

Low wages for group home caregivers are hurting disabled Texans

Editorial Board, Dallas Morning News

July 17, 2024

Right now, some Texas workers who care for the most vulnerable among us make less money for their work than cooks flipping burgers at fast-food restaurants.

That needs to change.

Caregivers known as direct support professionals provide services to Texans with intellectual and developmental disabilities, whether that means administering medication, preparing meals, bathing them, or managing incontinence and seizures. These caregivers work in small, regulated group homes that house three to four residents at a time. These residents with disabilities participate in a state-based program covered by Medicaid that provides them with long-term care in their own communities instead of sending them to institutions.

Yet, the base pay for these caregivers is \$10.60 per hour, which has led to a staffing crisis in these group homes, as recently reported by KERA News. Many of the caregivers who remain work long, grueling shifts and take on second jobs to make ends meet.

But working overtime can't make up for a lack in competitive pay. While these workers do have benefits like paid vacation time, working such long hours makes it impossible to take advantage of it, said Sandy Batton, the executive director for Providers Alliance for Community Services of Texas.

Group homes that care for Texans with intellectual and developmental disabilities are state contractors, and it's the Legislature that sets their Medicaid reimbursement rates. Last year, lawmakers raised caregivers' minimum wage to \$10.60 an hour from what was \$8.11 hourly, but advocates say the average wage should be \$15 an hour. The Legislature should revisit the reimbursement rate in the 2025 session.

In Dallas County alone there are 574 people with intellectual disabilities who live in small group homes, Batton said, citing state data.

In an interview with us, Batton echoed research findings that show group homes' inability to offer their workers a competitive wage leads to rapid staff turnover. And rapid staff turnover exposes group home residents to more injuries and more instances of neglect and abuse.

If more caregivers exit the field, more group homes will close. That will leave families with fewer providers. Other facilities for those with intellectual and developmental disabilities are at maximum capacity and can't take in more residents.

The workforce crisis often leads to more group home residents being unnecessarily jailed or hospitalized because inexperienced staff often call 911, Batton said.

If we want quality care for people whose lives depend on it, then Texas needs to make sure the base pay for caregivers is competitive. Dignity for the vulnerable should also include dignity for their caregivers.

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