

December 13, 2021

The Honorable Representative Michael J. Finn
House Chair
Joint Committee on Children, Families, and
Persons with Disabilities

The Honorable Senator Adam Gomez
Senate Chair
Joint Committee on Children, Families, and
Persons with Disabilities

Dear Chair Finn, Chair Gomez, and Committee members,

The Children's League of Massachusetts (CLM) is a statewide non-profit association of over 60 private and public organizations and individuals that collectively advocate for public policies and quality services that are in the best interest of the Commonwealth's children, youth, and families. It is through public education and advocacy that CLM promotes the availability, accessibility, and quality of these needed services.

We are writing to testify **in support of An act establishing an education loan repayment program for human services workers** (H.266/S.120). While the current workforce crisis has exacerbated the problem of recruiting and retaining human services workers, this challenge is not new. Investing in loan repayment is a critical piece of developing a long-term and sustainable workforce pipeline, and attracting and retaining the next generation of human service professionals.

Human services workers play an essential role in our communities. They provide 24/7 care and services to the Commonwealth's most vulnerable children, youth, and families. Yet the salary benchmarks used by the state to set rates fall below salaries paid by companies such as Starbucks and Amazon that offer higher wages and tuition benefits. Recent data show that over 75% of human services workers have attend some college or earned a degree; yet currently the median salary for direct care workers at \$16.79 an hour—less than \$35,000 per year for a full-time employee. Even the MIT Living Wage calculator notes that the living wage for a single person in the area is \$17.74 an hour. And this is merely a living wage—not sufficient to attract and retain a college-educated, skilled workforce.

This legislation would specifically invest in these lower income, full-time workers in a targeted way by:



- Creating a student loan repayment program for human service workers making less than \$50,000 per year.
- Helping organizations retain human services workers by having the state repay qualified education loans at a rate not to exceed \$150/month for a period not to exceed 48 months.
- Making payments directly to the lender and only during months the participant is working 35+ hours per week as a human services worker in Massachusetts.

Targeted loan repayment for human services also supports more equitable access to higher education in the Commonwealth. Approximately 80% of the human services sector's workforce is made up of women, and the majority is persons of color. In contrast, college attainment in Massachusetts is significantly lower for minorities and non-white women than for white peers. Loan repayment targeting this sector is a strategy that immediately supports increased equitable college attainment among these populations.

Direct care workers provide critical, complex services to one-in-ten residents of the Commonwealth – this workforce is part of the fabric of every community in every corner of the state. Without investments to keep these jobs competitive long-term, an increasing number of jobs will go unfilled and programs may close, leading to a reduction in the quality and availability of mental health, behavioral health, residential care, and other critical services for vulnerable Massachusetts residents.

We ask that you invest in a sustainable human services workforce pipeline by voting this bill out favorably and working diligently for its passage without delay.

Sincerely,

Tammy Mello
Executive Director
Children's League of Massachusetts