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Not simply Help Wanted - but Help Needed

By: Michael Weekes

The community-based human services sector in Massachusetts – one of the largest segments of our state’s nonprofit community – is in the midst of a workforce crisis. And unfortunately, this isn’t just a concern for our state or our sector – but it’s a growing crisis for many employers throughout the United States, particularly those reliant on a large and educated workforce to provide care or deliver services.

According to the latest data from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics’ [Job Openings and Labor Turnover Summary](#), the number of open jobs in the United States just set another all-time record, eclipsing 10.9 million unfilled jobs. People who quit their jobs rose to 4.0 million. Meanwhile, layoffs dipped to near a record low at just 1.5 million.

Some sectors have increased starting pay to attract workers to jobs, often passing the cost of doing so onto consumers – charging more for a large coffee, cheeseburger, utilities, groceries, or other products and services. Our organizations, however, operate on fixed contracts with the state as the primary funder, and they cannot obtain a higher reimbursement to reflect the increased cost of the services they provide or raise to increasing market-level wages for workers.

So what's the result?

The Boston Globe looked at the negative consequences on the public in a story entitled, [Human services agencies face staffing crisis, delaying services for those in need](#). A lack of workers at a take-out restaurant might mean the consumer has to wait a little longer to get their lobster roll, ice cream, etc. But a lack of human services workers can put lives and families at risk if people urgently needing vital support cannot access essential services. If the helpers aren't there to help, then essential care is delayed or even denied, compromising health and safety. The consequences can be dire.

The *Globe* story told the often-familiar narrative of workers who left human services for a better paying job, and clients with either disabilities, mental health, and/or substance misuse issues who were unable to receive support. We aren't just saying it's *Help Wanted* in our sector – it's *Help Needed*.

The workforce crisis in our sector isn't new, but it's certainly been exacerbated by the pandemic. A 2019 report commissioned by the Providers' Council and done by the University of Massachusetts Donahue Institute and the Public Policy Center at UMass Dartmouth – [Health through Human Services](#) – discusses some of the major issues. Workers in the sector who care for individuals with disabilities in group homes can vary between \$14 and \$17 an hour. And while median wages in the Massachusetts human services sector are slightly more than \$27,000, wages for all other industries in Massachusetts are \$40,500.

Human services organizations had been competing for talented workers with hospitals and state-operated human services programs for many years.

Unfortunately, due to the pandemic and stagnant salaries, we're now competing with Amazon, Stop & Shop, Target, Dunkin' Donuts and others. Workers in the community-based human services sector need higher salaries, commensurate with the essential work that they are doing, and right now, fixed contracts don't allow employers to pay employees a livable wage or befitting their incredible mission of improving lives.

The Providers' Council – in working with a group of human services membership associations known as *The Collaborative* – hopes to change that. Weekly discussions with the Massachusetts Executive Office of Health and Human Services have produced some positive results over the last 18 months. For instance, the state has

increased benchmark salaries for human services workers and, in a move nonprofits elsewhere can promote, made investments of millions of dollars in one-time funding available for worker compensation increases during certain months of the pandemic. While the funding has helped community-based organizations stem the tide of mass resignations, we know more can – and must – be done.

[The Providers' Council has joined with The Collaborative in requesting Massachusetts use some of its more than \\$5 billion in American Rescue Plan Act \(ARPA\) funds to support the community-based human services workforce.](#) Specifically, our request seeks:

- \$174 million annually for five years to be used to help organizations recruit and retain workers, particularly in high-turnover jobs like direct care staff, nurses, and clinicians;
- \$27 million for a student loan repayment program to incentivize people to join or remain in the sector and help them pay back student loans; and
- \$250,000 to fund a marketing campaign designed to attract unemployed or underemployed people to careers in the human services sector.

And while this is our request in Massachusetts, we know that human services organizations and nonprofits across the country are requesting some of their state's ARPA funds to help rebuild these sectors that have been so ravaged by COVID-19 and impacted by the labor shortages we're hearing about across the country. Our colleague state associations of nonprofits elsewhere continue to meet with state administrators and elected officials to discuss the importance of our sector being able to hire these essential workers for the public. A strong human services sector is needed to build healthy communities across our Commonwealth and our nation.

While it remains *Help Wanted* in many fields, it really is *Help Needed* for community-based human services organizations in Massachusetts and elsewhere. The health and well-being of residents across the United States depends on finding and developing talented staff to provide essential care to all those in need.

Michael Weekes is the president/CEO of the [Providers' Council](#), Massachusetts' largest association of community-based human services organizations and a former board member and chair of the National Council of Nonprofits.

For more information about this national crisis, see:

- Heather Long, [September jobs report shows unemployed are still struggling with child care and reluctant to return to low-paying jobs](#), *Washington Post*, Oct. 8, 2021 (“America’s unemployed are still struggling with child-care and health issues, and they are reluctant to return to jobs they see as unsafe or undercompensated. ... [L]ast month marked the weakest hiring this year, and an alarming number of women had to stop working again to deal with unstable school and child-care situations.”).
- Jason DeParle, [Child Care Has High Costs for Parents, Low Wages for Staff](#), *New York Times*, Oct. 9, 2021 (“[M]any parents spend more for care than they do for mortgages, yet teachers get paid like fast food workers and centers cannot hire enough staff. ... The Treasury Department reported last month that the average cost of care is roughly \$10,000 a year per child and consumes about 13 percent of family income, nearly twice what the government considers affordable. At the same time, it noted the average teacher earns about \$24,000 a year, many live in poverty, and nearly half receive some public assistance.”).