

STATE HOUSE

NEWS SERVICE

ENTHUSIASM, WORRY OVER UNION HOME HEALTH CARE WORKER PROPOSAL

By Catherine Williams
STATE HOUSE NEWS SERVICE

STATE HOUSE, BOSTON, APRIL 1, 2008-A proposal to increase wages and offer paid days off and state-sponsored health benefits for home health care workers won loud support at the State House on Tuesday but skeptics worry the plan will cost too much.

With demand for health care services expected to grow along with the swelling numbers of aging Baby Boomers, advocates of the measure say the proposal would slow the extreme turnover of workers jumping to higher-paying retail or restaurant jobs. Advocates say inconsistent care is a hardship for elderly and disabled patients, who need help with cleaning, bathing and cooking.

Republican Minority Leader Rep. Brad Jones (R- No. Reading) expressed concern over adding costs to a state budget with a \$1.3 billion budget gap. Jones said he was concerned that offering state-sponsored health insurance to contracted home health care workers might force the state to open the practice up to a wider group of workers. Jones also said he wondered if the plan would make the workers eligible for state pension benefits.

“There are some tremendous questions here that need to be addressed,” said Jones, who said he also wanted to know how much the increases would cost the state.

Representatives of 1199SEIU support bumping up hourly wages from \$10.84 to \$12, creating a health care benefit paid for by the commonwealth and locking in five paid days off for 22,000 workers. The union hopes to wrap up contract negotiations with the Personal Care Attendant Quality Home Care Workforce Council by early summer, said Mike Fadel, executive vice present of 1199SEIU.

Fadel told the News Service the health care coverage proposal “shifts costs” from one state purse to another and wouldn’t increase costs significantly. “The state is already paying it under a different bucket,” said Fadel, who added workers are already covered by state subsidized programs including MassHealth and Commonwealth Care. The proposal would offer insurance benefits to roughly 11,000 workers who work 20 hours or

more per week. He said the union is waiting for detailed benefit cost estimates from the council.

Celia Wcislo, vice president of 1199SEIU, told the News Service available health insurance coverage would move workers out of MassHealth to state subsidized Commonwealth Care plans or to private insurance. Asked about how the wage increases for the workers would impact overall health care system funding, Wcislo said, "Every time wages go up, it pulls money out of the system."

"This is a hard year for money but he [Gov. Deval Patrick] should be willing to help the least of us," said Wcislo, who also serves on the Commonwealth Health Insurance Connector Authority.

According to 1199SEIU, 40 to 60 percent of home care workers leave the job every year due to low wages and a lack of benefits. Hundreds of union supporters swayed to choir music and clapped inflatable white noisemaker batons beneath the Grand Staircase during a Tuesday afternoon rally.

Fall River resident Lisa Kelliher said she feeds and bathes and monitors medications for elderly and disabled patients. Kelliher said she is fighting a second bout of cancer. Both she and her patients suffer when she is sick or in the hospital. The lack of paid time off and health insurance is a burden, she said.

"This isn't just about us, it's about them too," said Kelliher, who has served as a health care worker for 28 years.

Somerville resident Keith Jones, who has cerebral palsy, spoke to the crowd from his wheelchair and said home health care workers help him cook and keep his house clean. Make no mistake about it we're not making unreasonable requests," said Jones. Jones appealed to lawmakers to support the wage increases and represent all constituents and not just those who can jump higher or run faster.

Legislators including Public Health Committee Vice-chair Rep. Alice Wolf (D-Cambridge) and Sen. Robert O'Leary (D-Barnstable) attended the event. House Speaker Salvatore DiMasi was scheduled to attend but cancelled his appearance due to a last-minute scheduling conflict, said Fadel.

In 2006, lawmakers overrode a veto by former Gov. Mitt Romney allowing the workers to form a union to negotiate pay rates with the state. Romney argued against the measure because he said it would create an unnecessary bureaucracy and increase costs to the state.

The nine-member council is chaired by Jean McGuire, assistant secretary of health and human services and includes George Noel, director of labor. The council's next meeting is scheduled for April 8.

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