

Put money into staff who enrich the lives of New York's most susceptible: Editorial

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A staffing crisis looms for nonprofits that serve people with disabilities. Jobs are tough to fill and turnover rates are high for Direct Service Professionals, the first-line care workers who help manage and support the lives of New Yorkers with intellectual and developmental disabilities. There's been progress — the governor included raises in his budget for 2018 to help bump up long-stagnant DSP wages, which hover close to minimum wage. That agreement, reached after heavy lobbying under the banner #bFair2DirectCare, came with a pledge for incremental funding increases for future years.

But the future is now. The state has to find a way to pay DSPs what they are worth, so compassionate and talented people stay in the field and our most vulnerable receive the kind of care that enhances and enriches their lives. Because nonprofits are reimbursed with state money (some passed through from the feds), it's the state that determines worker pay.

DSP pay increases were shunted most years in the last decade. After letter-writing campaigns, lobbying and rallies around the state, Cuomo included funding for DSP pay increases in the 2017-2018 budget: \$55 million will be released Jan. 1, 2018, to boost nonprofit wage reimbursement, with another \$55 million in April. Cuomo also set out future increases over the next six years.

But that's not fast enough to stem a growing worker shortage that already has some nonprofits cutting back on programs that they can't staff. Advocates are asking that the same amount be allocated, but over the next three years. That's the best way the state can help reduce DSP turnover and ensure quality care.

Nonprofits are struggling to compete for workers in a strong economy with plentiful jobs. Right now, and especially as New York's minimum wage increases, a worker is offered near equivalent pay for stocking shelves as for cleaning, feeding and caring for fragile people.

A \$15 minimum hourly wage will be reached in New York City by the end of 2019; Westchester, Nassau and Suffolk counties reach \$15 by the end of 2021; Rockland, Putnam and the rest of the state will see minimum wages hit \$12.50 by the end of 2020, and then rise to \$15 over ensuing years with hikes tied to general economic growth.

At the end of this year, minimum wage reaches \$13 for large New York City employers and \$12 for small employers; in Westchester minimum wage hits \$11 at the end of this year; for the rest of the state, it reaches \$10.40 on Dec. 31.

The average DSP salary was \$10.91.

Advocates say they need to be able to offer workers something closer to a living wage, calculated as roughly \$17.72 downstate and \$15.54 elsewhere.

The DSP job vacancy rate in New York was 11 percent as of July 2016; now agencies are talking about a 30 percent staff shortage.

We're aware that this will be a challenging budget year for New York. A deficit looms. Federal budgeting and pass-through funding for states remain up in the air. But quality care for our most vulnerable needs to be a priority. New York needs to ensure fair pay for DSPs, now.