Special caregivers deserve a living wage

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The critical condition of the state's nursing-home industry goes far beyond the frail, vulnerable population for whom it cares.

It goes right to those highly appreciated but lowly compensated workers who, for the most part, compassionately provide these elderly patients with the assistance that family members can no longer manage.

You'd think individuals with this special calling would be paid a wage sufficient to support themselves and their families. But in Massachusetts -- and just about everywhere else -- that's not the case. In fact, certified nursing assistants receive a wage of $13.36 an hour. That's the average. Workers with less experience make even less. Other behind-the-scenes employees -- dietary, housekeeping and laundry aides -- don't even earn that. They're the working poor.

So if you're thinking these unsung employees would be better off punching a clock at some fast-food chain, you're probably correct. However, nursing homes already experience a shortage of workers, which will only become more acute as the state's population continues to age.

That's why the Massachusetts Senior Care Association, an organization that represents a wide range of caregivers who serve the elderly and disabled, is behind the drive to raise these workers' salary to $15 an hour.

The first step in that process would be to ensure that the $30 million contained in the governor's fiscal 2017 budget for Medicaid rate increases for nursing homes survives both the House and Senate versions of the spending plan.

Of that, $18 million would be dedicated to raising workers' pay.

According to figure supplied by the MSCA, Medicaid -- the federal health-care program for those of low income and limited means -- pays for about two-thirds of long-term nursing-home patients. However, since 2009, Medicaid rates have been frozen. That has not only contributed to a daily loss $37 per Medicaid patient, but an inability to raise salaries.

So it's crucial that this $30 million appropriation remains in the fiscal 2017 budget. But that's just the first step. The MSCA seeks to generate a Nursing Home Quality Jobs Initiative that provides a $90 million fund for annual wage increases tied to the
Consumer Price Index, as well as funds for training and scholarships for certified nursing assistants.

As advocates point out, that sum could come by returning a portion of the revenue raised by the annual nursing-home user fee for that purpose. Since fiscal 2010, almost two-thirds of the $900 million raised has been redirected to other MassHealth programs.

Both the immediate raise for these selfless workers and the long-term plan for wage equity and professional development seem a small price to pay for all the benefits derived.

We urge the Legislature and governor see through both these initiatives.

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