

Personal health care assistants provide lifelines for disabled people statewide. But it took a union affiliation for these workers to get vacation, insurance options and a pay raise.

HELP for the HELPERS



JACK SPILLANE

Eight hours a day, five days a week, 52 weeks a year, Vanessa Perreira takes care of Janice Stephens.

Janice, 69, has suffered from a genetic disease her entire life. Called arthrogryphosis, the disease causes degeneration of the spine and muscles.

Vanessa, 48, is Janice's personal care attendant. That means she helps with nearly everything for the severely disabled Ms. Stephens: her feeding, using the bathroom, showering, cooking, housekeeping and driving her to medical appointments or shopping.

"I couldn't ask for anybody better" to care for, Vanessa said. And she loves the work, she said, explaining that she comes from a family that enjoys helping people.

At night, on weekends, and in the early mornings when Vanessa is not on duty, there are five other part-time personal care attendants who also help Ms. Stephens.

All of the PCAs, full- or part-time, earn just \$10.84 an hour.

They do not earn paid vacation and they do not receive health insurance benefits from the quasi-government agency that employs them.

"I haven't had a vacation in five years," said Vanessa, who has been Janice's attendant all that time.

The meager lifestyle of Vanessa Perreira, however, is about to change.

Last year, personal care attendants across the state voted to join the Service Employees International Union. And last week they approved their first contract with the state, with 93 percent of the members voting in favor.

The PCAs will receive salary increases and vacation time for the first time starting in July. The year after that, they will receive health insurance.

So next July, the PCA pay rate for women like Vanessa will go first to \$11.60 an hour, then to \$12 an hour the following year and to \$12.46 the year after that.

The health insurance will be a godsend to Ms. Perreira, who now must pay \$70 a month — nearly a quarter of her monthly salary — out of her own pocket for MassHealth, the state-mandated health care program enacted into law last year.

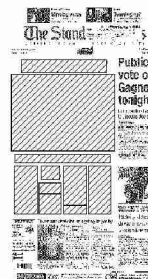
Several years ago, when she broke her foot, Ms. Perreira said, she had to go back to work immediately, wearing a boot on her foot for seven weeks.

"If I don't work, I don't get paid," she noted.

The union also wants to make it easier for Janice to obtain a personal care attendant if Vanessa is out sick or doesn't come to work for another reason. Right now, Janice has to make her own arrangements for replacement workers.

Vanessa has nothing but good things to say about **SEIU**, and state Sen. Mark Montigny and Rep. Antonio Cabral, who she said pushed for the right

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of the state-contracted home care workers to be unionized.

"SEIU, they don't stop for nothing," she said. "When they put their mind to something, they get it done."

The union sponsored a Hazelwood Park cookout last summer for the PCAs and their clients, and kept in touch with them as the union vote neared.

"They make you want to join," she said.

The walls of Janice Stephens' apartment at Kings Village East in New Bedford's West End are spic-and-span clean and decorated with pictures of Elvis Presley, her heartthrob since she was a teenager.

The apartment has wide doors, is completely handicapped accessible and, with Janice and Vanessa in it, seems a cheery place.

Vanessa jokes that Janice is the one in charge.

"You come here green and she trains her PCAs," she said.

Vanessa says she agreed to do a newspaper story so people could know about the important work of personal care attendants. And the lack of fair working conditions.

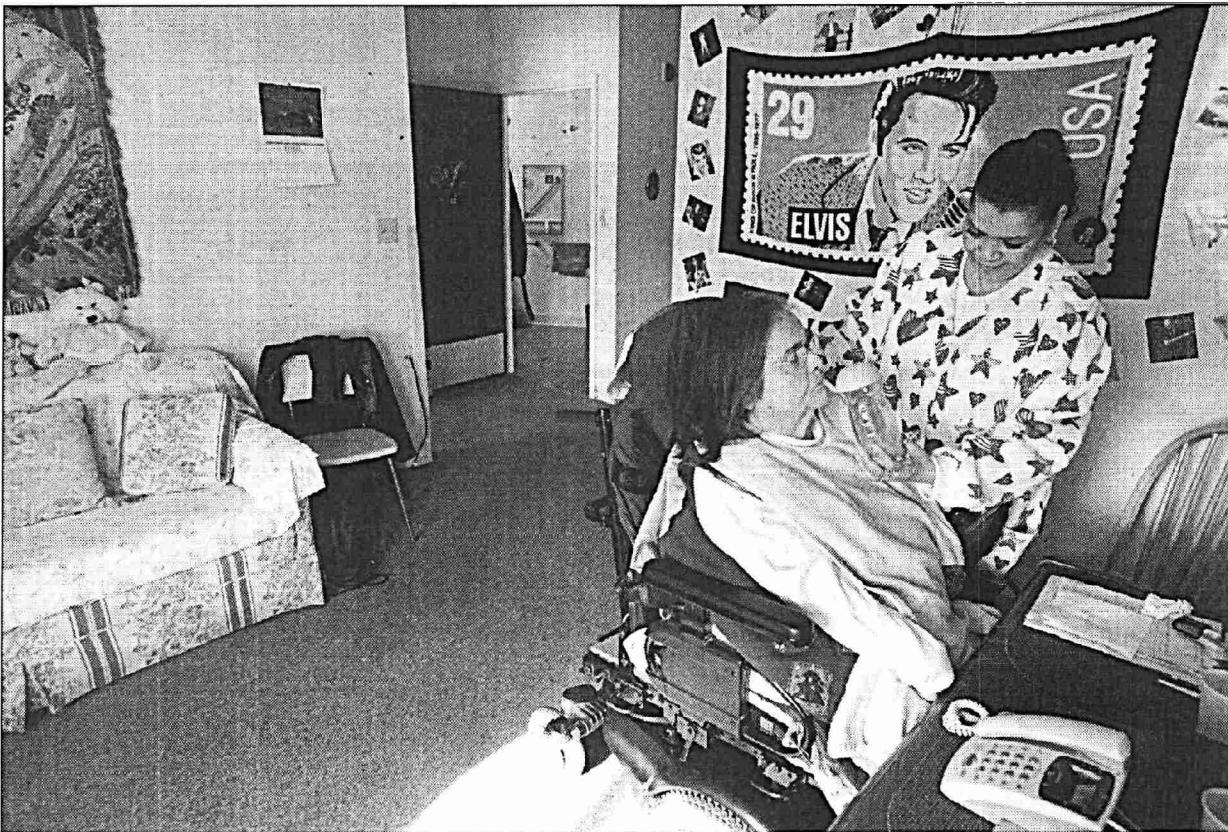
"We want to open up people's eyes to what we're doing here," she said.

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JOHN SLADEWSKI/The Standard-Times

Vanessa Perreira is the primary personal care assistant for Janice Stephens, who suffers from a genetic disease called arthrogyphosis.



JOHN SLADEWSKI/The Standard-Times

Vanessa Perreira helps Janice Stephens take her medication at her New Bedford apartment recently. Ms. Perreira will see a slight pay increase next year, vacation time and health benefits thanks to the recent unionization of personal care attendants.