

# DiGravio, Weekes and Blumenthal: Human service workers deserve pay increase

**By Vicker DiGravio, Michael Weekes and Gary Blumenthal/ Guest columnists**

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Consider the heart-wrenching story of Claire Petrillo of Haverhill, an outreach worker at Vinfen, one of the state's leading human service providers. Petrillo has dedicated her life to caring for some of the state's most vulnerable residents because she "loves helping people."

But sticking to her passion has come at a cost - literally. Petrillo and 31,500 other direct care workers like her are among the lowest paid employees in the Commonwealth, often earning less than \$12/hour while performing some of the most demanding jobs in the state.

To add insult to injury, these workers have not received even a basic cost-of-living adjustment to their salaries since fiscal year 2008, despite having to deal with the rising costs of shelter, food and health care. It's enough to make these dedicated caregivers reconsider their career decisions and that would be a tragedy for the Commonwealth on many levels.

Today, state lawmakers have an opportunity to help these low-paid employees. By including a \$28 million Salary Reserve in a pending supplemental budget bill, the Legislature can send an important message to an entire sector - and the individuals working in it - that their many contributions are greatly valued. The Salary Reserve would provide a modest increase of 43 cents an hour for those making under \$40,000 a year; that's nearly \$900 per year, which means so much to tens of thousands of families.

Passing a Salary Reserve is simply a matter of fairness. People employed directly by the state who perform jobs comparable to human service workers have received state-funded salary adjustments during the same time period. In June, as Massachusetts was still in the haze of the fiscal crisis, more than 4,000 of the state's executive branch managers received 3 percent increases, despite the ongoing budget challenges.

As the economy continues to sputter, demand for human services remains frighteningly high, and mental health issues, for example, often present themselves more profoundly. The sector's workers are continually being asked to take on increasingly complex challenges and they continue to provide high quality services to our state's most vulnerable residents.

Earlier this month, more than 130 business leaders and professionals wrote an impassioned letter to the governor and legislative leaders in support of funding the Salary Reserve. Family Service of Greater Boston President and CEO Randal Rucker was blunt about what is at stake.

"Having yet another year of no salary reserve for this critical workforce is akin to taking a sledgehammer to the foundation of a house," Rucker said.

Without a doubt, state leaders are facing an impossible task. The fiscal crisis over the last four years has left the Commonwealth with insufficient resources to meet its needs, and we appreciate the Legislature's efforts to maintain the human service safety net.

We are grateful that many in the State House understand that adults, elders and children with disabilities, mental health issues and other medical challenges must not be left alone in these trying times. When Rep. Ruth Balser of Newton first proposed including the Salary Reserve in the budget in April, she commented that "a strong human service sector is part of a strong economy." Indeed, thousands of people are able to keep their jobs because a family member receives services from the state's human service sector. Otherwise, those individuals may have to leave their job to care for their loved one. Indeed, funding the Salary Reserve is money well spent.

Rep. Carlos Henriquez of Roxbury knows the plight of human service workers all too well. Two years prior to being elected, Henriquez was a youth worker in the field, making annual salaries of \$16,000 and \$21,000 respectively, he recalled recently. "I know what it means to be in love with the work that you do, and that it means peanut butter and jelly sandwiches every night," Henriquez said at a Suffolk County legislative forum in March.

Petrillo and her four children have a similar struggle making ends meet. It was one year ago that Petrillo's husband, Pat, was deployed to Iraq, leaving her by herself to care for her kids. Unable to make ends meet on her human services salary, she was left with no choice but to move her family into her parents' house. "It makes me feel like less of a mother that I can't provide for them," she said at the time.

Last month, Petrillo celebrated her husband's safe return from his yearlong overseas deployment. It was a joyous occasion to be sure, but lingering questions remain: When Pat finishes active duty, how will they and their children receive healthcare? On her salary, she said, she can't afford it.

For the sake of the Petrillo family and tens of thousands like them in the Commonwealth who care for our most vulnerable residents, please ask your legislator to support a Salary Reserve in the supplemental budget.

*The authors are the presidents and CEOs of the state's leading human services trade associations; Vicker DiGravio for the Association for Behavioral Healthcare, Michael Weekes for the Providers' Council and Gary Blumenthal for the Association of Developmental Disabilities Providers.*

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