

Joint Committee on Children and Families

November 1, 2005

Testimony: Salary Equity Bill

By William J. Taylor, President and CEO of Advocates, Inc.

Senator Spilka, Representative Owens-Hicks, and honorable members of the Joint Committee on Children and Families: Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you this morning. My name is Bill Taylor and for the past quarter century I have been privileged to lead Advocates, a private non-profit human service organization based in Framingham. There is much about my organization about which I feel great pride having watched it grow from 8 staff supporting 25 people with disabilities to one with 800 staff supporting over 6,000 people today. Similarly there is much about which this Commonwealth and this government can feel proud in having devoted resources toward helping vulnerable citizens, citizens once abandoned or cast out, to now achieve meaningful roles in their communities in terms of participation, work, and relationships. These are, after all, our sons and daughters, our sisters and brothers, our mothers and fathers, our friends and neighbors.

I also, however, live every day in shame. As the 54 year old son of a proud 87 year old member of the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers Local 103, I am in my bones deeply dedicated to management practices that would make my union father proud. From the moment I assumed a management position I was committed to exercising my responsibilities in such a manner that would treat workers and pay workers in ways that my father would expect of his son.

Alas, I am thrice ashamed. First, I do not pay a just, or even a living wage to hundreds of my loyal and dedicated workers. Next, as staff numbers and their qualifications insidiously decline, so do I insidiously break my promise to those I serve. And, finally, for the past 18 years I, along with my fellow providers, have been utterly ineffective in convincing you, our government, that these programs need annual rate adjustments, if we are to keep pace with inflationary pressures, and thereby continue to provide the same level of quality service from one year to the next.

Since 1988, the last time human service contracts received an across the board cost of living adjustment, inflation in the Northeast has climbed 82%. The combined total of all the occasional salary reserve appropriations in the 18 years since 1987 amounts to only 8% of today's \$2.6 Billion "POS" budget.

During these years human service workers have seen their wages fall from 75% of the state's average wage in 1987 to less than 45% of the state's average wage in 2005. Group home clients have seen support staff ratio's fall significantly. If you worked in a group home in the 1980's you would have likely worked with 2-3 other staff each evening. Today you often work alone.

In these services where 70% of costs relate to staffing it was partly by reducing the number of staff in each home that human service organizations been able to provide some wage increases, however inadequate, while also managing cost increases in health insurance, food, supplies, utilities, general insurance, transportation, rents, mortgages, repairs, and the unrelenting stream of unfunded regulatory mandates.

And now, even as we continue to seek fair rates set annually in other forums throughout this building, we come today to this committee seeking extraordinary help for the largest and lowest paid members of the human service workforce, those who work in contracts with the Department of Mental Retardation. This portion of the workforce has fallen so far behind, that only the unusual measure we now advocate holds the possibility of repair. So I ask for your support of the Salary Equity Bill.

We, providers, are commonly told that we ask the wrong thing of the wrong government body. When we seek rates, we're told to seek dollars for salaries. When we seek dollars for salaries, we're told we should be asking for rates. When we ask the legislature, we're told to ask the

executive branch, and they then send us back to you.

My father, a union man, a World War Two veteran, who also survived the Great Depression, and who is now enveloped by the deepening darkness of Alzheimer's disease, asks me the same three questions every time I see him, and every 20 minutes that I am with him: How many staff do you have? What do you pay them? Do you provide them good benefits? Even as this tragic night steals him away, this survivor of America's Greatest Generation remembers to ask the important questions about how those of us in positions of privilege and power treat those for whom we bear responsibility. We still have much to learn about core values from this generation now leaving us in such great numbers every day.

I apologize to my father; I apologize to you and through you to my staff, and to those we support for my ineffective advocacy up till now. But the dollar inadequacies that cause my shame also threaten this government's ability to continue to feel proud of all it has worked to create. Somehow, together, we've got to find the ways and the means to get sufficient dollars on the table to enact and maintain fair rates, so that providers can pay a fair and just wage; so that clients can get the support they need and deserve; and so that we all can continue to feel proud of the interdependent and welcoming communities we have built. I ask for your help with this bill, and I ask for your help with our overall effort to do what is right and just.

Thank you for your time.

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