

The Observation Deck

Caregivers deserve a raise

By TU Editorial Board on January 26, 2017 at 3:14 AM

Putting a dollar value on someone's work is often fraught with risk, but few can argue the importance of those who provide basic human services to the disabled.

Now a coalition of non-profits that run residential and day programs for people with disabilities says its members are struggling to hold on to the dedicated professionals who deliver services to an estimated 128,000 New Yorkers.

The reason is simple: These workers are underpaid – forced to live paycheck-to-paycheck, struggling to provide for their families. Most are paid so little they are eligible for food assistance; many make ends meet only by working overtime or taking on other part-time work.

Gov. Andrew Cuomo's leadership in raising of the minimum wage for all New Yorkers is commendable, but in the process it has exacerbated the problem non-profits have recruiting and retaining direct human service professionals. These workers typically have been paid a few dollars an hour above the state minimum but now, as the minimum wage rises, it is eclipsing theirs. Meanwhile, the low unemployment rate is leading large retailers and the fast-food industry to compete for job applicants by offering workers more – meaning a person may earn more flipping burgers than providing essential care to the disabled.

The governor's budget division says the first priority is ensuring all the non-profit human services agencies have enough funds to keep up with the rising minimum wage, an amount that will total \$284 million in the coming year. But the agencies servicing the developmentally disabled argue that their pay scales must be more competitive – a few dollars above the minimum wage, which they call a livable wage – to avoid losing workers.

Turnover in direct care workers can be disruptive and costly for effective programs. Many of these devoted care providers become like extended family members to the disabled people they care for.

These agencies and their advocates estimate the cost to keep care providers' pay scales competitive at about \$45 million more a year. That sounds like a small amount in a proposed \$152 billion state budget, but there are always more programs in need of aid than tax dollars available. If the governor can't be persuaded to include the extra funds in the budget amendments he submits next month, the issue doubtless will end up part of negotiations with the legislature. When competing needs are pitted against each other, worthy programs can fall off the table.

This one shouldn't. The people who work on the front lines of essential human services have tough jobs. They bathe, lift, feed, dress, walk with and drive people with disabilities, and, perhaps most important, they accompany them on daily activities, as friends and guides.

By including money for fair pay in his budget, Mr. Cuomo can affirm that we as New Yorkers recognize the significant role of these caregivers and our responsibility to those who have come to depend upon them.