

June 21, 2023

The Honorable Robyn K. Kennedy
Senate Chair, Joint Committee on Children,
Families, and Persons with Disabilities

The Honorable Jay D. Livingstone
House Chair, Joint Committee on Children,
Families, and Persons with Disabilities

Dear Chair Kennedy, Chair Livingstone, Vice Chairs, and Committee members,

The Children's League of Massachusetts (CLM) is a statewide non-profit association of almost 60 private and public organizations that collectively advocate for the availability, accessibility, and quality of services that are in the best interest of the Commonwealth's children, youth, and families. We are writing **in support of "An act establishing an education loan repayment program for human services workers" (H.214/S.77)**.

Human services workers play an essential role in our communities providing 24/7 care and services to the Commonwealth's most vulnerable children, youth, and families. 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.

The burden of student debt and lack of affordable higher education for human services workers greatly contribute to the sector's recruitment and retention difficulties. While many human services workers have attended some college, the field's salaries and benefits do not help us retain these workers. The salary benchmarks used by the state to set rates fall below salaries paid by retail companies such as Starbucks and Amazon that can offer higher wages, tuition benefits, and often less difficult jobs. Many direct care workers only earn up to \$19 per hour, which doesn't meet the MIT Living Wage calculation for a single person in the area of nearly \$22 an hour¹.

This legislation takes an important approach to invest in lower income, full-time, human services workers and encourage their growth in the field.

- Priority for funding should be given to applicants who have an individual salary less than 50 percent of the median income; who are bilingual; who are living and/or working in a vaccine

¹ *Id.*



equity initiative community; or who have worked in the direct care field for three or more years (and we appreciate that additional criteria may be created).

- Payments would be made directly to lenders and only during months participants work 35+ hours per week as human services workers in Massachusetts.
- Applicants will be eligible for up to \$6,000 if they have an associate degree, up to \$20,000 if they have a bachelor's degree and up to \$30,000 if they have a master's degree.

Targeted loan repayment for human services also supports more equitable access to higher education in the Commonwealth. Eighty percent of the human services workforce is female and 36% are people of color, compared to 43% and 25% in other industries, respectfully.² In contrast, college attainment is 39% for women (age 25 or older) and significantly lower for Black population (27.6%) and Hispanic population (20.9%) than for white peers (41.8%).² Loan repayment targeting this sector is a strategy that immediately supports increased equitable college attainment among these populations.

Human service 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. Hundreds of vulnerable children in our state need a stable, caring human services workforce that isn't overburdened with financial stressors and any more reasons not to do this work or to leave their jobs. Our kids need a sense of self-worth that isn't threatened by a revolving door of staff, especially for the many suffering from trauma and abandonment. Without investments to keep these jobs competitive long-term, an increasing number of jobs will go unfilled and with high turnover rates 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, educated, and skilled human services workforce pipeline by voting this bill out of committee and working diligently for its passage without delay.

Sincerely,

² US Census Bureau: Census Bureau Releases New Educational Attainment Data.

Press Release Number CB23-TPS.21. February 16, 2023. <https://www.census.gov/newsroom/press-releases/2023/educational-attainment-data.html>



Rachel Gwaltney
Executive Director
Children's League of Massachusetts

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