

THEY DESERVE MORE

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Caregivers for people with disabilities still empty-handed

Illinois lawmakers approved a 75-cent raise, but two months later, no movement from the state on implementation

CHICAGO – Sept. 5, 2017 – A statewide coalition of more than 50 organizations that provide services for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities is urgently calling on the Illinois Department of Human Services and the Illinois Department of Healthcare and Family Services to finalize and implement a 75-cent per hour increase promised to frontline workers who care for people with disabilities in Illinois.

The raise was approved July 6th as part of the state budget, and the money should have appeared in paychecks by the end of August, but the organizations say the state has yet to provide a dime. The delay is worsening an ongoing staffing crisis that advocates say is endangering the safety and wellbeing of people with disabilities who live in group homes, attend day programs and/or live independently across the state.

“By law, this money should have been released weeks ago. We were thankful that the state gave us a small raise – in a longer road to a living wage – but the days keep passing and we have no assurance on those promised dollars,” said Kim Zoeller, president and CEO of the Ray Graham Association, which provides support for people with disabilities, and a lead member of the “They Deserve More” coalition of more than 50 organizations that serve people with disabilities in Illinois. “Our agencies are dangerously understaffed, and our dedicated staff have not seen a raise in nearly a decade. The state needs to release this money now so we can at least hang on to the staff we still have.”

The increase in state funding was meant to raise wages for workers, known as Direct Support Professionals (DSPs), who care for people with developmental disabilities. These workers have been leaving their positions because of poverty-level pay and instead taking better-paying positions in fast food, retail and warehouses. The low wages and staffing crisis are the product of chronic underfunding of community based services that has consistently ranked Illinois 47th in the nation for its spending commitment to people with developmental disabilities.

In July, when state lawmakers passed a budget after an historic impasse, they included funding to increase wages that have started on average at \$9.35 per hour. It was the first raise in nine years, and far less than what is required to attract and retain a skilled workforce and begin to reverse the statewide staffing shortage. This unprecedented delay by state agencies has left many workers wondering if they will ever see their money.

“It’s just a 75-cent raise but it would make a big difference to me -- I’m depending on that money to buy my groceries and put gas in my car,” said Shalon Williams, 43, who works full time in a group home in Villa Park and who regularly works 65 hours a week so she can pay her rent. Still, she has had to turn to a public program for help with her heat and light bills. “Do you know when the money will come through?”

“We can’t find a day program for our son, David, because programs can’t find enough workers. Who wants to manage complex and challenging behaviors and do the hard work of helping people with major physical needs for \$10 per hour?” said Lea Anne Howell, of Glen Ellyn, whose 22-year-old son, David, is on the autism spectrum. “The raise approved in July wasn’t enough, but it was a start and it gave us hope. Now we worry that it was an empty promise.”

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