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Human services workers gather together for a group photo as the 2024 Northeast Regional Caring Force Rally comes to a close. (Spenser Hasak)

Human services workers from across the region advocate for a livable wage

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PEABODY – Human services providers from across the region recently attended the Northeast Regional Caring Force Rally, advocating for a livable wage and a loan repayment program.

The Caring Force, a grassroots advocacy initiative of the Provider’s Council that promotes better pay and recognition for human services workers, along with leaders from nonprofits Bridgewell, Centerboard, Incompass Human Services, JRI, Key Program, NFI Massachusetts, Northeast Arc, Plummer Youth Promise, Vinfen, and Wayside Youth & Family Support Network hosted the event late last week at the Peabody Holiday Inn. The TriTown Rock Band, a music ensemble composed of local students with and without disabilities, also performed to kick off the event.

Geraldine Neistorowich, a senior program coordinator with Northeast Arc, a nonprofit that helps people with disabilities become full participants in the community, spoke about her son Sam who

was diagnosed with autism and a developmental disability as a kid, and credited direct support workers for “saving their family.”

“Sam went from being a five-year-old who was so violent that we needed to, for the safety of our family, get him out of the house because (his) sister needed protection,” Neistorowich said. “But now, because of direct care workers who came into my home day after day, nights, weekends, he’s now living with us.”

Neistorowich then asked the state representatives for their support.

“As a direct care worker, and as the mother of someone who for his whole life will receive direct care, I can’t say enough of the support we need from the legislature,” Neistorowich said.

A residential manager for NFI Massachusetts, a nonprofit that provides behavioral health, juvenile justice, and ambulatory services among others, also said that she and her colleagues often work more than 40 hours a week because the wages are “not attractive enough for the positions to be filled”, and that even though she loves her job, it does not mean that she wants to spend more of her time working just to make ends meet.

After the speakers representing the human services workers spoke, it was the state representatives’ turn.

“We’re going to raise up these priorities, both the budget and the bills that you’ve brought before us,” state Rep. Manny Cruz of Salem said, referring to two bills, one that is relative to a livable wage for human services workers, and one that would create an educational loan repayment program for human services workers. The budget refers to a request to maintain the Chapter 257 reserve at \$390 million for fiscal year 2025, which according to The Arc of Massachusetts, a group that promotes the human rights of people with developmental disabilities, is “a necessary step towards addressing challenges facing constituents with intellectual disabilities.” The reserve also includes an additional \$95 million to ensure that direct care staff are compensated no less than \$20 an hour.

State Reps. Dan Cahill (Lynn), Jerald Parisella (Beverly), Tom Walsh (Peabody), and state Sen. Joan Lovely (Salem) were also in attendance, voicing their support towards the human services workers’ legislative priorities.