



## **NEWS**

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### **Unity House of Cayuga County, Inc. Endorses Higher Pay For Direct Support Professionals**



The direct support professional workforce that is the essence of human service agencies like Unity House of Cayuga County Inc. is fast approaching endangered species status. Respected only nominally and recognized far too infrequently, the thousands of individuals who comprise the backbone of direct care for those unable to care for and help themselves leave their jobs not long after starting them, largely because they cannot afford to remain in a profession that offers average annual wages below the poverty level for a family of four.

As executive director of a human services agency that employs over 300 full- and part-time employees who care for more than 700 individuals a day with developmental disabilities, mental health illnesses, and those recovering from chemical dependencies, I can speak firsthand to the difficult and growing challenge of recruiting and retaining these professionals in the six Central New York counties in which we operate.

Direct support professionals are not earning and will not earn a wage they can live on. According to the New York State Association of Community and Residential Agencies (NYSACRA), although the profession from 2002-2012 is projected to be one of the top ten fastest growing in the state, it also is projected to be in the lowest ten percent pay- and benefit-wise. A NYSACRA survey of all attendees at its 2006 Regional Direct Support Professional Conferences that included pay and benefit issues also indicates low wages are a primary issue for direct support professionals. Nearly 73% of the more than 400 professionals who completed the survey rated their rate of pay for their work as either “fair” or “poor.”

The insufficient payscale applicable to direct support professionals generates high turnover rates and an unreliable labor pool. We need to be able to pay the qualified individuals who desire and enjoy this work the salaries and benefits that their responsibilities warrant. One effort to ensure as much rests with legislation currently in the U.S. House of Representatives’ Ways and Means Subcommittee on Health. The bill, H.R. 1279, entitled the Direct Support Professionals Fairness and Security Act, would provide money to states to increase wages paid to direct support professionals who provide services to individuals with disabilities under the Medicaid program. Cosponsored by our congressman, U.S. Representative Michael Arcuri, the bill if enacted into law would provide assistance vital to easing the recruitment and retention dilemma our industry faces. We urge its support by all those who employ direct support professionals.

Direct support professionals play an indispensable role in the lives of the disabled. Without them, the health and well-being of individuals with disabilities would at best be

jeopardized. It is therefore crucial that permanent, structural increases in salary and benefits that are the foundation for direct support professional career paths are realized, if we are to prevent any further erosion in the profession and, consequently, any reduction in the high quality of care they currently provide.