

April 8, 2019

See attached addresses:

Address

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Dear _____,

I am contacting you because you serve on the House Appropriations Subcommittee overseeing the budget for the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services. I am advocating for direct care staff working in the mental health system throughout Michigan. I work for a non-profit organization in Kalamazoo that employs about 430 staff. Roughly 375 of us are categorized as direct care workers. We are currently 64 staff short of being fully staffed and in today's employment market we cannot recruit the number of quality staff we need in order to serve a vulnerable population. The primary barrier we face in our ability to both recruit and retain direct care workers is low wages.

Due to our staffing shortage in 2017 we had to terminate services to 31 consumers and required an additional 9 consumers to move from their own home to another in order to continue receiving services. Forty lives were affected in 2017 and there may be more this year.

Our staff are burning out because we have to work so many overtime hours as a result of being short staffed. Invariably, when staff get burned out they quit, creating a vicious cycle of less than adequate staffing and frequent crises.

The direct care workforce represents the backbone of the mental health system, and are projected to be one of the largest US occupational groups by 2020. The direct care staff that we employ are responsible for caring for those with the most severe disabilities in our system. We provide intimate physical care, we literally deal with life and death decisions, we deal with highly aggressive individuals who cannot express themselves in other ways - and we often live in poverty.

Direct care staff are the infrastructure of the mental health system and that component of the system of care is crumbling. We cannot fully care for those for whom we are currently responsible and we do not have the capacity to respond to the needs of the older children and individuals with more complex medical and behavioral needs coming into the mental health system. All of us collectively in the State of Michigan need to invest in staff if those in need of supports are to have a good quality of life. Nonprofit providers need to – at the very least - be in a competitive position with entry level employers like McDonald's, Costco, and Target - all of whom have publicly pledged to raise their start wages to a minimum of \$12.00 or higher. We also need a strong benefits package in order to stay in this workforce.

Michigan's hourly minimum wage is \$9.45 and will increase to \$9.65 in January 1, 2020. The Section 1009 Report, developed at the directive of our State Legislature in the FY 2015-16 State Budget and designed to create a set of recommendations regarding the direct care workforce shortage crisis, calls for a starting wage of \$2.00 per hour above the minimum wage – or \$11.45 per hour this calendar year. We are a full \$1.00 per hour short of meeting that recommendation.

Last year the Legislature partially funded a \$0.25 per hour wage increase for direct care staff effective April 1, 2019 and required providers to make up the difference for the ancillary costs not included in the State's formula. This, of course, amounted to an unfunded mandate for the agency we work for. The Legislature is now considering a \$0.50 per hour increase for direct care staff and again not providing the full funding. Still, we greatly appreciate this consideration AND ask that you support this increase in the House of Representatives budget.

Thank you for your consideration of this important issue and your strong interest in the quality of life for people supported by Michigan's mental health system.

Sincerely,

Cc: Representative Brandt Iden
Representative Matt Hall
Representative Jon Hoadley
Representative Beth Griffin