

# 'This is tragic': Mass exodus of human services workers leaves industry in shambles

The whiteboard displays a handwritten schedule for the week of 3/15 to 3/18. The schedule is organized by day and lists various activities with associated dates and times.

Wednesday 3/15	Thursday 3/17	Friday 3/18
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By **CAMERON MORSBERGER** | [cmorsberger@lowellsun.com](mailto:cmorsberger@lowellsun.com) | Lowell

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The Massachusetts state government allocates about \$230 million each year to social service providers, which provide support to health care and group home workers, aides, therapists and other specialists.

But with inflation, increased interest in hybrid work, and small wages, a great number of people are quitting their jobs for the retail or food industry. And it's causing a workforce crisis that some warn may destroy the human services field entirely.

Chris Tuttle, CEO and president of health provider Bridgewell, said the severe lack of funding has threatened to shut down some of its services. Bridgewell has more than 100 programs across eastern Massachusetts, serving 6,500 people each year in group homes, habilitation programs and mental health clinics in Lowell, Danvers and Lynn.

Tuttle said the state funding for these nonprofits, provided through Chapter 257, is simply not enough. Without an additional \$351 million — over double the current allotment from the state — they will not survive, he said. At the current salaries they provide, Tuttle said human services work is no longer sustainable, but they are at the mercy of the state.

"The Chapter 257 line item at \$230 million sounds like a lot, and it is, but the median salary is roughly \$16.79 an hour, which is only about \$34,923 a year. That's before taxes," Tuttle said. "We cannot attract staff, and because we can't attract staff, we cannot expand our services. And in all honesty, we're going to have to start looking about potentially taking services offline."

Since the pandemic, more than 5,000 people have yet to return to Bridgewell's day programs primarily due to the staffing shortage. Many of those people, Tuttle said, have developmental disabilities and are thereby losing valuable life skills support.

A couple of years ago, Bridgewell had about 140 to 150 job openings, but now, 317 jobs are unfilled. That's nearly a quarter of the organization, Tuttle said.

While Gov. Charlie Baker has increased Chapter 257 funding during his tenure, Tuttle said he is "dumbfounded" by how the state is always reacting to a crisis instead of being proactive and advocating for programs that need it.



"The fact that the commonwealth won't do this, the fact that they've been resistant, is shortsighted, and this will cause significant issues in the near future," Tuttle said. "We are always taking care of people and I think the state has depended on us to always be there a little too much, because we're at a point now that I don't know if we will always be there."

Brenna Carney, the program director at NFI Family Resource Center of Greater Lowell, said the organization has five full-time staffers but is currently missing a family support worker and a clinician. While it now has a part-time clinician filling in, Carney said adequately training someone to work in the industry takes several months, so it's hard to find a permanent, dedicated person willing to take it on.

Funding for her program comes through the state Department of Children and Families, but that doesn't mean the organization isn't struggling just like the rest of the industry.

"There's only seven of us when we're fully staffed, so even being down two people, we feel it," Carney said. "Everyone would love more money, but in this nonprofit world, you're not going to be rolling in the dough."

Offering a food pantry, technical resources such as computers, parenting classes, mental health referrals and other resources, Lowell's NFI center is a fixture in the community, Carney said, but it needs all the help it can get.

Michael Weekes is the CEO and president of the Providers' Council, Massachusetts' largest organization of community-based health and human services programs, which are mostly nonprofits. With only \$230 million, Weekes said the average wage for workers is just shy of \$17 an hour, but that's just the median, meaning half of staff are getting close to minimum wage. And that's not "competitive."

The Providers' Council isn't looking to expand its services or grow its network, Weekes said, but rather provide a fair wage to its hardworking employees. Weekes said it is "not unusual" to hear of workers clocking 100-hour weeks.

"I think one of the things that is universal is the inability to have an adequate workforce, to be able to provide services, and in some cases, that has meant that some services have been cut or eliminated or people are on a waiting list for needed services," Weekes said. "While this was tragic, what seemed to compound that tragic situation for us is that the commonwealth has no financial resources to



The state budget for the next fiscal year is not yet finalized, and senators introduced amendments to provide more funding for organizations and programs on Friday. One amendment, drafted in part by state Sen. Ed Kennedy, D-Lowell, would increase funding for community residential service workers under the Department of Developmental Disabilities by \$70 million, raising the total to more than \$1.5 billion.

According to Kennedy's office, the amendment will be redrafted to call for wage increases for workers in that industry. It is not yet finalized.

State Sen. Jamie Eldridge, D-Acton, said increasing Chapter 257 funding was one of his priorities in budget negotiations. He said he spoke with Senate Ways and Means Chair Michael Rodrigues about the issue back in March. Eldridge added that the human services situation has become desperate and that preliminary language in the budget would raise salaries of the industry's lowest-paid workers by 75%.

"Too many of the human services workers are making minimum wage or just above it that actually, given the tight labor supply that we're in right now, some workers are leaving to go work for Amazon or for McDonald's," Eldridge said. "We need to keep continuing to make sure that the pay is equitable, and that's where the legislature's budget is so key."

Working in Lowell and helping at least 20 to 30 families each week, Carney said she sees how human services can make a direct, positive impact on local residents. She's passionate about the work, she said, but hopes workers can feel less overworked and better supported.

"Being a resource for the community, seeing firsthand what the needs are, is just rewarding, but also just shows how important the human services field is and how important it is to be in person and make human connections and to really be involved," Carney said. "I just hope that as the community heals more that people won't be nervous to come back to human services and want to work with people again. I think it's going to just take a few years until we get back there."





## Cameron Morsberger



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