

\$1,000 retention bonuses on the table as Minnesota lawmakers consider a plan to hang onto caregivers

Minnesota Senate Republicans on Thursday proposed a \$322 million plan to recruit new caregivers and to keep ones currently working around the state. The push comes as long-term care and group home providers say they're struggling to maintain a workforce.



Kathleen Unger (left) of Brimson works with Debbie Merrick to learn the proper technique for helping a person get into and out of bed without straining. Unger has considerable experience as a caregiver but said she found the class valuable as a refresher course. Bob King / rking@duluthnews.com

By [Dana Ferguson](#)

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ST. PAUL — Minnesota Senate Republicans on Thursday, Feb. 17, introduced a \$322 million plan to help stabilize the state's caregiver workforce after the COVID-19 dealt a blow to staffing at nursing homes and group home facilities around the state.

Long-term care industry leaders have said they face a workforce shortage of 23,000 or roughly 20% of the staff needed to fill positions around the state. And delays to providing additional state and federal aid are causing "irreparable harm" to the industry, caregivers said Thursday.

Under the proposal, current workers at care facilities would receive a \$1,000 retention bonus, and new hires would receive \$750 for signing on along with another \$750 if they stayed in their positions for six months. Those interested in becoming caregivers could also get \$1,500 to get certified and to purchase uniforms and other materials.

"It is big money because we care. Minnesota cares," Sen. Jim Abeler, R-Anoka, said. "It's a matter of hoping they'll be drawn in. But without this, they're not coming."

Lawmakers said they hoped to bring on 20,000 new employees with the new initiative and to keep on emergency staffing teams to prevent any lapse in care for residents. Even prior to the pandemic, the long-term care industry reported a shortage of caregivers. But the pandemic, coupled with a broader workforce shortage in Minnesota, worsened conditions.

In some facilities, caregivers worked multiple overtime shifts each week, and workers in other positions worked direct care shifts. For a handful, the shortages proved too much to overcome and they closed their doors for good, leaving communities with limited options for Minnesotans requiring long-term care services.

"Every day that we wait is a day someone quits and never comes back," Mount Olivet Rolling Acres Program Lead Christina Kurschner, said. Rolling Acres offers services to people with intellectual and developmental disabilities.

Christina Kurschner, a program lead at Mount Olivet Rolling Acres, on Thursday, Feb. 17, 2022, speaks to reporters at the Minnesota Capitol about staffing challenges in Minnesota group homes and adult day care settings.

Dana Ferguson / Forum News Service

The senators said the proposal would also push up the date when rates for disability care services is set to take effect, getting funds out to group homes sooner to help them recruit and retain

caregivers. Gov. Tim Walz has put forward a similar but smaller package to assist nursing home and group care settings in recruiting and retaining caregivers and Democrats who lead the Minnesota House of Representatives have also said it would be a priority for them, along with updating federal reimbursement rates for the providers.

Lawmakers are still in discussions about how to send out [\\$250 million or more in hero pay](#) for front-line workers who remained on the job during the pandemic. Sen. Karin Housley, R-Stillwater, said the discussion about recruiting and retaining care employees was separate, but employees that worked in person at the outset of the pandemic and who stay on the job into 2022 could be eligible for both benefits.

Any proposal would have to pass both chambers and be signed into law by the governor before it could take effect. So far, the proposal has advanced through a Senate committee.

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