

NYS Braces For New Campaign to Support Investments in Human Services Sector

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Observing New York state's nonprofit human services employees have been unaddressed for more than a decade, the state's behavioral health provider community and mental health advocates are waging an all-out attack to convince the state legislature and the governor to invest in across-the-board increases for the field.

The state's budget was signed in April, at which time Gov. Andrew Cuomo and the state legislature approved only a portion of the cost-of-living adjustment (COLA) increase for the human services workforce.

"We in New York state endeavor to try to get COLA for the entire human sector in the past budget, which was signed April 1," Glenn Liebman, CEO of the Mental Health Association in New York State, told MHW. The human services sector is inclusive of all nonprofits, including mental health, substance use, developmental disabilities, child welfare, foster care, domestic violence and food pantries, among others, Liebman said.

Technically, the COLA has been in statute for the last 10 years, but it was only fully funded the first year, explained Liebman, adding that every year since then it has been deferred. "This past budget was the first time the sector has rallied together in support of a COLA," Liebman said. Liebman said he and other advocates are speaking with "one voice" about the need for a COLA based on the consumer price index of 2.9 percent.

COLA funding offers providers some flexibility, said Liebman. "It can be used for other purposes, such as helping pay the cost of rising health insurance or other like-minded expenses," he said.

Some Success, More Needed

"We partially succeeded — we didn't receive an across-the-board increase for the entire human services sector," said Harvey Rosenthal, CEO for the New York Association of Psychiatric Rehabilitation Services.

The increases already approved will begin to be implemented in January 2020, he said. Once fully implemented, the result will be 4 percent for direct care workers and 2 percent for clinical workers who represent the New York Office of Mental Health, the New York State Office of Alcoholism and Substance Abuse Services and developmental disability organizations.

"This has been a very tough budget environment," said Rosenthal. "We're grateful to get that increase, but we have to go the full distance."

The executive director at the New York State Council for Community Behavioral Healthcare concurs with Liebman and Rosenthal that more resources are urgently needed. "For too long, the behavioral health workforce and the human services sector [overall] have gone without a meaningful infusion of resources for recruiting, retaining and attracting a qualified staff," Lauri Cole told MHW.

COLA is the preferred vehicle for aiding the workforce, and one that touches direct care staff, and sometimes lower-paid staff, as well as supervisors, she said. For eight of the last 10 years, Governor Cuomo has deferred the statutory cost-of-living adjustment for nonprofit human services employees, and in doing so the executive branch has withheld an estimated \$707

million from worker salaries and benefits, infrastructure improvements and ever-increasing operating expenses, Cole said.

A 2.9 percent COLA is essential to help New York to address shocking increases in deaths due to opioid use and suicide, including a growing number of attempts among children under 10 years old, and steadily mounting rates of homelessness and incarceration, according to a COLA fact sheet. The human services providers are fundamental to New York state: the sector makes up 20 percent of New York's workforce and delivers services to 2.5 million people annually.

The nonprofit human services workforce is, in effect, an indirect government workforce. Females make up more than 80 percent of the human services sector. The state and its local governments have turned to upward of 500 nonprofit organizations to provide these critical services, working in contracts for example with the following state agencies to serve the most vulnerable New Yorkers:

- Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance.
- Office of Children and Family Services.
- Office for People with Developmental Disabilities.
- Office for the Aging.
- Office of Mental Health.
- Office of Alcoholism and Substance Abuse Services.
- Department of Health

Workforce Survey

"The NYS Council and many other behavioral health associations recently distributed a survey to our combined members across New York state," said Cole. The survey included 126 agencies, representing 14,499 workers who responded from virtually every county in New York state, she said.

According to the survey, the statewide breakdown of turnover rates and vacancy rates were 34 percent and 14 percent respectively. The behavioral health turnover rate and vacancy rates are real and impactful to the hundreds of thousands of New Yorkers seeking access to care in the mental health and addictions system of care, noted Cole.

Cole added, "We completely support initiatives to fund minimum wage and other direct care commitments, but nonprofits must also be able to keep up competitive salaries to ensure access to and continuity of care for New Yorkers seeking their assistance."

The tangible impact of high turnover includes disruption in services, waitlists and staff burnout, the survey indicated.

"This year's fight is for the human services sector as a whole," Cole said. The fight will be for appropriate salaries, she noted, adding that human services agencies are really the backbone of the health care industry. There are many adults and children across the state in need of some sort of services, she said. "We need to have an adequately trained workforce to serve them," Cole said. She added, "We're going to be louder and more compelling and aggressive in our efforts to secure resources agencies need to staff our programs adequately."

Rosenthal added that plans are already underway to speak to advisors and officials regarding these important increases. "Our goal is to come back and get an across-the-board increase for the entire human services sector," he said. A somewhat new approach in this effort is to get together much earlier this year to seek investments in this field for the FY 2020–21 budget, Rosenthal noted.