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Other Opinion

A coming crisis for those needing personal care

By S. BARTON CUTTER

Direct support professionals carry many different job titles but help people with varying needs, ranging from providing basic physical assistance to opening avenues for people with disabilities to engage in community activities.

Whether they are known as personal-care assistants, support services technicians or other designations, their work is integral to the lives of many people with disabilities and often is undervalued except by those directly served.

In my work as a contractor for the N.C. Council on Developmental Disabilities, I see the necessity of well-trained, reliable direct-support professionals on a regular basis. As one with cerebral palsy, I also rely on direct support workers in my own life. Tom, my current support person, assists me with showering, dressing and eating so that I can earn a living, support my family and participate in my community. He is, in many ways, my lifeline to the world.

Despite Tom's critical service, many people view his line of work as menial, leading to a depreciation of this work force's value. This has led to a growing concern in the field of direct support.

An estimated 50 percent of direct support professionals leave their jobs each year. Low pay — \$8.68 an hour on average — a lack of benefits, high burnout rates and limited training and minimal opportunity for career growth make remaining in the field untenable.

THE STATISTICS ON THE COMING NEED FOR WORKERS IN THIS FIELD ARE STAGGERING. In the next decade, there is expected to be openings for 40,000 more nursing aides, orderlies and attendants and home-care aides. The demand for such services by individuals with developmental disabilities is projected to increase 37 percent by 2020.

To be prepared, it is vital that a portion of the money allotted to the N.C. Division of Mental Health, De-

velopmental Disabilities and Substance Abuse be spent on improving the direct support work force.

When Gov. Mike Easley asked for a budget increase of \$86.5 million for mental health in North Carolina, he cited the need for "continued development of appropriate community services to support the full continuum of care necessary to serve our citizens."

Even while trimming the requested increase to \$21.3 million, the House and Senate signaled their support for the goal.



THIS ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF THE NEED FOR GREATER SUPPORT comes at a critical time for people in the developmental disabilities community, but the boost in resources will be effective only if that money is well-spent.

Though much of the increase will be used to address mental health and substance abuse needs, many hope this will prove to be an important first step in the development of a stable, adequate support work force for people with disabilities.

Tom, who has been working with me for less than a month, is my third support person in two years. While at first glance, this may appear above average, the average drops drastically when one realizes there may be a one- to two-month gap in services while searching for a replacement.



The N.C. Council on Developmental Disabilities is working to find innovative solutions to lead the way in addressing the direct support work force crisis. Last year, the council and other DHHS divisions invited a team from the Center for Medicare and Medicaid Studies to evaluate the current conditions of the frontline work force in North Carolina.

As a person who understands the need for qualified direct support professionals from both personal and professional standpoints, I commend the governor and the General Assembly for recognizing the growing need for a quality workforce of direct support professionals.

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