

Attendants OK their first contract

Workers get pay hikes, benefits

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TELEGRAM & GAZETTE STAFF

Massachusetts personal care attendants represented by 1199 SEIU have approved their first contract with the state, an agreement that promises wage increases over three years, paid time off and future health insurance benefits.

Workers approved the contract by a vote of 4,499-59, mailing in their ballots, 1199 SEIU reported yesterday. The contract will cover about 25,000 workers, including about 2,000 in Central Massachusetts.

"We look at it as a really big achievement, because we've won the best contract of any group of PCAs across the country," said Jean G. Atkinson of Worcester, who was a member of the union's bargaining committee.

Personal care attendants are unlicensed home care workers who shop, cook, clean and perform personal tasks for clients in their homes. The service helps keep clients in their homes rather than nursing homes or other institutions.

The new contract comes as Massachusetts is struggling to balance its budget and manage burgeoning health care costs. Under the contract, workers' wages will increase from \$10.84 to \$12.48 per hour over three years. Beginning Jan. 1, workers will be able to accrue paid time off for sickness or vacation, depending on how much they work. The money to pay workers for time off will come from a fund that the state will initially seed with \$750,000, according to 1199

SEIU.

In the second year of the contract, the state's workforce council will also cooperate with the workers to come up with an option for health insurance, 1199 SEIU reported.

Although they get paid by MassHealth, the state's Medicaid health insurance program, they are not state employees. They also have no central employer. State legislation in 2006 gave the workers the right to organize as one unit for wages and benefits. They may not strike.

To negotiate with the workers and create a central registry of personal care attendants, the state formed the PCA Quality Home Care Workforce Council. It consists of consumers and state officials.

The new contract, which takes effect retroactively to July 1, gives personal care attendants a foundation for future negotiations, said Queenie E. Turner of Worcester, a member of the workers' bargaining committee.

"To have a contract is to have a foot in the door," she said. "You can go for better."

Union members and representatives say they hope the new wages and benefits will address high turnover in the profession.

"These improvements to PCA wages and benefits should absolutely be a major step forward in reducing the turnover of PCAs in the job and increasing the availability of home care services to seniors and people who depend on them," said Jeff R. Hall, spokesman for 1199 SEIU.

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