

This Just In: Good Help is Hard to Find

Reports project the looming work force crisis.

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by [*Martha Nichols*](#)

"Good help is so hard to find these days."

- Jafar, in "The Return of Jafar"

Let's admit right off the bat that lamenting the shortage of qualified staff is one of the oldest excuses around: Government officials gripe about it to frustrated taxpayers, fast food managers cry about it to angry customers, and Jafar joked about it while trying to wipe out Aladdin.

So when youth-serving agencies complain about the revolving door of employees and the difficulty of filling empty job slots, it would be easy to shrug it off as the same old whine. Christine Power, director of membership development at the Massachusetts Council of Human Service Providers, notes that until recently, the evidence of a worker shortage "was anecdotal. We talked about a work force crisis, but was it real?"

It's real.

In what Cornerstones for Kids Co-Director Ira Cutler calls a "groundbreaking" move, the Massachusetts council has published two reports that quantify the state's human services work force crisis in grim detail and offer prescriptions for dealing with it. That makes Massachusetts a good place to watch, because its aging population and other factors put it at the front of the line in the march toward this looming nationwide crisis, and because it is grappling with how to deal with the problem right now.

Which is not to say that Massachusetts is a best-practice model. Rather, the Bay State shows how youth agencies might both confront the issue and fail to. Among the questions being raised here: How much are agencies willing to recruit and train new youth workers from nontraditional groups, such as immigrants and high school graduates without college degrees? And will those agencies link arms and lobby hard for money to address the problem, or will they politely request a little help and be thankful for whatever they get?

Gap Ahead

The 300-member Providers' Council is housed in an office building on Fort Point Channel, the narrow waterway that divides Boston and South Boston. The couches in the lobby are plush leather, the view of downtown Boston picturesque. But bolstering the human service industry, staffers are quick to note, will take more than cosmetic upgrades.

The national work force crisis has been building for years. Michael Weekes, a trained social worker and CEO of the Providers' Council since 1998, has witnessed the shift himself. After graduating from college in the 1970s, he took a job as a youth worker at the Center for the Study of Institutionalized Alternatives (now the Center for Human Development in Springfield, Mass.).

Back then, he says, "there was no problem at all attracting college graduates who wanted to make a difference."

Floyd Alwon, vice president of consultation, research and training for the Child Welfare League of America in Quincy, Mass., also remembers the halcyon 1970s. "You could put an ad in The Boston Globe and get a hundred respondents," he says.

No more. In a 2001 Youth Today article about staffing problems in the Boston area, Alwon said, "It's as bad as it's ever been, or worse."

Today, Alwon calls the national outlook "really gloomy in the youth-serving field, partly because of how much will be going into elder services. Think of the numbers of people needed to care for my mom, your mom, me."

He's referring to a national demographic shift - the aging of the population - in which Massachusetts stands on the leading edge, according to the U.S. Census Bureau and the newest Providers' Council report, "Help Wanted 2: Recruiting and Retaining the Next Generation of Human Services Workers in Massachusetts," which was released in April. Baby boomers are beginning to retire, and they will comprise a record number of senior citizens. If current trends continue, there won't be enough working-age residents to replace them, let alone to care for all the elderly boomers and the state's children.

Other factors are at work. Massachusetts is one of the most expensive states in which to live. The birth rate has been declining in recent years, while residents have been leaving in droves. Hundreds of thousands more moved out than in between 1990 and 2002, according to one study cited in the report. Meanwhile, growth in the human service industry here is 2.5 times that of the nation.

The upshot, the report says: In less than 10 years, the Bay State will need another 39,000 workers to care for those in need. That's 39,000 more employees, in a state that employs 100,000-plus people in human services.

There are "simply not enough warm bodies," the report says.

The report and its predecessor, "Help Wanted" (released in April 2006), are good first steps toward dealing with the challenge, says Cutler of Cornerstones for Kids, a nonprofit that focuses on improving youth-serving organizations through, among other endeavors, its Human Services Workforce Initiative.

"Much as people say that there's a problem, the ability to quantify and measure it is really limited," Cutler says. "For anyone who's interested in taking action, you have to have this kind of information."

With its storied universities and policy institutes, Massachusetts has the works to do the research. The state should be the "poster child" for child welfare and human services, says

Edward Kelley, executive director of Robert F. Kennedy Children's Action Corps in Boston, which operates youth residential homes and community-based programs across the state.

It's not.

Who's Qualified?

If finding warm bodies were the only challenge, there would be no crisis. The state posted close to 75,000 job openings at the end of 2004, with 21 percent of them in health care and human services. At the same time, there were an estimated 140,000 unemployed workers.

One catch is that many of the open positions in human services require a degree or other credential. The recruitment challenge for agencies in Massachusetts and elsewhere lies in defining job qualifications. How low can you go? Or, can you even afford not to drop your standards?

Slipping standards is the elephant in the room, and not just in Massachusetts. It's a touchy subject, and the data compiled in the new report reflect the cognitive dissonance throughout the youth field.

One recommendation in "Help Wanted 2" is to expand "the universe of workers" when filling entry-level positions. It suggests targeting "underutilized populations" - retirees, young people who aren't college-bound, ex-convicts and immigrants.

However, more than half the council's members surveyed for the report listed "recent college graduates" as their first choice for new employees. Only about 15 percent put high school graduates first. For immigrants and "individuals with barriers to employment" (such as criminal records), the figures were 3.9 percent and 1.3 percent, respectively.

Credentials an Answer?

Another strategy is to improve the image of the human services industry through such means as professionalizing the work force. "Help Wanted 2" recommendations include marketing an organization's mission, providing tuition vouchers for college students and making available voluntary credentialing programs.

Improving the industry's image is a noble goal. Reaching it is difficult.

Consider the task of tapping into "the expanded universe" of workers and matching them with jobs. This year, the Providers' Council piloted a credentialing program with nine agencies, in an effort to attract new people to direct-care work, such as retirees at senior centers, high school students and those served by immigrant service programs.

At Diman Regional Vocational Technical High School in Fall River, Mass., for example, 10 students have completed a five-month course based on the Providers' Council eAcademy, an online system for teaching entry-level skills. Each student received a credential as a direct support professional in developmental disabilities and mental retardation. Some of the other pilot

programs offered credentials in child welfare, Power of the Providers' Council says, including one run by America's Youth Teenage Unemployment Reduction Network in Brockton, Mass.

Of the prospective employees involved in the nine pilots, more than 100 received a credential of some sort. Far fewer have gotten jobs.

The next step is "matching them with opportunities," says Weekes, the Providers' Council CEO. For trade associations like the Providers' Council, it may also mean convincing human service managers that it's OK to hire someone who's not a high school graduate or someone who has done jail time.

Teenagers often want to work with children, Power says, so lowering the minimum age for a direct-care job, or dropping the requirement for a driver's license, might expand the pool of candidates.

Establishing certificate programs at community colleges may be another way to tap into a better-prepared pool of employees. For example, the Maryland Association of Resources for Family and Youth, in collaboration with the Community College of Baltimore County, has started a Child and Youth Care Practitioner Certificate Program.

But while there may be employee "gems" among the expanded universe, Alwon says, "they're a higher risk, and they're going to require a higher capacity within the organization to orient, train and advise."

Competing for Workers

Whatever the field tries, the real catch is the price tag.

"Pay people what they are worth," says one anonymous provider quoted in the report. The "cost of living makes the cost of working a burden."

"It's a straight-up salary issue," agrees Susan Ayers, executive director of the Guidance Center in Cambridge, Mass., which offers programs for at-risk children and their families. "They don't want to leave us," she says of Guidance Center staff, "but they say, 'I can't live on this salary.' Many of our people, even with master's degrees, have more than one job."

One of the most disturbing findings in the Help Wanted reports involves the fierce competition to fill direct-care vacancies. The reason is obvious: In Massachusetts, human service workers often make \$9,000 less in salary than those in equivalent positions at health care organizations.

Across the country, Cutler notes, human services employers are "competing with teacher vacancies and nursing vacancies."

The prospect of health-care organizations duking it out with youth residential homes and after-school programs for workers is not pretty. Already, private providers must compete with government agencies, which usually pay more. Ayers calls this a "fundamental flaw in the funding mechanism," one that harks back to former Republican Gov. William Weld's crusade to

privatize state services in the early 1990s. When the Department of Social Services contracts with private providers, for example, these multi-year contracts don't include automatic cost-of-living adjustments for staff.

The public vs. private wage differential is so bad that Massachusetts has a Direct Care Worker Salary Reserve to help supplement the contracts that private agencies have with the state. At \$23 million for fiscal 2008, it's still a drop in the bucket.

"The biggest challenge is where the money comes from," says state Sen. Thomas McGee (D), who chairs the legislature's Labor and Workforce Development Committee. "How that's going to change, it's tough to say."

Massachusetts Muscle?

Despite its progressive reputation, Massachusetts is no trailblazer in human services, in part because the state is so strapped for cash.

But as is typical, the youth-serving agencies here have not organized into a strong political force. Even though the council produced the "Help Wanted" reports - an analysis of data that Cutler of Cornerstones has seen nowhere else - those reports do not seem likely to push the government into action. Providers' Council CEO Weekes believes in collaboration across the human-service sector "without looking for government to be the answer."

The Providers' Council does include advocacy as part of its mission. On its website, members can send letters to legislators through GiveVoice.org. The site says that tactic has helped to raise the Salary Reserve.

Regarding "Help Wanted 2," Weekes says, "We're not shy about sharing our information with the [governor's] administration. Much of what we found was quite revealing."

"Quite honestly, nothing can be done unless people decide this work is a value," Alwon says. "We could say we care about vulnerable youth, we care about the elderly, but the truth is we care just so much. We're not caring enough to pay substantially more in taxes to make these occupations enticing."

Given the inevitable competition for resources, says Kelley at the Children's Action Corps, what's needed is aggressive organizing. "But the provider community hasn't been assertive enough," he says. "We can't just sit in our chairs and point fingers. If the private agencies, along with leadership of the council, were really able to hold hands, we could be leading on these issues."

"Help Wanted 2" and its predecessor, "Help Wanted: The Future of the Human Services Workforce in Massachusetts," were produced for the Massachusetts Council of Human Service Providers by the Donahue Institute. The institute is a public service and development unit of the president's office at the University of Massachusetts.

"Help Wanted," published in April 2006, provides a snapshot of human services in the state. "Helped Wanted 2," published a year later, synthesizes and updates the original report's findings and presents more government data, information from focus groups, interviews and a survey of Providers' Council members.

Recommendations

The report presents eight major recommendations:

1. Develop a comprehensive approach to the work force crisis.
2. Improve the image of human services as a profession.
3. Fairly compensate and value workers.
4. Create realistic and achievable jobs.
5. Expand benefits, such as health insurance and tuition assistance.
6. Improve hiring practices.
7. Expand the universe of potential workers.
8. Monitor the human services industry and collect more data.

Resources

Michael Weekes, CEO
Massachusetts Council of Human Service Providers
Boston, Mass.
(617) 428-3637
www.providers.org

"Help Wanted" and "Help Wanted 2" are available under "Resources."

Ira Cutler, Director
Cornerstones for Kids
Norwalk, Conn.
(203) 831-0810
www.cornerstones4kids.org

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(617) 769-4008

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