

Contract boosts health aides

Labor pact secures raises
and health benefits for
personal care attendants.

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BOSTON – More than 25,000 personal care attendants who help elderly and disabled clients live independently in their homes are getting a raise and health benefits in their first labor contract with the state.

The contract, approved through a mail ballot this week, boosts pay from \$10.84 to \$12.48 an hour during the next three years, grants paid time off based on hours worked, and provides health insurance benefits in the second year of the contract. It's the first raise the MassHealth-funded PCAs have gotten since 2005.

The union estimated there are close to 700 PCAs on Cape Cod. They perform a wide range of tasks for disabled and MassHealth-eligible clients, such as helping people shower and get from wheelchairs to beds. They also help with tasks such as shopping, cleaning and food preparation.

Linda Mumford of Yarmouth, who splits her time between PCA work and employment at a nursing home, supported the contract. She helps care for a disabled woman and works with a quadriplegic who needs full care.

She said she hopes the union

can set up a network of local PCAs to make it easier for people to find care. Eligible clients find and hire their own PCAs, even though they are funded through MassHealth.

"Any way that people can stay in their homes is really important," Mumford said. "And they are getting quality care."

This year, the hourly wage for PCAs will go up to \$11.60 an hour, with pay retroactive to July 1. It rises to \$12 the second year and \$12.48 in the third.

Last November, Massachusetts personal care attendants voted overwhelmingly to form a union with 1199SEIU United Healthcare Workers East to bargain collectively with the state.

"When we started this journey, PCAs worked for no benefits whatsoever, including no health insurance, no sick days and no paid vacation," Mike Fadel, executive vice president of 1199SEIU, said in prepared remarks at the contract announcement yesterday at a Brighton senior center.

Fadel said the contract meant that PCAs would have fewer finan-

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cial worries, and there would be more stability as people stay on the job, rather than leaving "due to the low wages and lack of benefits." The PCAs took their case directly to Beacon Hill, lobbying at the Statehouse when negotiations appeared to bog down, and sending thousands of postcards to the governor's office.

Cathy Taylor, assistant director of the Cape Organization for Rights of the Disabled, said having a stable PCA work force was crucial, since the demand is so high.

"This is going to be huge," she said. "Right now, it's so hard to keep PCAs because of their low



wages and no days off, no holidays, and no vacation time. A lot of people want to do this work, but they just can't afford to." She said she thought the new contract would help change that.

"This is really going to allow PCAs to work in the program without worrying so much about their own families and their health needs," Taylor said.

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