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## Burnout, low pay take toll on New York's human service agencies

Sector pushes for 2.9 percent cost-of-living-adjustment in 2019-20 state budget

By Bethany Bump

ALBANY—Therese “Dezi” Verley Strodel was six months into her new job as a clinician at an Albany home for troubled kids when she submitted her resignation.

A painter in her past life, the 58-year-old felt the transition was just too hard. She wasn't used to working 40 hours a week. She wasn't used to working with children who'd been abused, neglected and traumatized. She wasn't used to being sworn at and belittled.

“I was asking them to do things like yoga and meditation and art,” she said. “They thought I was a voodoo lady. Every day was like a bully session. I just couldn't handle it.”

But almost as soon as she sent in her resignation letter, she felt she'd made a mistake. Five counselors at the Delaware Avenue group home run by Northern Rivers Family of Services had left in the past year. Verley Strodel would be the sixth, and at a time when she was just beginning to understand why the kids gave her such a hard time.

“They form these very strong attachments to their caregivers, and when those caregivers leave it is devastating,” she said. “I mean, think about what these kids have endured. They've experienced loss, abandonment, they've had their trust violated. They have bonding issues, and so the very first thing they do is they test us.”

So she withdrew her resignation, and Northern Rivers was all too happy to let her. The Albany-based human services nonprofit has trouble holding onto its employees, and it's hardly alone.

Annual turnover in the human services industry is greater than 30 percent. The average salary ranges from \$23,000 to \$30,000 a year. And burnout is common, fueled by the difficulties caring for those with physical and developmental disabilities, mental illness, survivors of domestic violence, the elderly, the addicted, and kids who've been abused, neglected and orphaned.

As New York lawmakers prepare to return to work in January, the human services industry is gearing up to make a familiar case: It's workers deserve a livable wage and New York can help by providing state-contracted human services providers with a 2.9 percent cost-of-living adjustment in the upcoming state budget.

The proposed cost-of-living increase is based on the most recent measure of inflation, and would allow agencies to increase salaries for counselors, social workers, care managers, clinicians, nurses, therapists and other direct care staff. The sector hasn't had an increase in eight of the 10 last years.

“I think the thing that scares the heck out of all the executives this year is that because of the turnover and the number of vacant jobs in all of our agencies, we have to make hard decisions about whether we can run programs,” said Northern Rivers CEO William Gettman. “There are programs that we could stand up right now if we had the staff, but we're not about to do a lousy job at it.”

Northern Rivers employs 1,400 people across 36 upstate New York counties. At any given time, 10 percent of positions are vacant due to turnover, Gettman said.

“We have staff here who have been poached by the big hospitals who can offer a lot more money,” he said. “One who just left was offered a \$10,000 raise. We just can't compete with that.”

In addition to years without raises, Gettman said his staff have borne the cost of expanding requirements in the field.

“As we've professionalized a lot of the fields and required master's level certification, even our B.A. level staff are coming out hit with \$50, \$60, \$70,000 in debt, which just wasn't the case a decade ago,” he said.

Verley Strodel has been with Northern Rivers nine months now, and hopes to stay for at least a year. Her husband makes enough money, she said, that she's fortunate enough to be able to pursue meaningful work without worrying about paying the bills. Many of her colleagues are not so lucky.

Gettman said 25 percent of his employees work a second job to get by, and five percent work a third.

“Burnout is a hidden issue,” he said. “They're working too many hours. They're committed to the mission, but at some point, the math doesn't work.”

Gettman said he'd have an easier time hanging onto staff if he were able to offer workforce incentives such as raises, bonuses, promotions and tuition reimbursement. He and other nonprofit executives are calling on state lawmakers to develop an infrastructure in next year's budget that would allow human service agencies to apply for funding for these things.

Money isn't top of mind just yet for 24-year-old Kaileigh Hughes, a residence counselor at Northern Rivers' Rathbone Cottage in Albany. She's always wanted to work with traumatized kids, and affords a frugal lifestyle sharing an apartment with one other person.

“But there are also student loans that would be nice to pay off,” she said. “I'm young, but I would like to start contributing to a 401K and start thinking about my future.”<END>