

HEALTH

Report: Elderly care in jeopardy

Higher pay, more benefits seen as critical to draw needed workers

By Cynthia McCormick

cmccormick@capecodonline.com

With Cape Cod's population aging rapidly, nursing home aides, home health aides and personal care attendants are among the region's fastest growing occupations.

But whether there will be enough of those workers in the future is in question as skilled nursing homes and home health agencies struggle to fill positions that traditionally combine hard work and low pay.

Increasing wages and benefits for health aides and personal care attendants is a vital part of reforming long-term care services in Massachusetts, according to a report released this week by a health care advocacy organization.

The report, produced by Manatt Health for The Blue Cross Blue Shield of Massachusetts Foundation and released Tuesday, advises establishing a minimum wage for all direct-care service workers in all settings.

The report also recommends the work of aides and attendants be professionalized by providing workers with benefits, full-time employment, job orientation and skills training.

"Home care workers in general in Massachusetts are living

paycheck to paycheck," said Becca Gutman, vice president of Home Care for SEIU 1199, a trade union.

The wages of personal care attendants, who are hired by clients and paid by MassHealth, have risen to \$13.68 per hour from \$10.84 an hour since the attendants got their first union contract in 2008, Gutman said.

Personal care attendant wages will rise to \$15 by July of 2018 — a wage rate supported by the report — but the attendants still struggle with other issues such as getting paid time off, Gutman said.

The need for long-term care services "is going to grow exponentially with the aging of the population," said Audrey Shelto, president of the Blue Cross Blue Shield of Massachusetts Foundation, which seeks to expand access to health care for low-income and other individuals.

Currently MassHealth is the state's largest payer of long-term care services for the elderly and disabled, spending about \$4.5 billion on such care in Massachusetts last year, Shelto said.

"It's a big cost that's going to keep growing," she said.

Setting an hourly wage for personal care attendants and other care workers "will take an investment" but would save money in the long run by keeping people out of nursing homes and hospital emergency departments, Shelto said.

Currently there are not

enough paid caregivers to meet demand, and the slack is being picked up by family members, especially female relatives, Shelto said.

During a January job fair in Hyannis, nursing home and home care officials said they were having trouble filling positions even as demand is booming.

The number of Barnstable County residents age 65 and older rose by nearly 6,000 individuals between July 2010 and July 2014, according to U.S. Census estimates, going from 54,048 to 59,848.

But during that same time period the number of people in the working age group of 18 to 64 dropped by nearly 4,000 to 120,826.

Women made up more than half of the loss of population in the younger group — at 2,190 individuals — which is significant since women currently hold a majority of nursing home and home health jobs.

"It is a noble profession, I believe," said Paula Clayton Parker, of Hyannis, a hospice aide for HopeHealth.

Her job includes bathing clients and helping them eat and exercise as well as providing manicures and companionship, she said.

"Discussing their favorite topics, past careers, interests," Clayton Parker said as she massaged the feet of a client in a house filled with family photographs and house plants.

"There are so many elderly that are in their homes" — and want to remain there, Clayton Parker said.

Full-time aides at HopeHealth receive full benefits and all employees go through orientation and training programs, said HopeHealth spokeswoman Stacie Madden.

HopeHealth has four doctors



on call for seriously ill, home-bound patients and provides respite services for family caregivers.

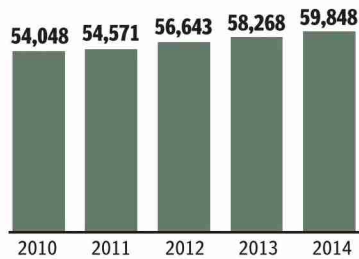
“We focus on caring for the caregiver,” said Diana Franchitto, president and CEO of HopeHealth.

The report released by Blue Cross Blue Shield recommends respite programs as well as financial remuneration for family caregivers, at-home physician services and other reforms to long-term care services.

— Follow Cynthia McCormick on Twitter: @Cmccormickct.

Aging on Cape Cod

Barnstable County population aged 65 years and older



Source: U.S. Census population estimates
 GATEHOUSE MEDIA



Paula Clayton Parker, a hospice aide for HopeHealth, works with a client in West Barnstable on Wednesday afternoon. A new report is recommending higher pay and more benefits for home health care workers to meet the demands of an aging population. MERRILY CASSIDY/CAPE COD TIMES