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Our View: Overworked, underpaid and desperately necessary



Our View

Opinion by Post Bulletin Editorial Board

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In 1962, the Peace Corps began marketing itself as “The toughest job you’ll ever love.” That’s a great slogan, and the Peace Corps is indeed a tough job, but it typically lasts just two years.

We think another job is tougher — a job so difficult, so physically challenging, mentally taxing and emotionally exhausting that only someone who truly loves it would even consider making a career out of it.

Group home workers, we salute you — but you deserve more than a salute.

In Monday's Post Bulletin, reporter Randy Petersen told the story of Kate Sawinski, the mother of a 56-year-old woman with cerebral palsy whose group home is among dozens of such facilities statewide that are closing or are at risk of closing due to staffing shortages.

We won't mislead you — this story is a tough read. It lays out the new challenges being faced by individuals and families who've already endured unthinkable hardships. They've had babies who entered the world fated never to walk, read a book or feed themselves. Some have had adult children permanently disabled by traumatic brain injuries, while others saw a spouse fall victim to early-onset dementia.

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We live in a society that promises help to the unfortunate, and the people who work in Minnesota's 3,800 group homes do their best to fulfill that promise. They learn to read the eyes and gestures of those who can't speak. They play games with those who can't remember the rules. They push wheelchairs for miles. They change sheets and diapers. They calm the agitated. They mitigate and negotiate. They give and receive countless hugs.

And the next day, they show up and do it all over again. And the next day. And the next. And the next — all for wages that today can be matched or exceeded at most fast-food chains or retail stores.

That's just wrong.

Group homes receive the bulk of their funding through Medicaid and other government sources, and for more than a decade, the leaders of Minnesota's group home agencies have sounded an alarm that's gone largely unheeded. The state dictates wages at group homes, and years of minuscule or nonexistent increases made these jobs non-competitive, even before COVID-19.

Now, with the “Great Resignation,” rising wages elsewhere and skyrocketing inflation, group homes statewide report job vacancy rates of 25 percent or more.

When staffing shortages reach such critical levels, the polite term for what happens next is “consolidation.” Residents in understaffed homes are relocated to a better-staffed facility that has an empty bed. Moving is seldom pleasant for anyone, but for vulnerable, routine-dependent individuals, a forced, unexpected move is traumatic, even terrifying.

And that's the best-case scenario. The worst-case? No suitable spaces are available in other homes, and desperate families must scramble to provide 24-hour care for their loved one while they wait and pray for a spot to open up elsewhere.

We're better than this, Minnesota.

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Our Legislature currently is embroiled in a hot debate about what to do with a projected \$7.7 billion budget surplus. Ideas abound, and strong arguments can be made (and are being made) for tax cuts, as well as increased funding for education, law enforcement, child care and environmental programs.

Lots of hands will reach for a slice of this very large pie. While we'd argue that group home workers deserve to be at the front of the line, the sad reality is that few legislators are likely to spend political capital to support and protect a relatively small and little-seen population of vulnerable adults and the people who care for them.

That's where you come in.

Call your state representative. Email your state senator. Tell them that before they cut tax rates, send refund checks or earmark more money for police departments, you want Minnesota to guarantee a living wage for those who take care of those who can't care for themselves.

What constitutes a living wage? It can vary according by location, but we'd suggest at least \$20 an hour starting pay, with built-in, automatic increases based on years of experience and ongoing training.

Doing nothing isn't an option. Group home workers clearly aren't in it for the money, but they have reached a breaking point. Minnesota can't rely on their self-sacrifice any longer.

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