

## **NYS Direct Care Workforce to Receive Long-Overdue Wage Hike**

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Members of the mental health advocacy and disability communities in New York State are breathing a sigh of relief following an announcement last month that Gov. Andrew Cuomo has approved a wage increase in the state budget for community direct care workers beginning in January 2018. The move, say observers, will certainly help with recruitment and retention efforts.

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Starting Jan. 1, 2018, the direct care workforce will receive a 3.25 percent salary increase. The community workers will receive another 3.25 percent increase in April 2018, representing a total 6.5 percent increase. Starting at the beginning of FY 2018, the New York State Office of Mental Health (OMH) clinical staff will receive a 3.25 percent increase.

More than 700 mental health advocates, providers, nonprofit agency managers and consumers with serious mental health conditions and their families descended on the state Capitol Feb. 28 calling on the governor and state lawmakers to provide funding for housing and workforce investments (see *MHW*, March 6).

About 100,000 direct care workers support 130,000 New Yorkers with developmental disabilities 24 hours a day, 365 days a year, according to the campaign's Facebook page.

A coalition of statewide and local organizations representing nonprofit providers, direct care workers, and self-advocates and their families launched the bFair2DirectCare campaign to support their efforts. Advocates had called on the Cuomo administration for \$28 million to address the high staff turnover rates in OMH housing programs.

The 11-member coalition of mental health and alcohol and substance abuse groups was instrumental in securing the funding, said Glenn Liebman, CEO of the Mental Health Association in New York State (MHANYS). The wage increase was long overdue, he said. "This will be significant," Liebman

told *MHW*. "It will incentivize people who work in direct care to come into our field."

MHANYs supported the increase along with the New York Association of Psychiatric Rehabilitation Services (NYAPRS) and the National Alliance on Mental Illness, said Liebman. He noted that many of the direct care staff represented not just housing programs but other community programs as well. "Everybody is speaking with the same voice," he added. A well-compensated workforce can help with recruitment and retention, he said. "We are overall very pleased with how negotiations worked, driven by the campaign advocates conducted in the field," Liebman said.

### **Relationships Important**

People with disabilities served by community nonprofit staff in the state are dependent on the relationships they have forged with that staff, said Harvey Rosenthal, NYAPRS executive director. Hope and trust are promoted with this type of relationship, Rosenthal told *MHW*. "It is key to our work," he said. "We need to keep those relationships (in place)." There had been concerns about the nearly 80 percent staff turnover rates due to the low salaries, he said.

The state's direct care staff represented housing and other community mental health programs, including rehabilitation, treatment and peer support, he said. "It runs the gamut," he noted.

Rosenthal added, "This was an important message by the governor and the legislature. This is an [acknowledgment that] the community mental health workforce matters and is deserving. It's a demonstration of their value. Our workforce is no less dedicated, and the people we serve are no less deserving."

There had been other budget wins, said Rosenthal, most notably raising the age of criminal responsibility to 18 and ensuring that youth are treated in an age-appropriate manner. The move is landmark around the country, said Rosenthal. Youth will no longer be housed in the same facility with adults, he said. High rates of sex abuse and youth suicides were occurring, Rosenthal said.

"We're really thrilled," said Rosenthal. The budget funding provides a real care package for community staff and supports important criminal justice advances, he said.