Editorial: A better deal for nursing home workers

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Government employs people and provides services, but it is not just another employer selling its wares. It is obligated to promote a healthy economy for all, above and beyond its activities in a specific area. It is obligated to ensure the well-being of all citizens - especially the most vulnerable - even if it costs a little more to improve the quality of the service delivered.

Consider nursing homes. They are mostly operated by private entities, but government pays most of the bills. Thus government is implicated in the low pay rates that burden nursing home workers, and in the damage low pay and high employee turnover does to the quality of nursing home care.

MassHealth, the state’s Medicaid program, plays a dominant role in nursing home financing. According to the Mass. Senior Care Association, about two-thirds of the nursing home residents in the MetroWest area are billed to MassHealth.

But the state Legislature has frozen Medicaid rates for years. As a result, nursing home workers - certified nursing assistants, janitors and other staff - are among the lowest paid in the state. Nursing home CNAs average just $13.07 an hour, and lower-skilled staff earn even less.

As in any low-wage field, nursing home employee turnover is high and jobs are hard to fill. But a nursing home is not a burger joint, where any low-wage worker can do the job as well as any other. Experienced nursing home employees, who are skilled at working with the frail and elderly and who have developed relationships with the individuals they care for, are especially hard to replace when they leave for better-paying jobs. The quality of care inevitably suffers when staff positions are vacant and new employees are being trained.

The Senior Care Association has proposed a program that would create a pathway to a living wage for nursing home workers, with training opportunities and employee retention initiatives. Its list price is $90 million, but much of that cost would be recouped through increased federal aid and an increased nursing home user fee.

Many on Beacon Hill recognize the need to do something about this. Gov. Charlie Baker’s budget increased funding by $30 million. The House budget has boosted it to $35.5 million. We hope the Senate can do more in its budget, due to be reported out of the Ways & Means Committee.

There’s another imperative leaders on Beacon Hill should keep in mind. Massachusetts has one of the highest rates of income inequality in the country, as well as one of the highest costs-of-living. Bay State politicians recognize these problems regularly in their calls to raise the minimum wage, but often forget that state government itself is a low-wage employer, especially through contractors who clean state buildings, feed students on college campuses - or run nursing homes.

To build a healthy economy, state government should be pushing wages up, not holding them down. That’s especially true for nursing home workers. These are the people who care for our parents, grandparents, neighbors and friends. They deserve a better deal.