowledge and experience to keep growing and extending, so I can support the community that I’ve been loving since the moment that I arrived to this country,” said Sycz. “But the barriers to access higher education for mental health workers and the low wages are impacting my professional future, which will also impact on the community we serve.”

These stories serve as powerful reminders that the work of human services professionals goes beyond a job — it is a support system, a personal mission and a pathway to success for so many individuals.

Representative Shirley Arriaga (8th Hampden), Representative Mindy Domb (3rd Hampshire), Representative Carlos González (10th Hampden) and Senator John Velis (Hampden and Hampshire) each delivered a powerful message of support for the sector, stating that

the human service workers in our communities are vitally important to the Commonwealth.

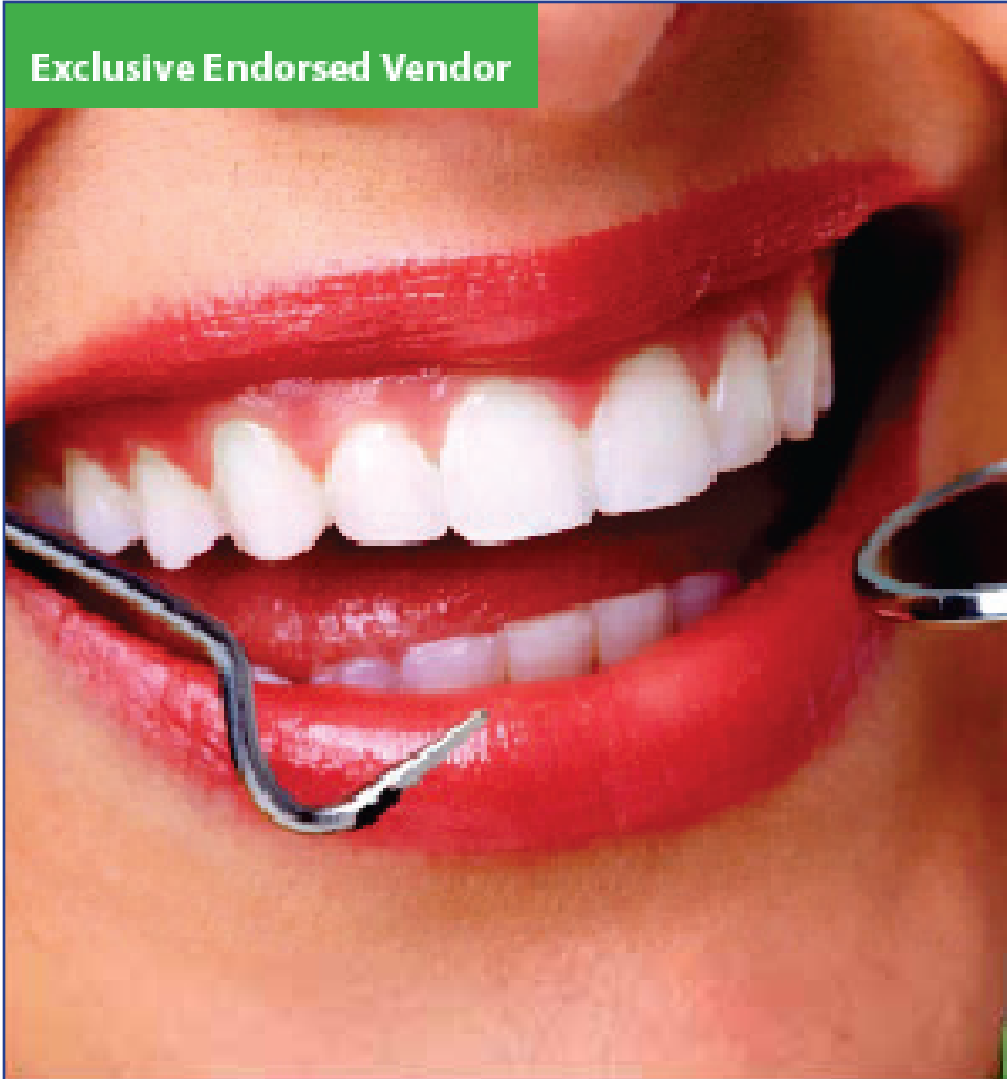
“At the most fundamental level, you are doing something that is really important right now — helping others. In many instances, you are helping out vulnerable human beings, and that’s a beautiful, beautiful thing,” said Velis when addressing the crowd. “I was very open last year with my struggles with addiction and all of the help that I received because people, like yourselves, came up to me and said, ‘hey, can I offer you a hand.’ And that’s my perception of what human services and The Caring Force does, they offer a hand of help.”

The rally wrapped up on a high note, with plenty of smiles, photos, and a lot of dancing, thanks to the music provided by DJ Mark Watkins. This marks the end of the regional rally series this year, but for more information on how to get involved in The Caring Force or any of its 2026 regional rallies, please contact Isabella A. Lee at ilee@providers.org.

CALENDAR OF EVENTS • OCTOBER 2025

What:	Community Webinar: Becoming a Trans-Affirming Therapist – Empathy, Best Practices, and Empowerment	What:	Provider Member Webinar: Advancing Workplace Inclusion Through Neurodiversity Professional Development – What Providers Need to Know
When:	Tuesday, October 7	When:	Tuesday, October 21
Time:	12:00 to 1:30 p.m.	Time:	1:00 to 3:00 p.m.
Presenter:	Charles Strauss, MSW, LICSW	Presenter:	Erik Brenner, Director of Belonging Initiatives and Michael Lewis, Student Support Specialist, College of Engineering, Northeastern University
Where:	Online via Zoom	Where:	Online via Zoom
Cost:	\$15 for NASW members; \$35 for non-members	Cost:	\$35, Event for Council Members Only
What:	Associate Member Training: Suicide Prevention for Military, Veterans, and Law Enforcement through Safer Firearm Storage – Lethal Means Counseling	What:	Free, Members-Only Webinar: Incompass Levels-Up with a Modern ERP System
When:	Friday, October 10	When:	Thursday, October 23
Time:	9:30 a.m. to 3:30 p.m.	Time:	1:00 to 2:00 p.m.
Presenter:	Sgt. Jay Ball, Framingham Police Department; Jennie D'Olympia, PsyD, LMHC; Kevin Lambert, Licensed Firearms Safety Instructor	Presenter:	Robyn Leet, Partner, Business Process Assessments & Attestations, AAFCPAs; Katie Belanger, CPA, Partner, AAFCPAs; and Adam Shuster, CPA, CIA, MBA, Chief Financial Officer, Incompass Human Services
Where:	In-person at William James College	Where:	Online via Zoom
Cost:	\$150; Provider Members registering receive 20% off with the discount code PCOUNCILVETS25	Cost:	Free; Event for Council Provider Members only
What:	Certificate in Supervision Series – Fall 2025	What:	Associate Member Training: Understanding the Complexities of Veteran Substance Use and Mental Health
When:	Wednesdays, October 15, 22, 29, November 5, 12 and 19;	When:	Friday, October 24
Time:	9:00 a.m. to 12:30 p.m.	Time:	12:00 to 1:00 p.m.
Presenter:	Jim Ognibene M.Ed, Visioneer Consulting; Comma Williams, Comma Williams Enterprises; Ginny Maglio, Optimum Development	Presenter:	John Meigs, PsyD, LADC
Where:	Online via Zoom	Where:	Online via Zoom
Cost:	\$700 for Members; \$1,200 for Non-Members	Cost:	\$10; Provider Members attending receive 25% off with the discount code COUNCIL25VETERANS.
What:	Free, Members-Only Webinar: Privacy in Practice – Real-World Data Security for Human Services	What:	Conducting Effective Internal Investigations
When:	Thursday, October 16	When:	Thursday, October 30
Time:	10:00 to 11:00 a.m.	Time:	9:30 a.m. to 3:00 p.m.
Presenter:	Jen Dwight, Senior Client Advisor; Laurie Corkum, COO, Salus	Presenter:	Jean Haertl, CEO, Safety and Respect at Work
Where:	Online via Zoom	Where:	Providers' Council Learning Center (100 Crossing Blvd., Suite 100 Framingham, MA 01702)
Cost:	Free; Event for Council Provider Members only	Cost:	\$300 for Members; \$500 for Non-Members
What:	Success as a New Supervisor – Fall 2025		
When:	Tuesdays, October 21 and 28		
Time:	9:00 a.m. to 12:30 p.m.		
Presenter:	Jim Ognibene, M.Ed, Visioneer Consulting		
Where:	Online via Zoom		
Cost:	\$200 for Members; \$400 for Non-Members		

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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